Several years after the close of World War II, Joseph Wood Krutch attempted to identify the distinguishing character of modern drama. Focusing on what is now commonly thought of as the first phase of modern drama, from Ibsen through Pirandello (c. 1880–1920), Krutch observed a recurring assumption of European drama: that a cavernous gap lay between the values of previous centuries and the values of our own. Those few who clung to the remnants of moral tradition could only admit, like the despairing old carpenter in Friedrich Hebbel's Maria Magdalena (1844), “I do not understand the world anymore.”

Such a vision of the twentieth century as fundamentally different from and alien to all previous human history became, in Krutch’s assessment, the defining character of “Modernism.” Its assimilation into the national character of America, however, and hence of that country’s drama, was somewhat delayed. Eugene O’Neill and Maxwell Anderson, he claimed, though responsible for the passage of American drama from childhood to adolescence, were essentially writing classical tragedy at a time when Ibsen, Chekhov, and Strindberg were already dead and Shaw’s major work was done.

Krutch acknowledged, of course, the work of those American playwrights who began extending the boundaries of dramatic form in ways that both imitated and anticipated such European experiments as Surrealism, Dadaism, Expressionism, and epic theatre. O’Neill's use of episodic form, Expressionistic techniques, and masks (The Hairy Ape, 1922, and The Great God Brown, 1926) contributed notably to new dramatic structures, as did Thornton Wilder’s fluid treatments of time (Our Town, 1938, and The Skin of Our Teeth, 1942), Tennessee Williams’s memory devices and slide screens (The Glass Menagerie, 1945), and Arthur Miller’s cinematic reveries (Death of a Salesman, 1949). But, for the most part, American dramatists in the period...
between Pirandello and Beckett, roughly from 1920 to the mid-fifties, were not overly interested in the arbitrary nature of life that so intrigued their European counterparts. Rather, American playwrights, even after the trauma of World War II, reasserted their faith in causality and its attendant moral claims.

Krutch’s monograph, published in 1953, may well have been an accurate estimate of modern drama to that point. Indeed, it would be unfair to suggest that Krutch celebrated the conservatism of American drama. For despite his wish to preserve the perception of self as a continuous unity – an assumption on which “all moral systems must rest” – Krutch clearly held American drama in low regard and lamented its more recent tendency to be negative and defeatist.

Admittedly, modern American drama has been pessimistic, at least if measured by the work of O’Neill, whose plays clearly set the tone for the American stage. *The Iceman Cometh*, staged immediately after the war (1946), offered Harry Hope’s saloon as a metaphor for those whose only hope rests in the refuge and lie of illusion. Alongside the dreariness of O’Neill, however, there was the optimism of Rodgers and Hammerstein’s *Carousel*, which ran for 890 performances following its opening in 1945, reminding theatre historians of an American counter-tradition of spirited lightness exemplified by musical comedy.

In the period immediately after World War II, however, even the Broadway musical was at risk. Despite such notable successes as *Street Scene*, *Brigadoon*, *Kiss Me, Kate*, and *South Pacific*, theatre audiences were dwindling, no doubt in part because television was finding its way into the American living room. Visiting companies from England and other European countries booked New York’s theatres, and Shakespearean revivals commanded impressive runs. But by 1948, hosts of Broadway actors were unemployed and serious drama needed support.

Obligingly, the two writers who were to take their place alongside O’Neill as major voices in American theatre both appeared. Between 1945 and the end of the decade, Broadway produced major plays by Tennessee Williams – *The Glass Menagerie* (1945) and *A Streetcar Named Desire* (1947) – and by Arthur Miller – *All My Sons* (1947) and *Death of a Salesman* (1949). Together, these two playwrights sustained and revitalized the Broadway theatre as a venue for serious plays.

**Arthur Miller and Tennessee Williams in the Forties**

Miller, who was born in 1915 in Harlem, had done his apprentice writing at the University of Michigan and in the Federal Theatre Project, which he joined in 1938. His first attempt to capture Broadway audiences, with *The Man Who Had
All the Luck (1944), failed, but in 1947 he offered the postwar public a play that encouraged memories of the heroism of the war years and provoked thought about the moral responsibility – and losses – of those who remained in the safety of their fenced-in yards.

All My Sons, which opened at the Coronet Theatre in 1947 in a production directed by Elia Kazan and starring Ed Begley, touched the conscience of America: it played to audiences familiar with the Truman Committee’s investigation of a scandal involving the manufacture of faulty airplane parts in Ohio. In Miller’s play, Joe Keller, owner of a wartime manufacturing plant, allows cracked airplane cylinders to be shipped to the military, an act that results in the deaths of some twenty-one pilots. Keller, who initially claims he will assume responsibility, later allows his partner to take the blame.

Miller sets the play in the suburban backyard, with Keller surrounded by the comfortable domestic routine that characterized the lives of so many following the disruptive war years. Interrupting the veneer of good cheer, however, are a wife haunted by a pilot son missing in action for nearly four years and that son’s former girlfriend, who eventually produces a letter that confirms Larry’s death: having heard of his father’s culpability in the distribution of the cracked cylinders, the pilot committed suicide in a kamikaze flight. In a play that works incrementally to raise the audience’s level of awareness, Keller recognizes, finally, that “They were all my sons” and, in a gesture that at once accepts responsibility and acknowledges shame, shoots himself upstairs in the family home. His death, the culmination of a father–son relationship built on lies and denials, both burdens and frees the younger son, Chris, with the lesson of recognition and forgiveness that, Miller hopes, extends beyond the family to society at large.

Though contemporary in its focus on wartime decisions and domestic life following the war, All My Sons resurrects the remnants of the nineteenth-century stage, relying on the retrospective technique that Ibsen mastered in Ghosts. In such a structure, the past is a continuing presence, and the exposition renews itself at intervals, as each critical piece of information is revealed.

All My Sons ran for 328 performances, won a New York Drama Critics’ Circle Award, and was made into a film with Edward G. Robinson in 1948. Its success, which provided Miller with the recognition he needed to pursue a playwriting career, proved a mere prelude to that of his next play, Death of a Salesman, which, under Kazan’s direction, won both a New York Drama Critics’ Circle Award and a Pulitzer Prize, saw a film version in 1951 (with Fredric March), and enjoyed major revivals: in 1975, for example, with George C. Scott as Willy Loman; in 1983, at the Beijing People’s Art Theatre, with a Chinese cast; in 1984, with Dustin Hoffman, who also starred in the CBS television production a year later, which was seen by 25 million; and in 1999 with Brian Dennehy. When Lee J. Cobb’s 1949 Willy, traveling cases in hand, weighing down the bulky shoulders of the New England salesman, appeared on the Morosco
Theatre stage, it began the public’s decades-long devotion to what many consider the quintessential American play.

Clearly this deluded salesman, defeated by self-absorption and misplaced dreams, touched a nerve in the theatregoing public, which had lived through the Depression and World War II and now looked forward to the security and prosperity of the Eisenhower years. In 1949, *Salesman* stood as a symbol of the transition in values that would grip the country. Though nostalgic for the innocence of prewar America, audiences were beginning to concede the chasm that divided the aggressive, success-oriented world that could not accommodate failure and the world of Dave Singleman, the salesman who operated on the strength of friendship and personal style.

Throughout the play, Willy encourages his sons, commending their misdeeds and turning their limitations into promise. Having returned from a New England sales trip that he never completed, the tired salesman turns to his self-sacrificing wife for flattery and support. Assisted by Linda, Willy sustains his dream; in a yard blocked from the sun by high-rise apartments, he plants
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seeds in a gloomy garden. His suicide stands as final testimony to the persistence and the futility of the American dream: Willy dies expecting that his sons will collect the insurance. An audience is left with a palpable sense of loss and a strong sense of the power of the play to test and tease and withhold.

But the power of *Death of a Salesman* lives less in the plot line than in its interior drama. The playwright who had trusted Ibsenesque drama just two years earlier now constructs a form that combines realism and expressionism in ways that enable an audience both to follow the action and to understand why Willy’s dream is so stubborn and grand. A sequence of reveries punctuates the play, consuming Willy at critical moments and providing the audience with privileged insights into a reconstructed or imagined past. Willy slips into daydreams involving the boys as athletes and as willing Simonizers of their father’s Chevy; Linda as the patient and frugal wife, mending stockings; a woman in a Boston hotel room, whose affair with Willy is interrupted by an unannounced visit from his older son; and a brother, Ben, who, like his father, left the family to seek adventure and wealth and who, finally, in his endorsement of Willy’s commitment to rugged individualism, lures Willy to suicide.

Miller’s forties plays are important as well for their focus on family, a theme that came to define serious drama in the postwar years. Willy Loman and Joe Keller are recognizable figures in the American domestic landscape: both fathers to two sons, each wants success for their sake; each wants to pass on the tokens of success, whether wanted or not, to his heirs. Like the families of O’Neill, however, and particularly the Tyrones (*Long Day’s Journey Into Night*), Miller’s are less than ideal. Joe Keller’s leisurely backyard life covers the pain and guilt that trouble relations between wife and husband and father and son and that compel audiences to see what Keller would rather conceal. Willy’s lessons in toughness, womanizing, and lying and Linda’s quiet nurturing of her husband’s illusions suggestively expose the weaknesses of the family that seemed to work in a more innocent time.

Similarly important as dramas of “domestic realism,” the form that was to define American theatre immediately after the war, are two major plays by Williams, *The Glass Menagerie* and *A Streetcar Named Desire*. In both, the model of the family that America celebrates is tenuous at best. In *The Glass Menagerie*, a domineering mother, whose husband abandoned her, attempts to hold the family together and assure her children’s success even as she constructs romantic illusions of the past and dreams of a future that has little chance of materializing. In *Streetcar*, the now legendary Stanley Kowalski, crude in style and brutal in behavior, claims his masculine prerogative over the pregnant, admiring Stella and her homeless sister through intimidation and force. In the backdrop of Blanche’s life is a marriage to a young man who proved to be homosexual and committed suicide; in the foreground is a desperate attempt to marry despite her having violated the womanly ideal. Williams invites his audience to see – and to understand – Blanche’s fragility
and her promiscuity within the frame of changing values and displaced worlds. But there is little to refresh in his portraits of family life: in Williams’s plays, as in Miller’s, marriage and family, the nucleus of social organization, is an imperiled institution.

Also like Miller’s plays, Williams’s two dramas examine the seductive but hurtful lure of illusion. Joe Keller, Willy Loman, Amanda Wingfield, and Blanche DuBois, in designing imaginary, protective worlds, contribute to a view of an emerging America as a country on the cusp of change but unready for it. Though Americans dearly hoped to return to the ordinary after the war, they were inescapably faced with the imperative of including in their experience the personal and mass horrors of World War II; the promise, and the threat, that technology held to transform their lives; and the recognition that the priority of family values was being challenged. In both Miller’s and Williams’s forties plays, a nostalgia for an older, less conflicted world competes for space with the insistence of a world that is faster, cruder, and crueler than the one remembered.

Williams, who was born in Columbus, Mississippi, in 1911, spent much of his childhood in St. Louis, which became the setting for The Glass Menagerie. In a brief run in Chicago in 1944 and an extended run of 561 performances in New York at the Playhouse the following year, that play established the no-longer-young playwright, whose career till then had been unremarkable. Under the direction of Eddie Dowling and Margo Jones, with Laurette Taylor playing Amanda, the play won a New York Drama Critics’ Circle Award, a Sidney Howard Memorial Award, a Donaldson Award, and a “Sign” Award; it saw television versions in 1966 and in 1973, the latter with Katharine Hepburn as Amanda, and was made into a film in 1950 and again in 1987. The play is structured as story and re-enactment, with Tom Wingfield, an aspiring poet who works in a shoe factory and dreams of a life free from his nagging mother and gentle but vulnerable sister, narrating the story from a fire escape, then stepping into the family flat to become an actor in their domestic routine.

For Amanda Wingfield, the family matriarch, there is no agenda more important than matching her slightly crippled daughter, Laura, in marriage, and she schemes relentlessly to do so. When her mother fails to make a match with Tom’s friend, a young man whose night school course in radio engineering has identified him as a man on the move, Laura retreats into her world of illusion, in which a menagerie of glass animals stands as symbol of her fragility. Poignantly and tenderly drawn, Laura has little chance of a life independent of her overbearing mother, who thrives on memories of a romantic youth in which she was the lady of choice to a gaggle of gentleman callers. The play, which is offered as a memory, is both powerful and sad, capturing the spirit and the longing of one who now lives on the edge of poverty but who has known a finer life.

Amanda Wingfield is one of Williams’s powerfully drawn women, who wins
the sympathy, and guarded respect, of an audience that recognizes the futility of her dreams but understands why she needs them. Equally as powerful is Blanche DuBois, of *A Streetcar Named Desire*, an English teacher who is run out of town for her promiscuous behavior but who styles herself “a priestess of Aphrodite.” More than any major character in the early postwar years, Blanche embodies the conflicts of a changing world. A lover of poetry and music and ballroom taffeta, Blanche stands as a fading tribute to refined life unable to survive in Stanley Kowalski’s crude and raucous world. Herself a complicated woman, Blanche has memories of an ideal she may never herself have known and finds refuge in alcohol and lies.

Williams’s presentation of the drama is in eleven scenes, each characterized by the sounds of New Orleans, from blues piano to street vendor cries. Against the ambience, vitality, and decadence of the city, the Kowalskis plan
the birth of their first child even as Stanley is given to fits of violence that momentarily alienate an always forgiving wife. Quarrelsome, demanding, and obsessed with his masculine role, Stanley regularly asserts his authority, a misused commemorative to domestic power.

The 1947 production of *A Streetcar Named Desire* at New York’s Barrymore Theatre, which ran for 855 performances, was directed by Kazan. The production featured Jessica Tandy as Blanche, Marlon Brando as Stanley, Kim Hunter as Stella, and Karl Malden as Mitch; it won Williams a New York Drama Critics’ Circle Award, a Pulitzer Prize, and a Donaldson Award. The play opened two years later in London, with Vivien Leigh as Blanche, and, in 1951, Kazan directed a film version, with Leigh as Blanche and, otherwise, the New York cast. But under pressure to respect both Hollywood’s official morality and the Roman Catholic Legion of Decency’s objections, Kazan omitted references to Blanche’s young husband’s homosexuality, dramatized Stanley’s rape of Blanche only suggestively, and ended the film with Stella, who embraces her husband in Williams’s play, shouting at her husband never to touch her again. (It took until 1984 for a film version of Williams’s full text to appear: John Erman directed Ann-Margret and Treat Williams in the remake.)

While able playwrights all have the personal credentials to dramatize illusion and know well the power of imaginative worlds, there is irony in the fact that Miller and Williams became the primary architects of postwar domestic drama. Although Miller was married to Mary Grace Slattery in the forties and added two children to the marriage, by the turn of the decade he had met Marilyn Monroe and begun leading a social life without his wife. Miller was to divorce Slattery in 1956 and marry Monroe, but that marriage would end in 1961—a year before his third, with Inge Morath, with whom he remains married, would begin. Williams, a homosexual, never married. Nor was early family life for either playwright ideal: Miller’s father lost all he owned in the stock market crash, when Arthur was thirteen, and Williams, whose traveling salesman father was frequently absent, grew up in delicate health in an extended family and, at age seven, was uprooted from his southern home and transplanted to St. Louis. Nonetheless, Miller and Williams often dealt with the postwar family as a subject.

**Postwar and Fifties Playwrights**

The postwar American stage also hosted a number of writers who had established reputations before the war, most notably Lillian Hellman (*Another Part of the Forest, 1946*), Maxwell Anderson (*Truckline Café, 1946; Joan of Lorraine, 1946; Anne of the Thousand Days, 1948*), Clifford Odets (*The Big Knife, 1949; The Country Girl, 1949*), Sidney Kingsley (*Detective Story, 1949*), and Elmer Rice (*Dream Girl, 1945*). O’Neill’s major career was also of an earlier era – in 1936,
he became the first (and, to date, only) American playwright to win the Nobel Prize for Literature – but in 1946, the first year of the baby boom, *The Iceman Cometh* appeared: *A Moon for the Misbegotten* (written in 1943) received its premiere one year later, and *Long Day’s Journey Into Night*, suppressed by the playwright’s unwillingness to expose publicly the addictions and deceptions of the Tyrone family – O’Neill’s own – was staged in 1956.

As the fifties unfolded, Broadway saw productions of Carson McCullers’s *The Member of the Wedding* (1950), Kingsley’s *Darkness at Noon* (1951) and *Lunatics and Lovers* (1954), Maxwell Anderson’s *Barefoot in Athens* (1951) and *The Bad Seed* (1954), Hellman’s *The Autumn Garden* (1951), Robert Anderson’s *Tea and Sympathy* (1953), John Patrick’s *Teahouse of the August Moon* (1953), Rice’s *The Winner* (1954) and *Cue for Passion* (1958), Wilder’s *The Matchmaker* (1954), Odet’s *The Flowering Peach* (1954), Jerome Lawrence and Robert E. Lee’s *Inherit the Wind* (1955), and Frances Goodrich’s and Albert Hackett’s *The Diary of Anne Frank* (1955).

William Gibson achieved immediate but shortlived fame in 1958 with *Two for the Seesaw* and, a year later, *The Miracle Worker*, which dramatized the relationship between Helen Keller and her tutor. The decade ended on the promise of this new playwright’s work and that of another, Lorraine Hansberry, whose *Raisin in the Sun* carved out a place for African Americans in the narrative of family drama. In that play, a black family on the south side of Chicago with ordinary problems and ordinary dreams must make an extraordinary decision when a representative of the all-white neighborhood into which they are about to move pressures them to change their plans. The first African American woman to have a play staged on Broadway, Hansberry held considerable promise. But shortly after her second play, *The Sign in Sidney Brustein’s Window* (1964), appeared, cancer claimed her. And Gibson’s career never did materialize: subsequent plays dramatized events in the lives of historical figures (John and Abigail Adams, Golda Meir, and, once again, Helen Keller) but failed to have an impact on the American stage.


Personally and politically, the fifties were difficult for Miller. These were years of marital transition, with Monroe divorcing Joe DiMaggio, Miller divorcing Slattery, and Monroe and Miller marrying. In 1957, a year into their marriage, Monroe had a miscarriage, which triggered a serious depression that persisted through the 1961 divorce and until her death in 1962.
Politically, Miller, long a leftist, became particularly active. In an environment that was increasingly anti-liberal, Miller watched the House Un-American Activities Committee conduct its investigation and listened as his longtime friend and director Elia Kazan and others named people in the motion picture industry who allegedly had associations with the Communist Party. In 1956, Miller was subpoenaed to appear before HUAC. His testimony was open and candid – until he was asked to name others and refused, an act that resulted in his conviction for contempt of Congress. Though the conviction was subsequently reversed by the U.S. Court of Appeals for the District of Columbia, Miller's experience reaffirmed his insistence on the precedence of the individual moral conscience over a law of society, a commitment that was dramatized with particular force in his fifties plays. In its most assertive form, it appears in the characters of John Proctor (The Crucible) and Eddie Carbone (A View from the Bridge), who die affirming their personal sense of justice.

Professionally, Miller began the decade with An Enemy of the People, which opened at the Broadhurst Theatre in 1950, one month after Death of a Salesman completed its 742-performance run. An adaptation of Ibsen's 1882 play, Miller's version speaks with special relevance to the Joseph McCarthy years. The stubbornly insistent Dr. Stockmann (played by Morris Carnovsky), intent on doing what is right regardless of consequences, becomes a recognizable and repeatable character in Miller's plays. Miller's protagonists are ordinary men of uncompromising commitment.

John Proctor in The Crucible, a play with suggestive parallels between the Salem witchhunts and the Congressional hearings, asserts his identity and individual conscience in the context of a public terror that finally claims his life. A man of uncommon moral courage, Proctor refuses to yield to those who would hold him guilty of trafficking with the devil. And though he signs a confession on his dying day, and later retracts it, he refuses to name names and, finally, champions as his highest value the honor of his name. By contrast, others in the community who are accused are persuaded that confession offers the only hope of redemption, and each in turn both admits complicity and names others.

Proctor's world is the world of 1692 Puritan Massachusetts, where fire and brimstone sermons assured that residents attended church regularly and knew by heart the Ten Commandments. John's fault is that he has violated – and forgotten – the Commandment prohibiting adultery, having yielded to the sensuous attractions of the young Abigail, who becomes the sustaining power behind the community's obsession with witches. A shrewd opportunist, she names those she does not like and manipulatively tries to reclaim her favor with John.

Miller's dramatizing of the Salem trials reveals society at its tyrannical
worst and polarizes good and evil. Clearly, the analogy between the Communist hunt and the Salem witchhunt was fundamental to Miller's purpose. In 1950, Senator McCarthy of Wisconsin, in a devastating gesture characteristic of the Cold War mentality, publicly stated that 205 Communists had infiltrated the State Department: though he could name none, the investigations that ensued ruined the careers and the lives of many. For Miller, the zealous guardians of the public good, in colonial New England and McCarthy's America, led the country into the darkest chapters of its history; the play, which opened at the Martin Beck Theatre in 1953, ran for 197 performances.

In 1955, a one-act version of A View from the Bridge shared a 149-performance run with A Memory of Two Mondays; the following year, a fuller version, not produced in New York until 1965, had a 220-performance run in London (beginning the relationship between that city and Miller that has since grown into a love affair). It was this version that Sidney Lumet made into a film in 1962. In 1997–98 the fuller version had a very successful Broadway revival.

Genetically linked to Dr. Stockmann and John Proctor, and not unrelated to Joe Keller and Willy Loman, Eddie Carbone completes the family of strong-willed protagonists that were central to the first decade of Miller's highly successful playwriting career. In this play, a narrator, Alfieri, tells the story of the longshoreman's inevitable death, the consequence of Eddie's inability to reconcile the social laws of the Brooklyn community in which he lives with the moral laws that claim him. The family, though important in the two earlier fifties plays, reassumes the primacy of the forties plays in this drama, which involves a daughter's desire to marry a man unacceptable to her father. Catherine, a niece whom Eddie and Bea have raised as a daughter, is attracted to Rudolpho, an illegal immigrant with blond hair, a tenor voice, and pointed shoes. Eddie, who believes in the traditional Sicilian and masculine family values that make his word domestic law, activates his objection by violating the code of the Red Hook community, reporting Rudolpho and his brother to the authorities as "submarines." In part, Eddie is motivated by a fatherly desire to protect a vulnerable young woman from the seductions of the modern world, but Eddie may also have an unacknowledged incestuous attraction to the girl. In breaking faith with both his family and his community, Eddie becomes an object of scorn and, finally, is killed in a knife fight with Rudolpho's brother.

A Memory of Two Mondays, the slighter of the two plays in the double bill, has yet to be appreciated, though in the history of modern drama it might have claimed an important place. Lyrical and sensitive, the piece records the experiences of workers in a warehouse on two successive Mondays, anticipating, in tone and in action, Samuel Beckett's Waiting for Godot. Miller's play-world is a warehouse of endless receiving and shipping, of boredom and waiting, of returning the next day to re-experience the routine. At this point in
Miller's life, however, the personal and the political conspired to disincline him to redesign the American theatre. Though he wrote a screenplay of his short story "The Misfits" especially for Monroe and published an occasional short story, he essentially absented himself from the stage until 1964.

Williams, on the other hand, remained a persistent contributor throughout the decade. In the early fifties, he wrote three plays that explored the divide between the spiritual and the physical, a motif he had treated with success in Streetcar. Critics thought Eccentricities of a Nightingale (1951) (a rewrite of Summer and Smoke [1948]) overburdened by symbolism, despite the fact that Geraldine Page, in a production directed by José Quintero, played Alma Winemiller, daughter of a Mississippi minister, with particular sensitivity. They were surprised by the robust comic spirit of The Rose Tattoo, staged in New York in 1950 at the Martin Beck Theatre and made into a compelling film with Anna Magnani and Burt Lancaster in 1955. In that play, the Sicilian-born widow, Serafina, given to solitude and prayer until she learns of her husband's infidelity, allows her sensual urges to return, turning the play into a paean to the Dionysian spirit. Camino Real (1953), which similarly celebrates the sensuous, but within the insistent presence of death, baffled critics. A series of expressionistic vignettes, the play dramatizes a variety of experiences and an assortment of characters in a raucous and threatening New Orleans street scene.

Following Camino Real, Williams returned to the fold of domestic realism with Cat on a Hot Tin Roof (1955), a seething drama of a marriage on the brink of disaster. Maggie and Brick Pollitt (played by Elizabeth Taylor and Paul Newman in the film version) muddle through their relationship under the watchful eye of Big Daddy, the quintessential southern patriarch (played by Burl Ives), who, dying of cancer, looks to his favorite son for an heir. Committed to the values of the Mississippi plantation, Big Daddy doesn't realize the extent to which ambivalent sexual identity, sexual frustration, dependency, and mendacity define the couple's life. At the end of the play, Maggie announces that she is pregnant in order to satisfy Big Daddy and provoke her homosexual husband into making the lie come true. Perhaps more powerfully than any drama of the fifties, Cat challenged the myths of family and community, offering the uncertain hope of a future constructed on moral paralysis and a mendacious lie. A major achievement, Cat, as staged by Kazan at the Morosco Theatre, won a New York Drama Critics' Circle Award and a Pulitzer Prize, became Williams's longest running play, and, in 1958, was made into an MGM film.

Williams closed the decade with three additional plays: Orpheus Descending (1957), Suddenly Last Summer (1958), and Sweet Bird of Youth (1959), all three of which were made into films, testifying to the playwright's continuing appeal.
Williams renews the familiar motifs of individual loneliness, sexuality, and bigotry and the collective pains of a Southern community that has succumbed to a degenerate modern world. Heavily symbolic, the play alludes to the myth of Orpheus and Eurydice, with an updated minstrel lover wandering into the hellish city to claim a lady. With its cast of decadent characters, including the figurative lord of the underworld, a promiscuous, alcoholic woman, and a woman at once elated over having conceived a child and disillusioned at having learned of her husband’s villainy, the play offers a drama of small achievements and large disappointments, sharing little inclination to endorse the psychological, sexual, or spiritual lives of the individuals and families in this Mississippi town.

Williams’s distress was even more emphatically expressed in *Suddenly Last Summer*. The central image of that play—children, armed with tin cans, savagely tearing the flesh of a decadent, homosexual poet, then cannibalizing his body—morbidly memorializes the loss of a world once defined by civility and grace, as well as the fears of the misfit who challenges the natural laws of sexuality or withdraws from society to be the artist. Such a character appears again in *Sweet Bird of Youth*, as Chance Wayne, who begins as an innocent in love with Heavenly Finley but descends into a degenerate life style when Heavenly’s father refuses to permit the marriage. A dependent personality, who recalls a host of other Williams characters, Chance teams up with a fading actress and becomes involved in other sexual liaisons as he attempts to establish a career that will impress Heavenly’s father. Instead, his behavior results in a dose of venereal disease for Heavenly and an operation that leaves her sterile. Finally, in an unstaged scene reminiscent of the brutal death of the poet in *Suddenly Last Summer* and of the too familiar racial lynchings in the South, a group of townsman, including Heavenly’s brother, castrate Chance, who pleads with the audience to recognize the connection between him and them.

In these and all of Williams’s fifties plays, the playwright exploits the myths of the old South and the realities of the new, endowing life below the Mason-Dixon line with a metaphorical authority. For Williams, the inclination toward poetry, kindness, refinement, and grace embodied earlier in a Blanche Dubois fights mightily against the press of time, which insists on a more prosaic world. Yet even as the plays of the fifties reveal an attraction to the myth of an idealized South and a resistance to the threat of its decline, so also do they acknowledge the bigotry, the masculinity, the mendacity that was always there. The site of Williams’s drama is clearly postwar, reflecting as it does the disillusionment and the nostalgia of a society wanting to return to the values it once held but unable to do so. Yet it is just as clearly a place where the playwright expresses dissatisfaction with a culture whose values offered little satisfaction in the first place, at least not to those whose imaginations—and sexual
orientation – set them apart. At a time when America was pretending that only the evil empire was the enemy, Williams was insightfully acknowledging the beast within and searching for both self- and others’ understanding.

**William Inge**

If there was a playwright who shared the respect of Miller and Williams in the fifties, not for innovation of form but for the sensitivity with which he dramatized the American family, it was William Inge. Born in Independence, Kansas, in 1913, Inge established his credentials as a playwright in 1950 with *Come Back, Little Sheba*, with Shirley Booth and Sidney Blackmer in the leading roles. Set in small-town middle America, as nearly all Inge’s plays are, *Come Back, Little Sheba* presents an unhappy marriage twenty years after Doc and Lola had been forced by Lola’s pregnancy to marry. Now, Lola is barren, the baby having been stillborn, and Doc is a chiropractor, not having completed his medical degree. The climactic event of the drama is a drunken rampage, in which Doc tries unsuccessfully to kill his wife. Though Inge himself finally succumbed to his own alcoholism and depression, committing suicide in 1973, the playwright characteristically ends this early drama on a note of regeneration, with a chastened Doc and a maturing Lola having recognized their weaknesses and acknowledged their mutual needs.

*Picnic* (1953) similarly dramatizes the repressiveness of small-town routine through an outsider’s appearance at a Labor Day picnic. *Bus Stop*, set in a roadside diner in Kansas, where a busload of passengers is stalled by a snowstorm, introduces an assortment of characters with individual aspirations and destinations that are painfully constrained. And *The Dark at the Top of the Stairs* (1957) follows the lives of a twenties small-town Oklahoma family poised at a point of personal and historical change: Rubin Flood sells harnesses, a commodity that will not survive the transition from an agrarian to an industrial society.

In this important cluster of plays, which had respectable runs on Broadway, Inge examines a large but typical cast of characters and relationships, repeatedly creating situations that dramatize the details of lives anesthetized by habit, dreams suffocated by compromise, and sexuality denied – the stuff of small-town America. The appeal of Inge’s plays was recognized by Hollywood, which produced screen versions of each: *Come Back, Little Sheba*, with Burt Lancaster and Shirley Booth (who won an Academy Award for her performance), in 1952; *Picnic*, with William Holden, Kim Novak, and Rosalind Russell, in 1955; *Bus Stop*, with Monroe and Don Murray, in 1956; and *The Dark at the Top of the Stairs*, with Robert Preston, Dorothy McGuire, Angela
Lansbury, and Eve Arden, in 1960. After the unsuccessful *A Loss of Roses* (1959), Inge was to continue writing plays into the sixties, many of them one-acts, and he wrote a well-received screenplay, *Splendor in the Grass* (1961), which won him an Academy Award. Though Inge’s plays have not had the staying power of Miller’s or Williams’s, they enjoy pride of place in the history of drama as examples of the troubled American family at a time when the country was, presumably, in its halcyon years.

Indeed, the collective force of Miller’s, Williams’s, and Inge’s plays extends beyond their analysis of that fundamental but discrete social unit to an analysis of the national condition, which, while marked by optimism and excitement, was showing sure signs of neuroses. The fifties were a time of peace, prosperity, and social progress. This was the decade of color television, credit cards, and the contraceptive pill, of Jackie Robinson, Jonas Salk, Simone de Beauvoir, Rosa Parks, Elvis Presley, and *Playboy*. Yet so also was it the first full decade of the postwar nuclear age. In the fifties, Americans were building bomb shelters and participating in air-raid drills, deluded into thinking that precautionary measures could save them from the devastation of Hiroshima and Nagasaki that had stunned and humbled the world. It is clear in retrospect that in documenting the contradictions and eruptions of families in Kansas or Mississippi or Brooklyn, New York, who failed at domestic coherence, these playwrights were inviting audiences to see that the American way of life, the American character itself, was undergoing change. If the country’s central unifying myth – the sanctity and health of the family – was eroding, how would this young, optimistic, no longer innocent nation cohere?

*Edward Albee*

Even as the major American playwrights of the fifties were approaching this question through the genre that has come to be known as domestic realism, European playwrights were engaged in a more philosophical testing of postwar meaning, one that demanded a radically different dramatic form. In 1956, an American production of Beckett’s *Waiting for Godot* left the American theatre reeling. Here was a form of theatre that challenged not only the optimistic vision of a country that still believed in causality, moral responsibility, and the American dream but also the artistic commitment of several generations of realistic playwrights. During the opening run of *Godot*, taxis queued outside the theatre at intermission anticipating fares from those unwilling to sit through a second act in which nothing happens – again. American audiences, unlike their European counterparts, who were familiar by now with the Theatre of the Absurd through the work of Jean Genet, Eugène Ionesco, and Beckett, were not prepared for such radical disruptions of the familiar
dramatic paradigm. Careers took unexpected turns after that and, as public sensibilities became more flexible, new American playwrights found themselves more willing to experiment with form, to explore the non-realistic devices that had defined European drama since the period between the wars.

Among the first to react to the Beckett production were Jack Gelber and Edward Albee, who took the lead in redefining—and relocating—the American play. Gelber’s *The Connection* drew on Beckett’s work both thematically and structurally. A group of heroin addicts, purportedly collected from the streets of New York and asked to improvise while being filmed, wait for Cowboy, their contact with the “connection,” who will provide their fix. Like Vladimir and Estragon, the junkies engage in interim activities but consistently direct their energies toward the arrival of that which enables them to endure. Their improvised behavior is complemented by the jazz that accompanies the play, conveying the flux and the intensity of those who need a fix. Acutely conscious of itself as theatre, as was the Beckett play, *The Connection* functions on several levels of illusion, recalling Pirandello’s earlier concern with the interplay between the fictive and the real and endorsing that continuing inquiry as central to the contemporary stage. During the intermission, street junkies from Gelber’s play ask the audience for handouts, disregarding conventional barriers between spectators and stage. Staged in 1959 by The Living Theatre under Judith Malina’s direction, *The Connection* ran for an impressive 768 performances.

Some months later, Albee’s *The Zoo Story*, which had been staged first at Berlin’s Schillertheater Werkstatt in 1959, appeared Off-Broadway at the Provincetown Playhouse in a double bill with Beckett’s *Krapp’s Last Tape*. *The Zoo Story* dramatizes a moment in the life—and death—of a lonely New Yorker, whose West Side rooming house features a sexually frustrated landlady, a fierce gatekeeping dog, a neighboring “queen,” and an empty picture frame. On a Sunday afternoon, Jerry claims possession of a Central Park bench from its regular occupant. Jerry spends considerable time winning the attention and irritating the sensibilities of the more conventional Peter, who has an East Side apartment, a job, a wife, two daughters, two parakeets, and a TV. The motifs of isolation, alienation, contingency, and absurdity that had been defining European drama both between the wars and after 1945 graphically found their way into an American play through the park bench drama of Jerry and Peter, which culminates in Jerry’s impaling himself on the knife that Peter holds in his outstretched hand.

Albee followed this success with *The American Dream* at the York Playhouse in 1961. Here was a play that frontally challenged the domestic values earlier playwrights had begun to question. *The American Dream* caricatures and distorts the American family, transforming its mendacious and heartless tendencies into grotesque perversities that both shock and amuse.
For adoptive parents Mommy and Daddy, the failure of their infant to become the perfect child, styled in their image, is reason to cut off the offending parts, then demand a refund for the mutilated child. The couple bargain with Mrs. Barker of the Bye-Bye Adoption Agency in a hilarious but sobering display of consumerism gone amok.

Albee’s drama acknowledges the values that have been central to American culture but refuses either to lament their demise or to endorse their recovery. Though critics claim Albee’s plays hint at the possibility of restoration, both *The Zoo Story* and *The American Dream* support a vision that may best be described as posthumanistic. Grandma, after all, in packing bogus lunches and entering baking contests with day-old cakes, is just as unconscionable as her opportunist daughter, who lets Daddy “bump his uglies” in order to earn her inheritance. And this representative of earlier times is hardly shocked by the commercialism of Mommy and Daddy, who complain of their defective adopted child. Nor does Jerry in *The Zoo Story* have any hope of filling his empty picture frame or of establishing genuine contact with Peter, even after his lessons on the importance of connecting and his analogy of humans with animals in the zoo. As Jerry anticipates the Central Park stabbing on the evening news, he consults his own motive: “could I have planned all this? No – no, no, I couldn’t have. But I think I did.” Jerry’s ultimate purpose may merely have been to communicate through the technology of the evening news, where he will become an electronic image in homes across the nation.


Albee’s first full-length Broadway play, *Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*, which opened at the Billy Rose Theatre in 1962, added layers of illusion to the family drama of O’Neill as it invited audiences into the living room of a New England college professor and his domineering alcoholic wife. George and Martha have managed the failure of their marriage through a ritualized game of one-upmanship involving humiliation and abuse followed by forgiveness and reconciliation. The centerpiece of their lives is an imaginary son for whom they have created a sequence of stories that connect, in provocative and destructive ways, with events that may or may not have marked their own unhealthy and unhappy lives. The “Walpurgisnacht” the audience witnesses is occasioned by a visit from a young couple; he is a new member of the faculty, she a minister’s daughter given to hysterical pregnancies and drinking that encourages her to tell tales. During the course of the early morning hours, Martha tells the couple about their son, taunting her husband in the process, until George decides to perform the ultimate act and end their game: in a compelling and heart-rending story, he kills the son in a car crash, hoping
The play proved a sophisticated foray into the nature of illusion, posing epistemological questions and inviting the kind of postmodern criticism that the work of Sam Shepard would later engender. But critics of Alan Schneider's production, which ran for 644 performances with Uta Hagen and Arthur Hill playing Martha and George, seemed less interested in those questions than in Martha's venomous tongue. Albee won a New York Drama Critics' Circle Award, an Outer Circle Award, and a Tony for this play but did not win a Pulitzer Prize, quite possibly because its language, which was irreverently vulgar, offended Broadway. The play (filmed in 1966 with Elizabeth Taylor and Richard Burton as Martha and George) proved critical in the history of American theatre, for, like John Osborne's Look Back in Anger (1956) in England, it reconstituted the idiom of the contemporary stage. Even more important, along with The Zoo Story and The American Dream, it made clear the need for an alternative New York theatre, one that would not merely comply with conventional public taste and yield to commercial sensibilities but that would stretch and challenge both audiences and writers.

Sam Shepard and Off-Off Broadway

By 1960, playwrights – and the public – were associating Broadway with commercialism, and a number of writers were refusing to take their places on the gravy train. Gibson, who had known modest fame for Two for the Seesaw, referred to his success as a hollow achievement, complaining that the contemporary American theatre (meaning the commercial theatre, or Broadway) was primarily a place not to be serious but to be likeable. In the sixties, a generation of playwrights was opting for an alternative. As a consequence, Off-Off Broadway, which came of age in that decade, became the forum for a host of new, often experimental playwrights who found venues for their work in the cafés, lofts, and churches of New York's Greenwich Village and the Lower East Side.

Even as the Off-Off Broadway venues that had hosted Albee's first play began to mature and the Off-Off Broadway theatre went about its business of redefining the American stage, it was becoming clear that that kind of theatre was capturing the ethos of the decade. The sixties were, after all, a decade of political and social contradictions. The Kennedy years were years of progress in the space program: America had a man in space by 1961 and a man on the moon by 1969. But so also did these years see the construction of the Berlin Wall (1961), which made material the political line between West and East, and the Cuban missile crisis (1962), which brought the country perilously close to
war with the Soviet Union. If Americans still had a claim to innocence at the beginning of the decade, they surely lost it in 1963 when their Camelot President, John F. Kennedy, was assassinated in Dallas. The shooting proved the first in a sequence that was to claim the lives of Malcolm X (1965), Robert Kennedy (1968), and Martin Luther King (1968). Under Lyndon Johnson, the Great Society Program once again asserted the government’s responsibility for the underprivileged masses and for preserving the country’s natural resources for its heirs. Yet even as Johnson was humanizing America, he gave the order, in 1964, to send U.S. troops to Vietnam: by 1967 there were 380,000 troops fighting on Vietnamese soil. At home, there were protests, by disenchanted flower children who made marijuana a religion; by angry blacks, who saw their brothers dying in disproportionate numbers; and by citizens concerned with the absurdity of an unpopular and unwinnable war. Meanwhile, the Beatles had made their debut in England, and women in miniskirts, more in control of their reproductive lives than ever before, were assuming positions in the workforce alongside men. The decade closed with its third President, Richard Nixon, in the White House, the nation still stunned by the riots at the 1968 Democratic National Convention in Chicago and the 1970 killings at Kent State University. In such a climate, Sam Shepard, a Southern California transplant, emerged to accelerate the pace and to secure the excitement and the viability of Off-Off Broadway.

Born in Chicago in 1943, Samuel Shepard Rogers III spent the first eleven years of his life moving among the military bases that marked his father’s career, then moved with his family to an avocado ranch not far from the freeways and malls of Los Angeles. When he was twenty, Shepard came to New York, where he (temporarily) traded his hopes of becoming an actor for a more practical job as busboy at The Village Gate. At the same time, he began writing plays about contemporary America, which he presented through a mixture of the plastic artifacts of popular culture and the hallowed remains of the legendary West. The young playwright’s vision proved one of unrelenting disruption, of an America that perpetuated the forms of its myths without understanding their essence. The Cowboy, the Gangster, the Rock Star, the Millionaire, all part of the American fabric, weave freely in and out of Shepard’s plays, creating a sense of surface yet curiously celebrating the persistence of American mythology.

Formally, Shepard used paradox, transformation, juxtaposition, and metaphor, connecting and disconnecting fragmentary moments in a seemingly capricious dramatic design. His characters proved ravaged remnants of the consistency principle that Krutch, some twenty years earlier, had declared essential if characters were to be morally responsible. In place of dramatic dialogue, he offered the monologue, or “aria,” an often lyrical— and always fascinating— expression of lonely self-absorption. Particularly in the plays of the
sixties, Shepard’s attraction to rock music, hallucinogenics, pop culture, and high tech, to John Cage, the Who, and the Rolling Stones found substantive and formal expression. It was almost predictable that Shepard would become America’s most original and most exciting playwright of Off-Off Broadway.

Though the sixties plays were not the ones that have emerged as the defining work of Shepard’s career – they included Chicago (1965), Icarus’s Mother (1965), Red Cross (1966), La Turista (1967), Melodrama Play (1967), and Forensic & the Navigators (1967) – the young playwright was prolific in that decade, and a number of those early contributions exemplify the spirit that this renegade writer delivered to the New York stage. Shepard was to move further east, to London, in the early seventies, where he both secured and extended his reputation as an original theatrical voice. By that time, he had received substantial promotion in Off-Off Broadway venues such as La MaMa and Caffe Cino; six plays had received Obie Awards; Shepard had won two foundation grants, a Rockefeller in 1967 and a Guggenheim in 1968; and Lincoln Center had produced Operation Sidewinder (1970).

The first of Shepard’s plays to be mounted in New York, Cowboys, appeared in 1964 at Theatre Genesis in a double bill with Rock Garden. Though the script is no longer extant, Cowboys #2, produced in 1967, provides a sense of Shepard’s relationship to the concept of the cowboy, which was clearly part of his mythological West, where the free and Adventuresome spirit reigns. Shepard compared the bonding among cowboys to his relationship with jazz musician Charlie Mingus, who shared an East Village apartment and a friendship with Shepard and who lent stimulation to the playwright’s own sense of unbridled energy in the New York of the sixties. If the rewritten version is representative of the first, then Cowboys celebrates the power of language to reclaim a remembered world and to create an imaginative one of unbounded potential. Against a backdrop of sounds that define both an urban setting and the open West, two urban cowboys speak, in successive monologues, of life in the great outdoors even as two city men of pedestrian mind confirm the poverty of the urban landscape and language. Along the way, the cowboys engage in the kind of role-playing that anticipates the transformational drama of the seventies that fascinated Shepard and others in the Open Theatre.

Rock Garden, which Shepard described as a play about his leaving his father and mother, rewrites the American family drama in sixties Off-Off Broadway terms. Here the mythical idea of the garden serves as overlap to a peculiar perspective of rootlessness and desire. Presented in three scenes, the play first provides a silent look at the family at dinner: the father reading a magazine, the teenage daughter and son each sipping milk, and no one speaking. It then moves to a scene in which the mother, in bed, asks the boy, in a rocking chair, to run errands as she offers a complaining monologue about her own father and his. In scene three, father and son, in underwear, engage
in scant conversation and extended monologues, the father about his imagined rock garden, the son about sex, while masturbating.

Given the unorthodox rituals that inform both of the plays in this early double bill, it is understandable that the reviews were sour. Fortunately, however, Michael Smith of the *Village Voice* recognized the power and the potential of this new playwright, providing an appreciation and an analysis that enabled others to engage his surprising worlds. Shepard stayed in New York for the remainder of the decade; some seventeen plays later, he had given shape and form not only to his own career but to Off-Off Broadway. At the end of the decade, having created a host of characters whose hallmark was the hallucinogenic monologue, Shepard left New York for London – to get “clean.” (In 1965, he had avoided the draft by claiming heroin addiction.)

The sixties Off-Off Broadway theatre produced the early works of a number of promising playwrights, including Maria Irene Fornés (*Tango Palace*, 1964; *Promenade*, 1965; *A Vietnamese Wedding*, 1967); Michael McClure (*The Beard*, 1967); Rochelle Owens (*Futz*, 1967); Barbara Garson (*MacBird!*, 1967); and Israel Horovitz (*Line*, 1967; *The Indian Wants the Bronx*, 1968).

Jean-Claude Van Itallie’s *America Hurrah*, a trilogy of plays – *Interview*, *TV*, and *Motel* – that wryly comments on America in the sixties, emerges from an inventory of some dozen Off-Off Broadway and Los Angeles plays as his most compelling. Contemporary in attitude, all three plays regret the impersonality of experience: in *Interview*, through a series of one-on-one conversations in which communication fails; in *TV*, through the electronic depersonalizing of three workers who are seduced by the attractions of television; and, most conspicuously, in *Motel*, through mechanical dolls serving as desk clerk and motel guests.

**Kopit, Guare, Wilson, and later Albee**

Arthur Kopit, after producing several plays in Cambridge, Massachusetts, while he was a student at Harvard, made his London debut in 1961 and his New York debut in 1962 with *Oh Dad, Poor Dad, Mamma’s Hung You in the Closet and I’m Feelin’ So Sad*, a parodic treatment of the Oedipal impulse. Set in Havana, with Madame Rosepettle a powerful maternal figure, the play presents a scene of irresistible humor: in it, the babysitter, Rosalie, seduces the seventeen-year-old Jonathan in his mother’s bed, only to be interrupted when the corpse of his father, stowed in a closet, tumbles down on them. In the aftermath of the event, Jonathan smothers Rosalie, is grabbed by the animated hand of his father, and, as the sound of harp strings fills the air, floats out to the balcony to view the sky.

Kopit’s irreverent humor also found expression in *The Day the Whores
Came Out to Play Tennis (1965), in which he satirizes the country club crowd, who are decidedly unprepared for the arrival of eighteen unauthorized female tennis players in unsavory tennis costumes, sans underwear. The other Kopit play of special note (about a dozen were published or staged in the sixties) is Indians, which opened in an elaborate Broadway production at the Brooks Atkinson Theatre in 1969, following runs in London and Washington, D.C. In that comic-strip extravaganza, Kopit appropriates the legends of the American West: his Buffalo Bill (played by Stacy Keach) epitomizes the American tendency to romanticize the past and deny its cruelties – a fitting subject at a time when the nation was embroiled in a war in Vietnam and, within its borders, the Civil Rights Movement. Kopit’s penchant for absurdity and black comedy, combined with his considerable skill at counterpoint and indirection, mark him as a distinctive voice on the Off-Off Broadway stage. A film version, Buffalo Bill and the Indians, appeared in 1976, directed by Robert Altman.

John Guare, whose most respected plays did not appear until 1971, also began his career in the sixties, with The House of Blue Leaves and Two Gentlemen of Verona, the latter a rock-musical adaptation, by Guare and Mel Shapiro, of the Shakespeare play. A master of the wacky and the weird, Guare surprises and amuses his audience with characters on the extremity of experience and carefully designed worlds that are always willing to yield to the absurd.

Lanford Wilson was among the most prolific of the new writers, with the sixties seeing some fifteen of his plays produced Off-Off Broadway, many of them at Caffe Cino and La MaMa, as well as in regional venues. By the end of the decade, Wilson had been recognized through a Drama Desk Vernon Rice Award (for The Rimer of Eldritch) and a Rockefeller Foundation grant and had had a play (The Gingham Dog, 1970) produced (unsuccessfully) on Broadway. Saddened by the suicide of Joe Cino, which effectively ended the “theatre of participation,” Wilson, director Marshall Mason, and others founded the Circle Repertory Company.

Wilson’s major achievement in the 1960s was Balm in Gilead, mounted at La MaMa in 1965. In that play, a crowded all-night coffee shop serves as the setting for a large cast of lonely, desperate people, the “riffraff,” the drug dealers, the prostitutes of upper Broadway. Through fragments of overlapping, repetitious conversations, in the idiom of the street, Wilson provides a powerful snapshot of the dispossessed underclass and, more obliquely, the urban American family. Gradually, two characters come into focus: Joe, a pusher, and Darlene, a hooker, whose nostalgic monologue, lasting nearly half an hour in production, becomes the centerpiece of a world as bleak but as persistent as those created by Gelber (The Connection) and Beckett (Waiting for Godot). Through several revivals of this play and through contributions in
subsequent decades, Wilson established himself as an important voice on the American stage.

Throughout the development of the Off-Off Broadway theatre, Albee continued to be a powerful force, irrespective of venue. The sixties saw a variety of Albee’s dramatic work, including *Fam and Yam* (1960), a short comic sketch that satirizes the Broadway theatre scene; *The Sandbox* (1960), a short dramatic piece that provided Albee with characters for *The American Dream;* *The Death of Bessie Smith* (1960), a one-act play that dramatizes the racially difficult circumstances surrounding the death of the blues singer in Tennessee; four adaptations – *The Ballad of the Sad Café* (1963, based on Carson McCullers’s novel), *Malcolm* (1966, based on James Purdy’s novel), *Breakfast at Tiffany’s* (1966, based on a Truman Capote story), and *Everything in the Garden* (1967, based on Giles Cooper’s play) – and several major works, including *Tiny Alice* (1964), *A Delicate Balance* (1965), and *Box and Quotations from Chairman Mao Tse-Tung* (1968), all of which connected American drama with the contemporary European style.

Alan Schneider, who directed Broadway productions of all three plays, cast John Gielgud and Irene Worth in *Tiny Alice* at the Billy Rose Theatre. Opaque and symbolic, the play enigmatically explores belief in an abstraction, whether it be illusory or real. Amid allusions to youthful homosexuality, a Lawyer and a Cardinal discuss Miss Alice’s huge bequest to the church and appoint Brother Julian to conclude the arrangements. Both the Lawyer and the Butler who welcomes the lay brother into Alice’s mansion have had affairs with Miss Alice, and Brother Julian has a story as well: some years earlier, he spent six years in a mental facility suffering a breakdown occasioned by his loss of faith in God. In his interview with Alice, the ancient crone proves an illusion: Alice strips off her disguise to reveal a youthful, beautiful woman, and the two discuss their respective sexual lives and Julian’s religious experiences. The meeting ends with the promise of their sexual union and marriage, though it is not clear whether Julian will marry Miss Alice herself or the tiny Alice in the miniature model of Miss Alice’s castle – or both.

In fact, little in this play is clear. At the end, the Lawyer shoots Julian, prompting suspicions of a conspiracy among the Cardinal, the Lawyer, the Butler, and Miss Alice that repeats itself with each new victim, Julian having been the unhappy recipient this time. But the role of the miniature model and the replica of Miss Alice’s castle preempts such a reading as primary, focusing attention instead on the metaphysical play that aligns Albee’s dramatic experiment with those of Genet. For in *Tiny Alice,* as in *The Balcony* and *The Maids,* the palpable presence of the illusion reorients the illusory and the real. For Julian, as for the characters in Genet’s plays, there is a moment, or a space, where the two meet to create a purified abstraction. Though Julian, at his death, may or may not understand the metaphysical force of the moment,
he understands that the union of Miss Alice and tiny Alice, of the mansion and
the model, of the real and the abstract, is what he, in his priesthood, has
wanted and insisted on. Though critics were puzzled, and some distressed,
over the obscurity of the play, *Tiny Alice* ran for 167 provocative per­
formances.

As though in atonement, Albee countered with a play that returned audi­
ences to the comfort of realism. *A Delicate Balance*, which opened at the
Martin Beck Theatre in 1967 and won Albee a Pulitzer Prize, ran for 132 per­
formances, with Jessica Tandy and Hume Cronyn as Agnes and Tobias.
Though somewhat elusive, the play may be included among the repertory of
domestic drama that dominated the American stage. In it, a middle-aged New
England couple are visited by close friends, who seek refuge from an unnamed
fear that has enveloped their home. The presence of the second couple pro­
vides the occasion for Agnes and Tobias to re-examine their own relation­
ships, upsetting the “delicate balance” that the family, despite insensitivities,
power struggles, and failures, has sustained. Intelligent and thoughtful, the
play invites a consideration of the larger questions of existence and the
careful illusions that keep life in place. (In 1973, it was made into a film, with
Katharine Hepburn and Paul Scofield in the leading roles.)

The variety of Albee’s art and the intensity of his concern about form are
confirmed by his next contributions to the American stage: *Box* and
*Quotations from Chairman Mao Tse-Tung*, presented at the Billy Rose Theatre
following a run in Buffalo. In these pieces, Albee’s theatre becomes, once
again, a theatre of the avant-garde, a minimal, provocative theatre that refuses
to respect the orthodoxies of the stage. In *Box*, which frames the presenta­
tion of *Quotations*, the only actor is in the form of a projected voiceover that med­
itates and muses while the audience looks at the outline of a cube. Precisely
orchestrated, the Voice follows Albee’s stage directions, which even specify
the length of the pauses. Pervading its pronouncements is a deep sense of
loss, encompassing both human experience and art.

In the companion piece, Albee puts four characters on the stage, on the
deck of an oceanliner. They are Chairman Mao, a Long-Winded Lady, an Old
Woman, and a Minister, the last having no lines. In this play, as in *Box*, Albee
creates a musical structure of form and counterpoint, with actors directed to
speak their lines rhythmically. The interplay of the Long-Winded Lady’s per­
sonal past, Mao’s predictions of global catastrophe (a recitation from the *Little
Red Book* of Chairman Mao), the Old Woman’s doggerel poem, and the intrud­
ing Voice from *Box* bring together the motif of loss. The box, which appears
as prologue and as epilogue to the monologues of *Quotations* (which take
place within the outlines of the cube) may be a symbolic coffin, containing the
remnants of civilization and art.

Curiously, Albee’s plays, though sharp in their challenge to conventional
form and contemporary taste, continued to find venues on Broadway. There was an irony in this acceptance, yet there was an appropriateness in it as well, for Broadway had played a significant role in the playwright’s youth. Born in 1928, Albee was adopted by a New York theatre owner, Reed Albee, and his wife, Frances. The infant was named for his adoptive grandfather, a well-known vaudeville producer; as a child, he was often taken to Broadway plays. Though Albee was thirty before *The Zoo Story* appeared, he had been an aspiring writer most of his life: at Choate and at Trinity College and for ten years in New York while he was working at odd jobs, including one, for three years, delivering telegrams for Western Union.

**Groups and Collectives and Their Performance Pieces**

Even as Albee, Shepard, and others were stretching the boundaries of literary form, Off-Off Broadway was playing host to a non-literary theatrical movement that celebrated the primacy of performance (see also Gussow, “Off- and Off-Off Broadway,” and Carlson, “Alternative Theatre,” Chapter 2). Among the earliest, most applauded, and most maligned of the avant-garde groups that helped create this Off-Off Broadway phenomenon was the Living Theatre, whose productions of Gelber’s *The Connection* (1959) and *The Brig* (1963) proved seminal in the experimental theatre movement. The Living’s politically radical, pacifist leaders, Judith Malina and Julian Beck, found a theatrical counterpart for their political anarchy in a form of production that insisted on the continuity of theatre and life; that celebrated nudity, sex, and freedom; and that employed provocation, intimidation, seduction, and shock. Its 1968–69 productions of *Mysteries – and Smaller Pieces, Frankenstein, Antigone*, and *Paradise Now* reflected a demolition of conventional forms too irreverent for contemporary critics to endure. The Living thrived on a physical and a verbal freedom so thorough that it was years after the staging of *Paradise Now* before the public knew that, amid the riot of theatrical sex witnessed and participated in by the audience, Malina was raped. The event, ironically, perfectly embodied the absorption of life into theatre, symbolically, though unholyly, consummating the marriage between life and art. Even more ironically, the aggression inherent in rape became an operating principle for the experimental theatre, which intruded upon its audience’s personal space through verbal and physical assault.

Intent on achieving an audience participation that would obscure the line dividing theatre and life, the experimental theatre of the sixties created performance spaces in places where no one suspected theatre could take place and repealed the law of audience passivity. The Happening, which had its genesis in the plastic arts with Allan Kaprow and soon became theatrically
ubiquitous, provided minimal scripts, necessitating abundant improvisation, and freely mixed theatre and life.

In the Open Theatre, established in 1963, Joseph Chaikin and Peter Feldman were developing an aesthetic through which they could present dream, myth, and ritual on stage while breaking out of the rational dictates of mimetic theatre. The Open worked through meditation, developing a non-verbal stage language of gesture, rhythm, sound, and silence that functioned more through instinct than training and that, unlike the work of other groups, reflected passivity, not aggression. Among their important pieces was Van Itallie’s The Serpent, which ritualistically and therapeutically connects the archetypes of the Garden of Eden and the primal murder with the assassinations of John F. Kennedy and Martin Luther King, and Megan Terry’s Viet Rock, a fluidly structured satire of the war in Vietnam.

In the late sixties, Richard Schechner and Richard Foreman were redefining theatrical space through designing environments in which to perform the primitive rituals best exemplified by the Performance Group’s Dionysus in ‘69 (1968). Begun in 1968, Schechner’s Performance Group dedicated itself to reacquiring ritual through a celebratory event involving actors, audience, and the free definition of theatrical space. Dionysus in ‘69, based on Euripides’ The Bacchae, proved an orgiastic rendition of the life cycle, beginning with the ritual birth of Dionysus through the simulated birth passage created by naked actors. Freely sexual, the production invited spectators to partake in the orgy and to help create the portions of the event that did not rely on the Greek text.

At the same time, Peter Schumann’s Bread and Puppet Theatre was engaging audiences in the Christian ritual of communion, beginning each of its productions with a bread-breaking ceremony before presenting its New Left activism. John Vaccaro and Charles Ludlam were developing their savagely nihilistic Theatre of the Ridiculous. Robert Wilson was staging his three-hour speechless epic, Deafman Glance (1971), in Paris, creating a Theatre of Silence. Jerzy Grotowski was developing his concept of “poor theatre” in Poland, with Apocalypse cum figuris (1968), and Peter Brook was experimenting with non-proscenium staging and “the empty space,” most notably in his productions of Marat/Sade (1964) and A Midsummer Night’s Dream (1970). In the Shakespeare play, the bare stage offered a whirligig of circus trapezes, conceived not as props but as extensions of the actors’ bodies and voices, encouraging contemporary interpretations of the classics that stripped the stage of theatrical cliché.

For the Off-Off Broadway theatre of these performance groups, the dramatic text served as impetus for a range of theatrical experiments. No longer intent on recording the scenarios of daily experience, theatre became an experience in itself. But Off-Off Broadway’s commitment to non-literary performance proved to be ephemeral, not only because performance events left
only a few scattered scripts behind but also because playwrights with dramatic texts that deserved staging were exceptionally active as well.

**Black Theatre**

In the sixties African American drama came of age. Sporadically represented until that decade, most notably through Hansberry’s *A Raisin in the Sun*, African Americans were now finding venues, in university and regional theatre, Off-Off Broadway, and, occasionally, on the Broadway stage.

The sixties, of course, saw much social action on the part of black Americans. In 1962, the National Guard assisted as James Meredith became the first African American to enroll at the University of Mississippi. In 1965, inner city blacks in Watts, Los Angeles, rioted; it was the same year that 4,000 blacks and civil rights supporters began their march from Selma to Montgomery, Alabama, in a demonstration that was to change the history of race relations.

In the sixties, LeRoi Jones – later Imamu Amiri Baraka – a playwright unwilling to relinquish the identity of black Americans to the national effort to integrate, wrote several assertive plays for the Off-Off Broadway stage: *The Baptism*, *The Dutchman*, *The Toilet*, and *The Slave*, produced in 1964, and *Experimental Death Unit #1* and *J-E-L-L-O*, produced in 1965. In the early years of Baraka’s career, it seemed evident that the playwright, in taking a political position on black identity, needed to address some personal identity questions as well. As an undergraduate, Baraka had attended a traditionally black university (Howard), but he did his graduate work at Columbia; in the sixties, he was married to a white woman and was part of a Greenwich Village group of intellectuals for whom creativity was more prominent a priority than race. At a time when the Civil Rights Movement, the killing of black children at a church in Birmingham, and the riots in Watts were pressing men like Jones into action, there appeared to be a disconnection between the angry voice of the plays and Baraka’s own life style. Within a short time, however, Baraka had divorced his wife, trained as a Muslim, moved to Harlem, and begun the Black Arts Repertory Theatre. *The Slave*, in fact, may metaphorically have anticipated his own personal conversion: in it, Walker Vessels, leader of a black revolutionary group, kills his former wife’s professor husband and watches as a militant black army assaults and destroys their home.

Though Baraka’s plays vary in the extent of their violence, all are calls for cultural independence. In *The Toilet*, a relationship between a white and a black that might have been does not find expression. In *Dutchman*, a black man on a subway elects not to kill a white woman who was harassing him, only to be murdered himself. In *Experimental Death Unit #1*, a militant army kills
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and decapitates two white homosexual men as well as a black prostitute, who, in trafficking with whites, allegedly earned her fate. And in *J-E-L-L-O*, Jack Benny's chauffeur, Rochester, rebels against his abusive and oppressive boss and wins full redress.

Baraka left New York in the mid-sixties to write for black audiences in Newark, where *Slave Ship* (1967), as well as other plays that enable or promote revolution, was performed. His successor Off-Off Broadway was Ed Bullins (b. 1935), whose work profiles the lives of blacks caught in a trap no less forceful and far more immediate than that in *Godot*. Through a cycle of plays that begins with *In the Wine Time* (1968), Bullins expresses frustration and hope over the individual and collective limitations and potential of blacks. Later in the decade, Bullins produced a number of short plays with clearer and angrier political statements about black identity, including *A Son, Come Home, The Electronic Nigger*, and *Clara's Ole Man*, all staged in New York in 1968.


*Women Playwrights/Feminist Theatre*

At the same time, women were just beginning to establish themselves in the American theatre. Though women playwrights had made significant contributions to the theatre in the early part of the century – Susan Glaspell, Zoë Akins, and Sophie Treadwell, for example – and Hellman remained a major figure in American theatre, what is now known as feminist theatre, a phenomenon that has thrived since the seventies, began to emerge in the sixties, particularly in the work of Adrienne Kennedy and Megan Terry. Kennedy's *Funnyhouse of a Negro* (1964) was especially important, both to her career and to the development of a feminist presence on the American stage. Its focus is on Sarah, a young woman of mixed race who tries to find a space where she is secure in her sense of self. The daughter of a black father and a white mother, Sarah
lives with a Jewish poet. She is aware of herself as a black with commitments to Africa yet is attracted to the European culture of her white intellectual friends. In the course of this expressionistic play, which generously uses masks, Sarah has fantasies of identity, aligning herself with four historical figures: Queen Victoria, the Duchess of Hapsburg, Patrice Lumumba, and Jesus. Unable to accept her own identity or to reconcile those of Lumumba and Jesus, whom she associates with her abusive father, Sarah commits suicide. In a companion piece, *The Owl Answers* (1965), Clara Passmore similarly attempts to get “rooted” in history and in self: unable to attend her black father’s funeral, she seeks out her British heritage through encounters with an unwelcoming trio: Shakespeare, Chaucer, and William the Conqueror. The play culminates in the complicated symbolism of a ritual conflagration on the high altar/bed of St. Paul’s.

Terry’s *Ex-Miss Copper Queen on a Set of Pills* (1963) presents a similarly confused young woman, caught, without resources, between her sense of herself as a former midwest beauty queen and that of her current drug-addicted life as a prostitute on the streets of New York. *Calm Down Mother*, performed in 1965 at the Open, extends the fantasies and maskings into dramatic transformations, with the three actresses playing eight characters and switching identities on demand. In each of the eight units, women are in circumstances that reveal the range of their limitations as well as their potential as women. The play ends in an affirmation of self as all three celebrate their bellies, their bodies, and their “eggies,” the source of both masculine control and feminine power. Five years later, in 1970, Terry wrote a dramatic tribute to the French philosopher Simone Weil called *Approaching Simone*. Clearly, feminist drama was off to a running start.

*Broadway in the 1960s: More Miller, Williams, and Albee*

Meanwhile, the Broadway theatre endured. In the sixties, Miller returned with *After the Fall* (1964), which opened the Vivian Beaumont Theater’s first season at Lincoln Center following a run at the ANTA-Washington Square Theatre. The play is an odyssey of individual anguish, with Quentin, the confessional protagonist, obsessed with trying to understand why he continually searches for hope despite repeated disappointment. Its form, a conversation with a silent off-stage Listener and a dramatization of the landscape of Quentin’s mind, enables Miller to range freely between past and present and to explore his protagonist’s personal pain as a psychological exercise in memorial reconstruction as well as an investigation into the nature of good and evil – before and after the Fall. Quentin remembers events of his personal and professional life,
including an encounter with the House Un-American Activities Committee and a marriage to Maggie, a woman of enormous sexual energy yet undaunted innocence. At the end of a therapeutic two hours, in which a concentration camp tower conspicuously looms, Quentin is closer to understanding guilt and responsibility and prepared to respond to Holga’s hopeful hello.

The following year, *Incident at Vichy*, which deals with the public side of guilt and responsibility, documented Miller’s continuing preoccupation with the Holocaust. The play, which dramatizes an event in wartime France, when the Vichy government routinely persecuted suspected Jews, is brutally insistent upon a guilt that refuses to discriminate, a guilt suggested by Holga’s acknowledgment that, since the concentration camp, no one can be innocent. The event involves eight men and a boy who have been detained; Jews in the group fear that their false identity papers will be discovered, yet they refuse to believe in the death camp. One by one, Miller implicates each of the characters in the conspiracy of silence, self-interest, and delusion that enabled the Nazis to accomplish their barbarity. When only two men are left in the room – Von Berg and Leduc – there are gestures of generosity, even heroism, with the old Austrian Catholic offering the French Jew his pass. One cannot decide with confidence whether Leduc’s motives in accepting it are decent or selfish.

In 1968, Broadway’s Morosco Theatre became home to *The Price*, a play that collects the motifs and the concerns of Miller’s earlier work – guilt, moral debt, self-delusion, choice, and consequence – into a story of two brothers, together for the first time in years. The occasion is the sale of their dead parents’ belongings to a shrewd octogenarian dealer, who tries, unsuccessfully, to get them to see the worth of more than just the furniture. Instead, the two brothers, one a physician and one a policeman, invest in moral posturing that, despite revelations and accusations, ends where it began, with neither brother willing to settle the accumulation of moral debt. Solomon gets the furniture, and they the cash, but the differences between the brothers remain unresolved. Their rehearsal of the choices each made and the obligations that ensued once again makes the family the focus of attention, and, as with other Miller families, a framework of self-interest and deception is revealed. Miller’s vision of the American family, though packaged in many forms, remained one of suspicion. But with Solomon, whose laughter resonates throughout the attic space at the end of the play, Miller knows the price that life demands.

During the run of *The Price*, which saw 429 performances, the millionth copy of *Death of a Salesman* was sold, leaving no doubt that Miller’s reputation if not current influence remained strong. Even as Miller’s career seemed to be once more gaining momentum, Williams’s, by contrast, was clearly winding down. In addition to an experiment with comedy (*Period of Adjustment*, which opened in Florida in 1958 and New York in 1960) and several one-act plays, the sixties introduced *The Night of the Iguana* (1961, film version...

The first of these, *The Night of the Iguana*, is generally seen as a point of punctuation in Williams’s career. That play, with its attention to the misfit who struggles to find personal, spiritual, and social space, is thematically of a piece with Williams’s earlier work, though its conciliatory tone may suggest a mellowing of Williams’s own obsessions. The defrocked minister who is the focus of *Iguana* was locked out of his church after kneeling, then reclining, with a young woman, who, in remorse, tried to commit suicide. Now a tour guide, he visits a resort near Puerto Barrio, Mexico, run by Maxine Faulk. Other hotel guests, including Hannah Jelkes, an artist, and her ninety-seven-year-old poet grandfather, who dies after completing his most lyrical poem; a busload of teachers from the Baptist Female College in Blowing Rock, Texas; and four young Germans form the backdrop for the experience of The Reverend T. Lawrence Shannon, who is removed from his responsibilities as tour guide and dramatically urinates on the ladies’ luggage but who apparently pairs off at the end with Maxine. There is a sense of resignation and reconciliation in this Williams play, which still acknowledges the struggle but seems more willing to yield.

Following *Iguana*, which ran for 316 performances at the Royale and was made into a film in 1964 with Richard Burton, Deborah Kerr, and Ava Gardner, Williams’s plays became less structured and more philosophically abstract, exploring the culminating moments of life and of art with less of the frustration and anger of the earlier plays. In *The Milk Train Doesn’t Stop Here Any More*, he writes a modern-day *Everyman*, with Flora Goforth in search of a way to exit this life with dignity and acceptance. She is assisted in her quest by a man in lederhosen, who is both poet and Angel of Death. Chris Flanders’s mission is to give her not what she wants but what she needs: he cryptically does so by presenting her with a mobile called “The Earth is a Wheel in a Great Big Gambling Casino.” The withdrawn widow dies behind a screen with Chris escorting her across the bar.

In *In the Bar of a Tokyo Hotel*, Williams insistently explores the artistic imagination, through an American woman, Miriam, who fears the loss of her vitality, and her painter husband Mark, whose style is in a dramatic transition. When the gallery director Leonard arrives from New York, he attempts to convince Miriam not to continue her tour alone. But she has little compassion for her dependent husband, who, faced with her cold refusal, collapses and dies. Though cryptic in purpose, the play invited critics to see the piece as the (autobiographical) profile of an artist at a low point in his career.

The play may have proved prophetic, for in the dozen or so years remaining before the freak occurrence that claimed his life in 1983 (a nasal spray cap suffocated him), the playwright was to enjoy little commercial success. Though theatregoers may recall the titles of some of Williams’s seventies and
eighties plays – such as Small Craft Warnings (1972), Vieux Carré (1977), and Clothes for a Summer Hotel (1980) – none of these promises to gain prominence in the repertoire of American theatre, and many – Seven Descents of Myrtle (1968), Out Cry (1971), This Is (an Entertainment) (1976), The Red Devil Battery Sign (1975), Demolition Downtown (1977), Crève Coeur (1978), Something Cloudy, Something Clear (1981), and A House Not Meant to Stand (1982) – have already disappeared from the vocabulary of the stage.

Neither Miller nor Williams left a major mark on the sixties stage. Albee was center stage now, with plays that disturbed complacent audiences and pushed against the boundaries of the realistic form. He shared the spotlight with an unlikely partner: a playwright who thrived on the conventions of the comic form and capitalized on the public’s penchant for the one-liner. Born in the Bronx in 1927 (a year before Albee), Neil Simon proved a commercial phenomenon: at one point in the sixties, four of his plays were in simultaneous runs on Broadway.

Broadway’s Star: Neil Simon

Neil Simon had begun his writing career doing comedy sketches and revues for radio and television with his brother Danny. His break on Broadway came in 1961, with his first play, Come Blow Your Horn, which premiered the previous year at the Bucks County (Pennsylvania) Playhouse and began a sequence of successes that remained uninterrupted until 1970, when The Gingerbread Lady, Simon’s first effort to mix comedy and tragedy and his first commercial flop, suggested that the public may have had its fill of Simon. (The signal proved false, for Simon, even into the late nineties, though somewhat tempered, continues his appeal.) A master of the running gag, the circular joke, and the witty one-liner, Simon prods his audiences into the kind of unrestrained laughter he himself experienced as a youth at a Charlie Chaplin, Buster Keaton, or Laurel and Hardy movie. Through recognizable characters (often caricatures) and familiar settings – particularly the urban middle-class American living room – Simon, himself the son of a truant father, comically and conservatively upholds the value and the primacy of marriage and family.

In Come Blow Your Horn, two brothers, Buddy and Alan, modeled on Neil and Danny, enjoy their independence in New York in the older brother’s apartment. Their bachelor exploits, drawn against the backdrop of parents unable to release their sons to the world, prove an education to Alan. By play’s end, the profligate older brother has matured into a man who, sounding much like his father, prepares to settle into marriage. Along the way, there are appearances by Peggy, the woman upstairs, with whom Alan has been sexually involved; Connie, who arrives with suitcases in hand, ready to move in with
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Alan, with or without marriage; Mr. and Mrs. Baker, parents of the young men; and, finally, Aunt Gussie, who drops in to find Buddy alone, anticipating an evening with a woman named Snow. Mrs. Baker’s antics provide much of the humor of the play, which relies on the interrupting doorbell and telephone rings to activate a fresh sequence. Her efforts to be helpful by taking messages even though she cannot find a pencil result in a mêlée of confusions that neutralize some of the crueler behavior of her domineering husband, who has employed both their sons in the family business. It is Mr. Baker who animates the play, however, for, at its heart, *Come Blow Your Horn* is not only an exploration of traditional and newer values but also an inquiry into what manhood and masculinity mean, particularly within the context of family. Though it took the prolific Simon three years to write this first Broadway play, the finished product bears the mark of a craftsman adept at constructing and sustaining a plot, renewing an audience’s laughter periodically, and exploring family values at moments of challenge or change. Directed by Stanley Prager, the New York production at the Brooks Atkinson Theatre enjoyed a quite respectable 677-performance run.

At the end of the decade, following the successes of *Barefoot in the Park* (1963), *The Odd Couple* (1965), and *Plaza Suite* (1968), a new Simon play proved once again to be a crowd-pleaser. *Last of the Red Hot Lovers*, which opened at the Eugene O’Neill Theater in late 1969 and ran for 706 performances, is, like *Come Blow Your Horn*, typically Simon. Structured in three parts, the play presents the adventures of Barney Cashman, who is involved sequentially with three women. The setting is Barney’s mother’s apartment, which he uses during her absences to serve him in his first adulterous affair. Prompted by the boredom of daily life, the middle-aged owner of a fish restaurant, who worries that his fingers smell of fish, invites Elaine Navazio to the apartment; she is a woman given to alcohol, cigarettes, and casual affairs, and her agenda does not include the romantic prologue that Barney imagines. Prevented by their incompatible visions of sexual experience to accomplish the act, Barney is left disappointed and disillusioned.

Eight months later, he tries again, this time with Bobbi Michele, who tells stories of incipient kinky sex that intrigue Barney. Barney joins Bobbi in a joint – his first experience with marijuana – which renders him hopelessly convinced that he is dying and her adamant about her own independence and the viciousness of others.

In the third of his unsuccessful trysts, which occurs one month later, Barney plays host to Jeanette Fisher, who proves to be a deeply depressed woman who clings to her purse, does not enjoy sex, and is married to a long-time friend of the Cashmans. When Jeanette leaves the apartment, Barney has secured from her an admission that some people are decent. Despite his aggressive behavior, however, Barney’s sexual appetite and his quest for a beautiful, decent woman have not been satisfied. The play ends with Barney
on the phone to his wife, asking the reluctant woman to meet him in his mother’s apartment.

In another playwright’s hands, such portraits of neurotic people and relationships may well challenge the conventions of marriage and family. In Simon’s repertory, however, these institutions, no matter how flawed, survive, if not on the stage then at least in the minds of the audience, who are always made aware of what might have been. It is not surprising that virtually all of Simon’s sixties plays – and subsequent ones as well – have been made into films, for they tap into the ordinary lives of middle-class urban Americans struggling to communicate and to understand. Simon’s playful humor makes palatable each desperate character and occasion; theatregoers leave Simon’s plays feeling good about themselves and comfortably entertained.

The Musical

The Broadway musical, explored in more detail in Chapters 2 (Maslon, “Broadway”) and 4, which typically had a goal similar to Simon’s, remained a staple of the American theatre during the postwar years. Blockbuster musicals such as Carousel (1945), South Pacific (1949), My Fair Lady (1956), The Sound of Music (1959), and Fiddler on the Roof (1964) – to name just a few – continued to please the Broadway tourist crowd – and, for many, to define the American theatre.

In 1967, however, a musical of another sort premiered at the Public Theater. Highly theatrical and entertaining, Hair, a rock musical, captured the spirit and the conflicts of the sixties, pitting the long-hair generation against the Establishment and celebrating nudity, free love, and rock’n’roll (see Aronson’s discussion of these and other factors in Chapter 1). A central character, Claude, finally opts not to burn his draft card, but he winds up a casualty of Vietnam. Galt MacDermot’s music and Gerome Ragni and James Rado’s lyrics were insistently contemporary, promising the deliverance of the conservative musical theatre into the Age of Aquarius. Though Hair ran for 1,844 performances in two venues, first at the Public and then on Broadway, it proved an isolated event, with little lasting influence on the form of the musical stage.

Conclusion

By the end of the sixties, the Broadway theatre’s customer base was shrinking, as were its artistic standards. Millions of families across the nation owned television sets, which not only seduced audiences into the effortless evening in the living room armchair but also set a new, diminished standard for drama.
Writers of talent found themselves generating sitcoms, serials, and Westerns in return for handsome financial rewards. At the same time, Broadway was coping with increases in operating costs: by the end of the fifties, a serious play needed a weekly income of $20,000, a musical $40,000, to offset the $250,000–$500,000 it cost to underwrite the show. This situation would only worsen throughout the remainder of the century. To help assure the show’s success, producers relied on expensive advertising and star appeal, denying the price of a ticket to all but the elite, for whom seeing a Broadway play became a status game. Discriminating theatregoers with more slender wallets abjured the Broadway stage or selectively invested in a play – after they read the review. For the 1969–70 season, Broadway mounted only sixty-two plays, 200 fewer than had been on its boards forty years earlier. Given the excesses and the mediocrity of Broadway, made palpable in its inhospitality to serious playwrights and its reluctance to revise the musical after Hair, it is not surprising that the Off-Off Broadway theatre materialized.

The twenty-five years following the close of World War II saw a number of defining moments in the development of the American theatre. Miller, Williams, Inge, and Albee, whose plays were produced on Broadway, recognized the conventions of culture and theatre that were too stubborn to disappear, yet treated them in original and provocative ways, reconstituting the form of the domestic play and extending America’s chronic inquiry into the role of the nuclear family. At the same time, a conservative Broadway theatre, marked by the comedies of Neil Simon, sustained traditional forms and values, as did the ubiquitous musical, a collaboration of song, book, and dance, often bundled into leg shows and lavish entertainments, that continues to attract audiences from around the world and to sustain New York’s reputation as the theatre capital. With the rise of regional theatres and the emergence of Off-Off Broadway, however, the focus that Broadway once enjoyed has been diffused, with Broadway increasingly identified as a commercial theatre designed for popular audiences rather than as the venue for the serious play. In the sixties, Shepard and a host of playwrights who might not otherwise have found a stage for their work turned to the developing Off-Off Broadway theatre, which welcomed not only the experimental playwright but a band of new performance groups as well. Mapping the progress of these postwar years reveals a variegated American stage, whose elevations and depressions collectively create a cartography of an art form distinctively our own.

*Bibliography: Plays and Playwrights: 1945–1970*

Though no survey of American drama precisely dedicates itself exclusively to the twenty-five years immediately following World War II, a number of more comprehensive studies cover the plays and playwrights of this period. Bigsby’s work in this area
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is extensive. In an early analysis, *Confrontation and Commitment*, he offers an assessment of a developing contemporary American theatre. Focusing on the work of Miller, Albee, James Baldwin, Jones (Baraka), Hansberry, and some of the Off-Off Broadway performance groups, including the Living Theatre, Bigsby observes that American audiences, twenty years after World War II, were still attracted to the well-made play and the American theatre had not fully absorbed the lessons of the European stage. From 1982–85, Bigsby published an exceptionally insightful three-volume study of the American drama, with volumes two and three offering coverage of these years. In *A Critical Introduction to Twentieth-Century American Drama, Volume Two: Williams/Miller/Albee*, Bigsby provides information and analyses on the work of these three major playwrights within the social, political, and theatrical contexts of postwar America. In volume three, *Beyond Broadway*, he covers the Off- and Off-Off Broadway theatre movements, critically assessing the patterns and the anomalies of this burgeoning alternative theatre. In yet another study, *Modern American Drama 1945–1990*, he extends his analyses of the work of major playwrights, including Miller, Williams, Albee, and Shepard.

Other valuable studies include Adler, *American Drama, 1940–1960*, which offers a solid overview of the twenty years indicated in its title, with particularly helpful comments on the major writers treated here. Berkowitz’s *American Drama of the Twentieth Century* clusters plays chronologically, with the relevant sections running from 1945–60 and 1960–75. Though Cohn’s *New American Dramatists* and Roudané’s *American Drama Since 1960* include only ten years of the period in focus here, Cohn provides a wide-ranging survey of playwrights and Roudané brings special emphasis to the work of African Americans and women. Krutch, in “Modernism” in *Modern Drama*, a monograph referenced in the early paragraphs of this essay, offers a personal view on modern European theatre, providing a context for his assessment of a modern American theatre in its infant years. And finally, *Realism and the American Dramatic Tradition*, edited by Demastes, though not limited to this twenty-five-year period, includes a number of relevant essays.


There are a number of introductory studies of Tennessee Williams’s work, among them Tischler, *Tennessee Williams*; Jackson, *The Broken World of Tennessee Williams*; Falk, *Tennessee Williams*; Londré, *Tennessee Williams*; and *The Cambridge Companion to Tennessee Williams*, edited by Roudané. Murphy’s *Tennessee Williams and Elia Kazan* provides important information on how one of America’s most influential directors translated the texts of Williams’s plays onto the stage. Readers interested in the film versions of Williams’s plays should consult Yacowar, *Tennessee Williams and Film*, which treats fifteen translations of plays to the screen – all released in the fifties and sixties. Two collections of essays worth exploring are *Tennessee Williams: A Collection*
of Critical Essays edited by Stanton, and Tennessee Williams: A Tribute edited by Tharpe. In 1975, Williams published his Memoirs, a volume that joined a number of biographical treatments already in print and anticipated several that were to appear after his death in 1983. The best of these is a critical biography by Spoto, The Kindness of Strangers, though the most thorough biography of his early life is Leverich’s Tom. Interesting interviews with the playwright are collected in Conversations with Tennessee Williams edited by Devlin.

Early assessments of Edward Albee’s work include Bigsby, Albee; Cohn, Edward Albee; and Rutenberg, Edward Albee: Playwright in Protest – all in 1969. More recent – and confirming – analyses may be found in McCarthy, Edward Albee; Roudané, Understanding Edward Albee; and Amacher, Edward Albee. Two edited volumes that offer focused analyses of particular Albee plays are Edward Albee: A Collection of Critical Essays edited by Bigsby, and Critical Essays on Edward Albee edited by Kolin and Davis. A stimulating set of interviews may be found in Conversations with Edward Albee, edited by Kolin. Those interested in a comprehensive bibliography of primary and secondary works may wish to consult Giantvalley, Edward Albee: A Reference Guide.

Insights into Sam Shepard’s work may be culled from Tucker, Sam Shepard; Mottram, Inner Landscapes; Hart, Sam Shepard’s Metaphorical Stages; DeRose, Sam Shepard; and two recent studies: Bottoms, The Theatre of Sam Shepard, and Wade, Sam Shepard and the American Theatre. Kimball King’s Sam Shepard: A Casebook is a helpful collection of essays, with several on the sixties plays. American Dreams: The Imagination of Sam Shepard, edited by Marranca, offers a compendium of perceptive essays, including several by Shepard. Oumano’s biography, Sam Shepard, provides a solid analysis of this fascinating figure’s life and work. And Bigsby’s chapter on Shepard in the Beyond Broadway volume mentioned in the opening paragraph is essential reading.


There are a host of books on the American musical theatre. See Degen, Chapter 4, for suggestions.

Important reference books include Roudané, Contemporary Authors: Bibliographical Series, Volume Three: American Dramatists, which offers a primary and secondary bibliography as well as bibliographical essays on a number of playwrights from this period (Albee, Baraka, Hansberry, Kennedy, Kopit, McCullers, Miller, Shepard, Terry, Williams, and Wilson), and Bronner, The Encyclopedia of the American Theatre 1900–1975. Methuen’s “Writers on File” series is particularly helpful, with compact volumes on many of the playwrights discussed in this chapter. Arnott’s Tennessee Williams on File offers a representative example: the book catalogues the plays, providing information on publication and production as well as excerpts from critical reviews. Brief biographies of playwrights and entries on many plays from this period can be found in Wilmeth and Miller.