

The Library of America • Story of the Week

From *The American Stage: Writing on Theater from Washington Irving to Tony Kushner* (Library of America, 2010), pages 385–89.

Originally published in the January 1929 issue of *Theatre Guild Magazine*.

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The Provincetown Players began in an abandoned fish-house on a Cape Cod wharf in the summer of 1915 as an amateur workshop for experiments in playwriting and stage lighting. Its elected head, George Cram “Jig” Cook, said its goal was “to give Americans a chance to work out their ideas in freedom.” The group moved to a Greenwich Village stable and a membership subscription system, with new plays offered every three weeks. The fare was eclectic but fresh and ambitious: work by Eugene O’Neill, Cook’s wife, Susan Glaspell, the Yiddish playwright David Pinski, Strindberg, even Gilbert and Sullivan. Growing dissension—some members wanted to continue experimenting, others to capitalize on success and go commercial—led to dissolution in 1924, but a second company took shape, formed by the disciples of New Stagecraft (O’Neill, Robert Edmond Jones, and Kenneth Macgowan), with an equally variegated repertory: Mrs. Mowatt’s *Fashion*, *Desire Under the Elms*, plays by Stark Young and Paul Green. A third avatar was killed off by the Wall Street crash.

Among the 20-some hopefuls in at the birth of the Provincetown Players was the budding bohemian Djuna Barnes (1892–1982). She occasionally acted for them, in Tolstoy and Claudel, but chiefly contributed a number of one-act plays, some under the nom de plume Lydia Steptoe; “none of them,” judges the critic Ruby Cohn, “can be taken seriously.” Between 1929 and 1931, Barnes contributed a number of essays to *Theatre Guild Magazine*. Subjective to the point of idiosyncrasy, playing variations on the standard forms of the memoir and the celebrity profile, they were “op-eds” *avant la lettre*.

The Days of Jig Cook

Recollections of Ancient Theatre History But Ten Years Old

THE world has grown a little older, the fat man even fatter, the local sponge has died, at a ripe old age at that, since the Provincetown Players used to write and act their own plays in their Greenwich Village stable; the girls who used to fight to get into the Provincetown casts have withered, and others sit and cannot recall just what it was that used to make them get

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into such heated controversies. Only a few talk of the days when Jig Cook used to drink to inspire others, of the past when Eugene O'Neill was a boy who was too shy to speak.

Helen Westley tells me that youth alone is idealistic. But Helen is right only in regard to American youth. Those who were young when I was also very young have not, with the passing of time, become seasoned to the bone. The things that produced the Provincetown Players and made the group what it was, has not made them what they are. Therefore we hear much talk of "lost atmosphere." People speak of those early days as if they were a sort of collar stud which, by some diabolical mischance, had been mislaid by the injustice of God.

The French are otherwise. They too, to be sure, are idealistic in youth; but they are also idealistic in age. They do not speak of days "when." In their lives there is no mislaid stud of enthusiasm. They have, with the peculiarly economical spirit of their race, kept their stud where they can, at any moment, lay their hands on it. It is perhaps not quite the bright stud it used to be, it is indeed not a little dulled, but it will be found in their dress shirt when they are laid out for their grave.

Just what was the spirit that took us to the Brevoort in nineteen hundred and fifteen, sixteen, seventeen, with the eagerness of the devotee? America is the one country where the minority should die young. Jack Reed was right, and some, not all of us, are wrong; and we shall be wrong until we have the ability to keep that collar stud from start to finish.

It is perhaps this inability that has made those early days something we recall with sentiment and exasperation. We perhaps sensed that we would not live long, which is the essence of precocity. No, we would not live long, so we would live hard and reach high. Ida Rauh would not always want to be the Duse of Macdougall Street; Jig Cook was already fatal with his untimely end. The rhythm of his emotional life was that of one walk precariously on the hyphen of Jig versus Parnassus. Jig said "What is this thing called life? Where did it come from? Where is it going? This past of life is just an accident . . . a moment."—And then it was a long while.

Our destiny made us speak before we understood, write before we should and produce before we were able, the plays of John Reed, of Eugene O'Neill, of Susan Glaspell and Floyd

Dell, of Maxwell Bodenheim, of George Cram Cook and Edna St. Vincent Millay; of Wilson and Kreymborg, of Wellman, of Steele and of Barnes. Before we were able we had mature grief and fleeting immortality.

In those days Greenwich Village was to the Bronxite just another name for hell and the devil. Now it is no longer the Village that will get a girl by her back hair and sling her into damnation, it is Paris. My own mother told me that I could never expect to live down that city. And when she thinks I am looking a little thin, or when she sees me watching a fly's slow progress from wall to ceiling, or catches me being introspective—"It's Paris! You needn't tell me. Don't I know what that place can do? I accepted your father under the Arc de Triomphe, and look at us now!"

Some said in those days that you could not get any nearer to original sin than by renting a studio anywhere below Fourteenth Street. It was as good as suicide to write a one-act play, have Norma Millay laugh at it, Charlie Ellis sit through it, or hear Mary Blair connecting it with the Torah or Swedenborg, which ability was one of her charms.

Poverty and paint, I was told, would bring about no good end. We sat and cherished this possibility with a politic humor. The Provincetown theatre was always just about to be given back to the horses. It had been a stable, and a stable, said my friends, it will be again. That this prophecy has never been fulfilled is due largely to M. Eleanor Fitzgerald, who by this organization has been turned into an eternal Eliza crossing the ice, and by main strength, and gift of a pioneer right arm, has so far kept the baby from drowning.

How can I recreate and analyse the spirit that was the early Provincetown and its people? Did I once know? Did any of us know? Do any of us know now since science has made the analysing process a sort of social ping pong? I doubt it. I have talked to Jimmy Light, and Jimmy does not seem to me to know.

If it was just youth, are there not young people today? The answer is, there are. But not by so much as a single feature do they resemble this other youth. They have enthusiasm, but they are not the enthusiasms that we had. There are still Little Art Theatres, and one-act plays, actors and actresses clamoring

for parts, but they are not related to us by so much as a wish-bone.

Why, in those days we used to sit on the most uncomfortable benches imaginable in that theatre, glad to suffer partial paralysis of the upper leg and an entire stoppage of the spinal juices, just to hear Ida Rauh come out of the wings and say: "Life, bring me a fresh rose!"

Our private lives were going all wrong in all directions; we did not eat for days that we might save up to dine at the Brevoort; we sat in the Hell Hole and became both foreign and philosophic under the "Hélas bébé!" of Hypolite Havel; and "Life teems with quiet fun" from Christine, who ran the Provincetown restaurant and who could be counted on to lose all her hairpins, thus loosing her lovely golden hair, by no later than twelve of the clock. We used to sit in groups and recall our earlier and divergent histories. One would say, "I was well smacked by my mother for chewing the paint off the gate post"; another maintained that he had learned the value of madness when his father jumped from a window in an effort to prove gravity, and was picked up convinced. So we talked, and so we went our separate ways home, there to write, out of that confusion which is biography when it is wedded to fact, confession and fancy in any assembly of friend versus friend and still friends.

Of such things were our plays made. Eugene O'Neill wrote out of a dark suspicion that there was injustice in fatherly love. Floyd Dell wrote archly out of a conviction that he was Anatole France. I wrote out of a certitude that I was my father's daughter, and Jig directed because he was the pessimistic Blue Bird of Greece.

Such things made atmosphere, as a chalk line on the floor of a magician's home makes terror and expectation,—atmosphere and a dead line over which the general public could not go.

Then where was the catch in the blood? When and on what day, or succession of days did we, unknowingly, walk over our own dead line and into the general life of a world which, until then, had been the audience?

For though some of us have "come through," we are less of that past than those who were never a part of it. This at least is true of me, and I think it is true of others.

Our legend was bought and paid for by those who did not live to walk over. That we are legend at all, that I have been asked to write of the days of Jig, that we are recalled by some with a sigh, by others with a shudder, is, I think, due to the lives we have lost and to the "ideals" that we cannot remember.

It was a kind of drunkenness that is beyond recall. Jig who could inspire divergent minds to work together for one idea, an ideal that was never quite clear to him, or if clear to him, one that he could not make clear to me nor to a number of others, sent his actors on the scent of no man's rabbit. It was, I think, Jig's rabbit, Jig's conjuring trick; he knew the passes, he spoke the formula, he had the hat, but—was he too proud, or was he too wise, or was he too limited to produce the hare? Who knows?—but it made good hunting.