

A COMPANION TO  
*TWENTIETH-*  
CENTURY *AMERICAN*  
*DRAMA*

EDITED BY **DAVID KRASNER**



## A Companion to Twentieth-Century American Drama

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EDITED BY **DAVID KRASNER**

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*For*  
*Don B. Wilmeth*  
*and*  
*Thomas Postlewait*  
*Pioneers in the Field*



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# Notes on Contributors

**Thomas P. Adler** is Professor of English at Purdue University, where he has taught dramatic literature for over 30 years. His publications include *A Streetcar Names Desire: The Moth and the Lantern* and *American Drama 1940–1960: A Critical History*.

**Sarah Bay-Cheng** is Assistant Professor of English and Theatre at Colgate University. She is the author of *Mama Dada: Gertrude Stein's Avant-Garde Theater* and co-editor of the forthcoming *The False and the Fallen Staff: A Collection of Falstaff Plays from Four Centuries*.

**Annemarie Bean** is Assistant Professor of Theatre at Williams College. She is currently writing a book on the performances of miscegenation through the development of female impersonation in American blackface minstrelsy.

**Deanna M. Toten Beard** is Assistant Professor of Theatre Arts at Baylor University. Her research specialty is American theatre history and dramatic literature in the period 1900 to 1930. She has published previously on the topic of experimental performance.

**Murray Biggs** teaches English and Theatre Studies at Yale University, where he also directs student productions. His publications include co-editing *The Arts of Performance in Elizabethan and Early Stuart Drama* (1991).

**Stephen J. Bottoms** is a Senior Lecturer in Theatre Studies at the University of Glasgow, Scotland. He is the author of *Playing Underground: A Critical History of the 1960s Off-Off Broadway Movement* (2004), *Albee: Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* (2000), and *The Theatre of Sam Shepard* (1998). He also regularly directs for theatre.

**Mark Evans Bryan** is an Assistant Professor at Dennison University.

**Peter Civetta** is a doctoral candidate in Theatre Studies at Cornell University's Department of Theatre, Film, and Dance. He is completing his dissertation on the

performance of preaching at four upstate New York Jewish, Muslim, and Christian congregations.

**Jerry Dickey**, Associate Professor of Theatre Arts at the University of Arizona, is the author of several essays and book chapters on Sophie Treadwell, as well as *Sophie Treadwell: A Research and Production Sourcebook* (1997).

**Jill Dolan** holds the Zachary T. Scott Family Chair in Drama at the University of Texas at Austin. She is the author of *The Feminist Spectator as Critic* (1988), *Presence and Desire* (1993), and *Geographies of Learning* (2001).

**Harry J. Elam, Jr.** is the Robert and Ruth Halperin University Fellow for Undergraduate Education, Professor of Drama, Director of Graduate Studies in Drama, Director of the Institute for Diversity in the Arts, and Director of the Committee on Black Performing Arts at Stanford University. He is author of *Taking It to the Streets: The Social Protest Theater of Luis Valdez and Amiri Baraka* and *The Past as Present in the Drama of August Wilson*, co-editor of *African American Performance and Theatre History: A Critical Reader*, and co-editor of *Colored Contradictions: An Anthology of Contemporary African American Drama*, *The Fire This Time: African American Plays for the New Millennium*, and *Black Cultural Traffic: Crossroads in Black Performance and Popular Culture*.

**Mark Fearnow** teaches theatre history and playwriting at Hanover College. He is the author of *Clare Booth Luce* (1995) and *The American Stage and the Great Depression* (1997).

**Anne Fletcher** is an Assistant Professor at Southern Illinois University, Carbondale. Her work has appeared in *Theatre History Studies*, *Theatre Journal*, and *Theatre Symposium*. Her book on Group Theatre designer Mordecai Gorelik is forthcoming.

**Ehren Fordyce** is an Assistant Professor of Drama at Stanford University, where he teaches directing and contemporary performance. He has written on the rise of the directing profession in Romantic Paris, as well as on contemporary artists such as the Wooster Group and Reza Abdoh. He has also translated dramas by Büchner and Maeterlinck, and poetry by writers ranging from Petrarch to Mallarmé.

**J. Ellen Gainor** is Professor of Theatre and Associate Dean of the Graduate School at Cornell University. She is the author of *Shaw's Daughters: Dramatic and Narrative Constructions of Gender* and *Susan Glaspell in Context: American Theater, Culture, and Politics, 1915–48*. She has edited the volumes *Imperialism and Theatre* and *Performing America: Cultural Nationalism in American Theater*. She is currently co-editing *The Complete Plays of Susan Glaspell*.

**Janet V. Haedicke** is Professor of English at the University of Louisiana at Monroe, where she holds the Tommy and Mary Barham Endowed Professorship. She has published numerous articles in such journals as *Modern Drama* and *American Drama*, both of which accorded her essays special recognition. She has contributed to both

critical anthologies and reference volumes in drama. Co-editor of the *Tennessee Williams Literary Journal*, she also serves as President of the David Mamet Society.

**Ann Haugo** teaches in the School of Theatre at Illinois State University. Her publications on Native theatre have appeared in *American Indian Theatre: A Reader*, *The Cambridge Companion to Native American Literature*, and various journals.

**David Krasner** is an instructor in Theatre Studies, English, and African American Studies at Yale University, where he teaches dramatic literature, theatre history, acting, and directing. He is the author of several books on American drama, African American theatre, performance theory, and theatre history.

**Daphne Lei** is Assistant Professor of Drama at the University of California, Irvine. She has published works on premodern Chinese literature and drama, and Asian and Asian American theatre.

**Julia Listengarten** is Assistant Professor of Theatre at the University of Central Florida. She is the author of *Russian Tragifarse: Its Cultural and Political Roots* and a number of articles, and served professionally as a director, translator, and production dramaturge. Her translation of the Russian absurdist play *Christmas at the Ivanovs'* premiered in New York City at Classic Stage Company in 1997 and was included in the anthology *Theater of the Avant-Garde, 1890–1950*. Her most recent article on cultural translation is included in the forthcoming volume of *Translation Perspectives*.

**Felicia Hardison Londré**, Curators' Professor of Theatre at the University of Missouri-Kansas City, is co-author of *The History of North American Theater: The United States, Canada, and Mexico from Pre-Columbian Times to the Present*.

**Tiffany Ana Lopez** is Associate Professor of English and Director of CASA – Chicana/o Arts and Social Action at the University of California, Riverside. She is editor of *Growing Up Chicana/o* (1993) and author of *The Alchemy of Blood: Violence as a Critical Discourse in U.S. Latina/o Writing*. She has published widely on prison drama and Maria Irene Fornes, and is a frequent contributor to *Performing for Los Angeles Youth*. She is currently working on a collection of essays about Latina/o writing and performance related to prison issues.

**Brenda A. Murphy** is Professor of English at the University of Connecticut. She is author of, among other books, *O'Neill: Long Day's Journey Into Night*, *Congressional Theatre: Dramatizing McCarthyism on Stage, Film, and Television*, *Miller: Death of a Salesman*, *Tennessee Williams and Elia Kazan: A Collaboration in the Theatre*, and editor of the *Cambridge Companion to American Women Playwrights* and *A Realist in the American Theatre: Drama Criticism of William Dean Howells*.

**Christopher Olsen** has published two articles, one on audience surveys in *New Theatre Quarterly*, and one on drama technique for teaching students with learning disabilities in *Interview Magazine*. He is currently working on a book about off-off-

Broadway in the 1970s. He is a theatre and speech professor at York College and Millerville University, both in Pennsylvania.

**Linda Rohrer Paige** teaches in the Department of Literature and Philosophy at Georgia Southern University. She is the co-editor of *Southern Women Playwrights: New Essays in Literary History and Criticism*, and editor of the journal *Studies in American Culture*.

**Ann Pellegrini** is Associate Professor of Religious Studies and Performance Studies at New York University. She is the author of *Performance Anxieties: Staging Psychoanalysis, Staging Race* (1997) and co-author of *Love the Sin: Sexual Regulation and the Limits of Religious Tolerance* (2003). Her co-edited volumes include *Queer Theory and the Jewish Question* (2003).

**Gene A. Plunka** is Professor of English at the University of Memphis, where he teaches courses on modern and contemporary drama. His books include *Peter Shaffer: Roles, Rites, and Rituals in the Theater* (1988), *The Rites of Passage of Jean Genet: The Art and Aesthetics of Risk Taking* (1992), *Antonin Artaud and the Modern Theater* (edited, 1994), *Jean-Claude van Itallie and the Off-Broadway Theater* (1999), and *The Black Comedy of John Guare* (2002). He is currently finishing a book about the theatre of Beth Henley.

**Steven Price** is Lecturer in English at the University of Wales, Bangor, where he teaches literature and film. He has published extensively on American, British, and European drama, and is associate editor of *The Year's Work in English Studies*. With William Tydeman, he is co-author of *Oscar Wilde: Salome*. He is currently completing a study of the screenplay as a textual genre.

**June Schlueter**, Charles A. Dana Professor of English, Lafayette College, is author or editor of *Metafictional Characters in Modern Drama*, *Arthur Miller, Feminist Rereadings of Modern American Drama*, *Modern American Drama: The Female Canon*, and *Dramatic Closure*.

**Mike Sell** is Associate Professor of English at Indiana University of Pennsylvania. He has a forthcoming book, *Avant-Garde Performance and the Limits of Criticism: The Connection, Happenings/Fluxus, the Black Arts Movement*. His essay, "Arthur Miller and the Drama of Liberalism," will be published in *Arthur Miller's America*, and he is currently editing *The Ed Bullins Reader*.

**Rachel Shteir** is Head of Dramaturgy at the Theatre School at DePaul University. She has taught at Yale, Carnegie Mellon, Tisch School of the Arts, Columbia, the National Theatre Institute, and Bates College. She has published widely in magazines and newspapers including the *New York Times*, *American Theatre*, and the *Nation*. *Grit, Glamour, and the Grind*, her book about the history of striptease, is forthcoming.

**Molly Smith** is Artistic Director of the Arena Stage in Washington, DC. She was the founder of the Perseverance Theatre in Juneau, Alaska, and directed over 50 produc-

tions for 19 years as its Artistic Director. In 2001, she was awarded an Honorary Doctorate of Fine Arts from American University, has served as judge for the Susan B. Blackburn Prize, and was named one of *Washingtonian Magazine's* 100 Most Powerful Women.

**Andrew Sofer** is Assistant Professor of English at Boston College. He is the author of *The Stage Life of Props* (2003) as well as essays on Shakespeare, Kyd, Miller, Williams, Beckett, Pinter, and others. He has directed many new and classical plays.

**Leslie A. Wade** is an Associate Professor in the Louisiana State University Department of Theatre. He has published numerous articles on contemporary performance and is the author of *Sam Shepard and the American Theatre*.

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# Foreword

*Molly Smith, Artistic Director of the Arena Stage*

Theatre is a place of ritual, a place of wonder, a place we come together as a community to experience stories, to sit and really listen to another person's predicament, join in their pain and joy and agree or disagree with the choices they make in their lives.

In the same way we gather in stadiums and churches, we gather in theatres for the heat of connection. In America, there is certainly no shortage of heat. Arguably the most culturally and racially diverse country in the world, America is, as Mark Twain put it, a "loud, raucous, cacophony of voices." I believe the best American plays are like the mountains in Alaska – huge and dangerous and full of God. Audiences love to laugh, are desperate to feel, need to get angry, are driven to think – and through these American voices, which are brave, ugly, sweet, bitchy, sensual, and hot blooded, we bring the world into human scale and recognize our own humanity.

Over 50 years ago visionaries like Zelda Fichandler of Arena Stage in Washington, DC decided that wonderful theatre could happen outside of New York – indeed, that resident theatres could be born in all corners of America that would serve and sustain the individual passions and needs of each community. The resident theatre, not-for-profit movement was born. Theatres like the Guthrie in Minneapolis, the Alley Theatre in Texas, the Seattle Repertory Theatre, the Mark Taper Forum, and the Oregon Shakespeare Festival were created. Today more than 350 large theatres and a few thousand small theatres populate the landscape of America. But very few of these theatres focus on American plays. Why?

I think we have a chip on our shoulders about American writers. When I talk to my colleagues, they are always looking to England to see what's new instead of investigating our own backyard. Look at Broadway – huge numbers of plays come from Europe before the Tony Awards, with our own American writers desperately trying to get an off-Broadway house. There is something wrong with this picture.

What other country has so many diverse dramatic writers? Poetic writers like Langston Hughes, Tennessee Williams, Gertrude Stein, Nilo Cruz, Zora Neale

Hurston; musical writers like Lerner and Loewe, Kander and Ebb, Rogers and Hammerstein and Frank Loesser; master storytellers like Arthur Miller, David Mamet, Marsha Norman, August Wilson, Clifford Odets, Wendy Wasserstein, Edward Albee, Beth Henley, Eugene O'Neill, Sam Shepard; political writers like Tony Kushner, Neil LaBute, Paula Vogel, Lillian Hellman, David Henry Hwang, Suzan-Lori Parks. These authors are as varied as the American landscape, our writers reflecting our dynamic heritage.

Maybe our respect for European art over American art comes from America's history as an emerging nation when Europe and other parts of the world were in full flower. But America is now in full flower. Just as we have branded and proudly exported our homegrown democracy, shouldn't we brand, proudly produce, and export our homegrown American drama?

*... yes I said yes I will Yes.*

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David Krasner



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# Introduction: The Changing Perceptions of American Drama

*David Krasner*

For too many critics and historians American drama is still American literature's unwanted bastard child, the offspring of the whore that is American theatre.

Susan Harris Smith (1997: 10)

Molly Smith maintains that her aim as director of the Arena Stage in Washington, DC is “to produce huge plays about all that is passionate, exuberant, profound, deep and dangerous in the American spirit” (2003: 45, emphasis in original). Yet, as she makes clear in the Foreword to this book, her goals are not completely shared by others; very few American theatres, on Broadway, off-Broadway, or regional theatres, emphasize American drama. Smith’s jeremiad has a long history in American dramatic criticism. In fact, American drama has struggled since its inception with a reputation of inferiority. For instance, in 1889 drama critic Brander Matthews inveighed against what he called the “decline” of American drama. American drama, he lamented, was “shabby in structure and shambling in action,” nor had its practitioners “taken the trouble to learn [their] trade” (1889: 930). In 1954 drama critic John Gassner wrote that, despite the “seed of a vigorous democratic art,” the century preceding Eugene O’Neill found American playwrights “of no importance whatsoever to the world” (1954: 632). The sorry state of affairs appeared intractable. Drama critic Susan Harris Smith, in her book *American Drama: The Bastard Art*, described American drama as having “always suffered from a bad reputation” (1997: 23). The “widespread discrimination” of American drama, she contends, “is of long standing,” representing “the sour leitmotif in American publishing, academic or commercial, highbrow or low, where drama in general is slighted to a great extent but American drama virtually is erased” (29–30). Today, however, perceptions are beginning to change.

This book seeks to examine the vitality and broad scope of American dramatic literature by focusing on as many twentieth-century American dramatists and dramas as possible. The anthology is meant for students, scholars, and practitioners of theatre and American literary history alike, assisting them in discovering a richer and wider perception of American drama than has heretofore been acknowledged. In order to reveal the range of American drama, we will illuminate the history of playwrights both well known and not so well known. Particular attention is given to the institutions in which the dramas have been performed (the theatres, venues, and directors who assisted the playwrights), dramaturgical analysis of the plays, background to the playwrights, and the relationship between dramatic literature and broader historical continuities and social transformations. The history of a national literature inescapably concerns itself with questions of national identity. Literary history is neither social nor political history, but an historical understanding of dramatic literature cannot be separated from cultural influences, political movements, and social change. Directly or indirectly, American drama reflects the American social milieu.

Subjects are arranged within three categories: time periods, popular playwrights, and themes. Chapters examine the timeframe of particular dramas, focus exclusively on major playwrights and their works, or shed light on thematic relationships between playwrights. Every attempt has been made to distribute the research broadly in an effort to weigh the significance of the plays and their importance to the history of American drama. The contributors attempt at every instance to provide proportional emphasis given the diversity of dramas.

*A Companion to Twentieth-Century American Drama* embodies the work of a generation of scholars who have collectively and to a large extent defined the field, as well as that of a new generation who have contributed wide-ranging and useful insights. The authors come from various branches of American intellectual traditions, including theatre, drama, and performance studies; literary and American studies departments; and comparative literature.

The importance of this work is difficult to overstate. American drama may lag behind; however, it is far from being the “bastard child” it was once considered. Indeed, American dramatic literature is beginning to secure its place as representative of American art and culture. By attending to the various historical traditions and influences of American drama, as well as analysis of plays themselves, this work provides an overview of American drama and its place in twentieth-century American literary tradition.

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# American Drama, 1900–1915

*Mark Evans Bryan*

The drama of the modern United States before World War I was in many ways not a *modern* drama at all. In the years before the Little Theatre Movement gave rise to a generation of American playwrights who experimented with European realisms and anti-realisms, and the “new stagecraft” made metaphoric space of theatre production, American drama existed much as it had since the Civil War. Literary and theatrical modernism in Europe was a response to the changing circumstances of modern life. Though the American social and political landscape was transformed by the same cultural forces, the American drama of the first 15 years of the twentieth century reflected instead a theatrical business structure that resisted new forms and a literary culture that produced few new works of drama, however much a series of uniquely American responses to modernity occurred.

The spectacular 1899 premiere of *Ben-Hur* in New York City typified the American drama of the turn of the twentieth century. Adapted by William Young from the best-selling novel by Lew Wallace, the six-act religious melodrama was a popular and critical success and the grandest stage spectacle that New York audiences had yet seen. Incorporating eight horses and two chariots running at a gallop on massive treadmills, a moving cyclorama background painting, and wind machines, the climactic chariot race of *Ben-Hur* is far more representative of the American stage at the beginning of the twentieth century than, for instance, the Boston premiere, nine years before, of the realist drama *Margaret Fleming* (1890) by James A. Herne, arguably the first modernist American drama.

In his 1886 column on literature, William Dean Howells, the arbiter of American realism, praises the work of vaudevillian Edward Harrigan. In Harrigan’s short comedies of working-class Irish and German immigrant life in New York, Howells discerns “the actual life of the city...from laborers in the street to the most powerful of the ward politicians.” Harrigan, Howells observes, “writes, stages, and plays his pieces; he has his own theatre, and can risk his own plays in it, simply and cheaply” (Howells 1886: 315–16). The business of American

theatre, Howells adds, places a conservative stranglehold on the development of the drama:

there has been so little that is fresh, native, and true on the stage for so long that the managers might not know what to make of [an innovative] piece; and it is to the manager, not the public, that the playwright appeals. . . . It costs so much to “stage” a play in these days of a material theatre but no drama, that [a manager] can only risk giving the old rubbish in some novel disguise. . . . With the present expensiveness of setting, a failure is ruinous, and nothing really new can be risked. So much money has to be put into the frame of the picture that only the well-known chromo-effects in sentiment, character, and situation can be afforded in the picture. (315)

The transformation of the theatre industry reflected massive changes in American culture. The years before the turn of the century were characterized by rapid economic development and the growth of national industries. In the Progressive Era (ca. 1890–1900), limited-liability corporations became the norm in American business and antitrust legislation was passed to reign in the power of American enterprise. Scientific management transformed the practices of the urban factory. Market instability, immigration from Europe, and agricultural crises in the Midwest and South produced a surplus of unskilled workers in American cities. Before 1890, the economy had depended largely on capital goods, but after the deflation of the 1880s, American capitalists directed their investments toward consumer goods (ready-to-wear clothing, leisure items, household goods, etc.). For the first time, the production of such goods became dominant, as the small trading store transformed, for example, into the department store, moving from proprietary to corporate capitalism.

American theatre “business” responded to the centralizing and corporatizing strategies of new American industry. The difficulties of touring in the United States before the Civil War were demonstrated by limitations for elaborate productions to profit from more than local audiences in the major theatre centers. The innovation of the combination company, which allowed large-scale productions to tour in their entirety on the nation’s growing rail routes, made the production of theatre a potentially profitable enterprise for national touring corporations. Large producing and booking agencies for drama and vaudeville emerged in the metropolitan Northeast; as a result, American dramatists produced new plays in large numbers from the 1880s to the 1920s as demand, and copyright protections, increased.<sup>1</sup> Auditoriums that accommodated touring productions replaced local stock companies, regional “local color” writing in the theatre disappeared, and the American theatrical world fell under the influence of a relatively small number of producers. By the time of the writing of Howells’s 1886 column, combination-touring companies from New York City dominated the popular theatre in the East. A decade later, the most powerful of these producing cartels was founded: the Syndicate, a booking and producing monopoly effectively controlling the “legitimate” American stage until the early 1910s, when

the rival Shubert organization wrested control of it with its own growing monopoly. “I tell you,” the playwright Clyde Fitch once wrote, “there will never be *good* American dramatists till there are good American producers!” In the Syndicate, Fitch found producers; indeed, perhaps no dramatist benefited from the producing monopolies as much as he did. But even Fitch lamented the power of Syndicate producer Charles Frohman: “what a state it is, when there is only *one man* to whom one can offer a play and expect to have it in any 1/2 adequate way presented” (Fitch, *Letters* 1924: 117).

The career of Clyde Fitch exemplifies the changing role of the dramatist in the United States at the turn of the century. Though he was one of the most commercially successful playwrights in American history and a favorite of Frohman and the Syndicate, Fitch was also admired by figures in the theatre as disparate as the literary critic Howells, the anti-Syndicate producer and playwright David Belasco, and the playwright Rachel Crothers. Brander Matthews suggested that *The Truth* (1907), Fitch’s serious comedy of manners about an upper-middle-class married couple besieged by the pathological honesty of one and the pathological dishonesty of the other, “bid fair to achieve the cosmopolitan popularity of Ibsen’s ‘Doll’s House’” (1926: 43). Fitch encompassed both models of the American dramatist in the new twentieth century: the literate, professional writer, whose experience of the theatre was dominated by collegiate theatricals, the study of the classics, and, for some, the seminars of George Pierce Baker at Harvard; and the professional theatre artist, whose experience of the theatre began with professional theatre production and whose career in playwriting complemented a career as a director, producer, or performer. A graduate of Amherst College, a budding novelist, and a young playwright who had been invited to speak before George Pierce Baker’s drama club at Harvard, Fitch had produced only three full-length plays before he began his long association with Charles Frohman in 1892.

Fitch’s popular melodramas, plays such as *The Girl with the Green Eyes* (1902) and *The Woman in Case* (1905), were episodic dramas of vice, blackmail, and violence, with Syndicate-required happy endings (Meserve 1994: 164).<sup>2</sup> A deft and observant comic writer as well, his comedies ranged from the realistic detail of *The Truth* to *Captain Jinks of the Horse Marines* (1901), in which the title character, the clumsy and unsuccessful military character made popular in the song “Captain Jinks of the Horse Marines” (ca. 1868), wagers one thousand dollars that he can woo a beautiful opera singer. Falling in love with her instead, the bet becomes public and Jinks nearly loses his love. The play ends with the lovers together, a happy toast, and the singing of “Captain Jinks of the Horse Marines.” The comedy mixes romantic farce with political commentary: although the “Captain Jinks” song was popular in military circles, the figure of “Captain Jinks” was utilized by anti-imperialists who opposed the Spanish–American War (1898) and the nationalist, expansionist policies of the United States. Prominent anti-imperialist Ernest Crosby published his satirical, anti-war novel, *Captain Jinks, Hero*, the following year.

The plays of Clyde Fitch portrayed a modern world; they explored urban life, the pathologies of modern culture, and the new social structures of the industrializing age. His characters, if lacking depth, had detail. Rachel Crothers praised the complexity and moral ambiguity of the central character in *The Truth*: “I think you’ve done the most difficult of things,” wrote Crothers to Fitch, “given us all sides of a human being, and made her intensely appealing in spite of very grave faults – a very complex and interesting study. . . . It makes the commonplace element extremely dramatic” (Fitch, *Letters* 1924: 332). Fitch’s melodramas of contemporary society bridge the gap between the tradition of American romantic melodrama and social realism. In a 1904 speech, Fitch calls for a “real melodrama” that portrays the “truth” of the urban condition:

the incidents, the events of everyday life in a big city are more melodramatic than anything that was ever put upon the stage. . . . [It is] a daily life which is blood and iron mixed with soul and sentiment – melodrama of the ancients, pure and simple. . . . Realism is only simplicity and truth. (*Plays* 1930: xli–xlii)

Fitch’s last play, however, illustrates the playwright’s ambiguous distinction between “real melodrama and the false.” *The City* (1910), “a modern play of American life,” is a traditional melodrama that appropriates the hallmarks of stage realism (443). It is located in the morally ambiguous urban world of social realism, using naturalistic dialogue and suggesting the role of heredity in its characters’ lives. But *The City* is not a story of “everyday life in a big city.” The death of George Rand, Sr., the scion of a rural New York family and the victim of blackmail at the hand of the melodramatic villain, Hannock – a “drug fiend,” convicted felon, and Rand’s illegitimate son – prompts the Rand family to move from rural “Middleburg” to New York City (478). Years later, George Rand, Jr. has climbed the social ladder as a businessman and likely gubernatorial candidate, becoming wealthy and successful, though corrupt. Hannock secretly marries Cicely Rand, his half-sister, but when George learns of their liaison, he attempts to end it by divulging the secret of Hannock’s parentage. Hannock murders Cicely but is prevented from shooting himself by his half-brother, though he threatens to destroy George’s political career with the scandal. In the end, George decides to “make a clean breast of it all! . . . no matter what it costs,” withdraw from public life, and repent for all his crimes of action and inaction, while beginning a new life (618).

Although structurally melodramatic, *The City* is a commentary on the city itself, the stultifying nature of rural life, and the transformation of American urban culture. Fitch’s career coincided with perhaps the most significant changes in the geopolitics of American society. The pastoral American past collided with industrial, urban America; the rapid industrialization had repercussions throughout American culture (Trachtenberg 1982). American theatre audiences embraced entertainments that appealed to nostalgia for an oftentimes fictional past, a premodern American landscape expressed in melodrama, minstrelsy, and the entertainments of the increasingly

popular vaudeville stage. Fitch, however, a modernist in spirit if not in execution, directed his final play to question idyllic versions of rural life and extolled the possibilities of the new urban century: “Don’t blame the City,” George Rand, Jr. implores after the death of his sister and the end of his political career: “It’s not her fault! It’s our own! What the City does is bring out what’s strongest in us. . . . *She* gives the man his opportunity” (627–8).

Many of the social melodramas that held the stage during the career of Clyde Fitch explore the temptations, dangers, and possibilities of the new city. The American tradition of social satire and domestic comedy, however, was equally successful in portraying modern urban life. Changing social mores and upper-class urban culture are at the center of *The New York Idea* by Langdon Mitchell, who had grown up in the closed social world that he satirized. Arthur Hobson Quinn included *The New York Idea* with *The Great Divide* by William Vaughn Moody, *Jeanne d’Arc* by Percy MacKaye, and Crothers’s *The Three of Us*, all of which premiered during the 1906–7 season in New York, as “the advance guard of the new drama” (Quinn 1927, vol. 2: 4).

*The New York Idea* is a comedy of manners, an indictment of upper-middle-class American culture, and a drama of society and marriage, not unlike English sentimental comedies of the eighteenth century, but placed in the new context of the burgeoning American divorce culture. (The rate of divorce in the United States rose sharply between the end of the Civil War and the writing of *The New York Idea*. In 1880, less than one half of 1 percent of all marriages ended in divorce; by the beginning of World War I, that rate had climbed to over 10 percent.) On the eve of the wedding of Philip Phillmore, a divorced Manhattan judge, and Mrs. Cynthia Karslake, a divorced heiress, the lives of a small group of the New York social elite are thrown into disarray as they couple and uncouple, forming fleeting unions rooted in love, spite, or social pressure. Cynthia has agreed to marry Philip, despite her desire to be “a free woman,” because “a divorcée has no place in society” (Mitchell 1956: 140). The “society” to which Cynthia refers is a closed social world. The characters are “persons of breeding” (a series of horse metaphors and sexual innuendo begins with this Act 1 utterance), who “winter in Cairo” and inherit millions of dollars (124–6), and who own famous racehorses and consider bankruptcy to be “the next thing to” death (136).

*The New York Idea* satirizes upper-class mores, but it also charts society and social space in the changing New York (one of several horses mentioned in the play, in fact, is named “Urbanity”). The play reflects the increasing divisions in the United States in 1906: between the wealthy and the working, as well as the urban and the rural. Indeed, when Philip’s sister, Grace, complains that the nineteenth of May is “ridiculously late to be in town,” she renders invisible the majority of the more than four million people in the city of New York in 1906. It is an echo of the descriptions of the city in the summer in Edith Wharton’s novel *The House of Mirth* (1905), in which New York is described as “a dusty deserted city” or as simply “deserted” (Wharton 1984: 224, 250). (The stage adaptation of *The House of Mirth*, by Wharton and Clyde

Fitch, premiered one month before Mitchell's play.) *The New York Idea* – that “a woman should marry whenever she has a whim for a man” – indicates an uneasiness in the conservative elite in an age where civil unions no longer guaranteed the inheritance of fortune and status (202). “I feel as if we are all taking tea on the slope of a volcano!” observes the first Mrs. Phillmore, as the characters of *The New York Idea* teeter on the edge of their new century (145).

The melodramas of Edward Sheldon are more explicitly ideological, exploring urban life, corruption, and racism. A graduate of George Pierce Baker's Workshop 47 at Harvard, the first-of-its-kind workshop in dramatic writing in the United States, Sheldon wrote melodramas in the nineteenth-century tradition about twentieth-century social problems. *Salvation Nell* (1908) is a melodrama of the urban condition that follows Nell, a working-class woman, as her life is nearly destroyed by her criminal lover. Nell is, at root, a traditionally melodramatic woman in distress, but she is the central character of a play set in believably realistic working-class surroundings. *Salvation Nell* was produced by Harrison Grey Fiske, an admirer of Henrik Ibsen, in a production that Quinn hailed as “as realistic a picture of slum life as can be imagined” (1927, vol. 2: 86).

In *The Nigger* (1910), Sheldon combines melodrama and social critique. Produced by Winthrop Ames during the debut season of the New Theatre, *The Nigger* was both a reconstruction of the “tragic mulatto” melodramas of the mid-nineteenth century and a response to the political and business climate of early twentieth-century America.<sup>3</sup> Set among the corrupt business and political leaders of an unidentified state in the South, *The Nigger* follows Philip Morrow, a white racist governor controlled by a powerful business monopoly, a corrupt media, and the secret of his African heritage. But even as the play relies on traditional melodramatic devices, it is a commentary on the undermining of America's Reconstruction (ca. 1865–76, which attempted to “reconstruct” the South by, among other things, incorporating newly freed slaves into the social fabric of American life). In the play, however, law, society, and Morrow himself are dominated by the will of industry and Southern racism, which cannot overcome attempts at racial reconciliation. Government in the post-Reconstruction South, Sheldon's play observes, was subsumed by the darkest elements of modern society: the anti-democratic power of industry; the primitive backwardness of American regions not fully engaged in the urban, modern world; and the legacies of American chattel slavery, the root source of American market successes in the nineteenth century. Although *The Nigger* is indeed a racist drama (as its title suggests), it is in many ways the modern incarnation of a genre of racial melodrama popularized in such plays as Dion Boucicault's *The Octoroon* (1859) and Bartley Campbell's *The White Slave* (1881). The play is a rebuff to the post-Reconstruction literature of reconciliation that united Northern and Southern whites at the expense of African Americans. *The Nigger* repudiates the perception of the Civil War as a nonsectarian heroic struggle and the myths of the benevolence of the antebellum agrarian South that gained currency in the period onstage and in fiction (as in the novels of Winston Churchill and Thomas Dixon,