

The Library of America interviews Laurence Senelick about The American Stage

In connection with the publication in April 2010 of *[The American Stage: Writings on Theater from Washington Irving to Tony Kushner](#)*, edited by Laurence Senelick, Rich Kelley conducted this exclusive interview for The Library of America e-Newsletter.

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In The American Stage you've undertaken the daunting task of creating a near-900-page anthology of writings about the theater in America, starting around 1801 and ending in the twenty-first century. You note in your introduction that the book is neither a documentary history of the theater nor a historical collection of theater criticism. So what is it and how did you decide what to include?

Audiences experience theatre in two ways: when they respond immediately to a momentary stimulus and when they recreate that response through recollection and imagination. I was looking for material that expressed in a vivid way both aspects, whether positive or negative. Critiques and reviews were obvious examples, but limited in format and intention. Memoirs, histories, poems, parodies, diaries, novels, and editorials provide much more varied responses. The Library of America is devoted to great writing, so most of my selections come from writers by profession, capable of distilling what they experienced into effective language. Of the few exceptions, the actor William Gillette was a successful playwright and the director Elia Kazan no mean novelist. Because I was eager to cover all aspects of the theatre, I included forgotten figures on the fringes of literature: the serial contest-winner Charles Sprague, the bachelor diarist Charles King Newcomb, the advance agent Edward P. Hingston, the columnist Sidney Skolsky, and the radio comic Fred Allen.

My model was the kind of bumper book that was once commonplace: a compendium of material both entertaining and informative to be dipped into at

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leisure. As John Lithgow suggests in his foreword, the book might serve as a substitute for playgoing, particularly if one isn't a time-traveler.

The book is filled with great theater stories: John Houseman recalling how he and Orson Welles schemed to put on the first performance of Marc Blitzstein's The Cradle Will Rock when the WPA cut off their funding—and locked them out of their theater—the day before opening. Philip Hone's eyewitness account of the 1849 Astor Place Riots where thirty-two people were killed because of competing performances of Macbeth. Or John Lahr relating his father Bert Lahr's anxieties as he prepared to create the character of Estragon in the first American production of Waiting for Godot. Do you have a favorite story?

Max Beerbohm once said that “Theatrical anecdotage is the deadliest weapon in the armory of old age.” I don't agree, although I try not to dismay my students by telling them in detail how they missed out by not seeing so-and-so in such-and-such a role. My favorite narrative in this collection is Langston Hughes's poker-faced account of how the angels in *The Green Pastures* planned and then failed to strike in segregated Washington, D.C. It's a beautiful example of an angry political message couched in easy, colloquial prose. A friend of mine finished reading it and said, “My blood's boiling.”

The pieces in the book are arranged chronologically, but I wonder if you could suggest some alternative paths through the book for readers who want to follow a particular theme.

In part intentionally, in part fortuitously, there are a number of themes that can be traced throughout. The development of African-American theatre begins with Mark Twain's praise of the pseudo-Negro entertainment, the minstrel show, leaps to the 1920s with Alain Locke's call for Negro themes that exploit native talent, and then to the Langston Hughes's protest article from the midst of the Depression. In the 1960s, Ed Bullins's call for a militant theatre is followed up by Lorraine Hansberry's complaint of the lack of opportunity for black artists on the professional stage (thirty years after Locke so little had changed). And the current state of play is summed up by Henry Louis Gates, Jr., contrasting the artistic ideals of August Wilson with the slapdash popularity of the Chitlin Circuit.

The changing position of women in the American theatre can also be charted from these selections. Anna Cora Mowatt, as one of the earliest to

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champion acting as a respectable profession for women, is represented both by an excerpt from her novel *Mimic Life* and by Edgar Allan Poe's review of her play *Fashion*. Women as sexual objects in the extravaganzas and burlesques of the Civil-War era receive comment from Mark Twain, Charles King Newcomb, and Olive Logan. The star actress is put under the microscope by Alan Dale on Clara Morris and Djuna Barnes on Alla Nazimova, and is allowed to speak for herself in Alexander Woollcott's account of Mrs. Fiske. Lottie Blair Parker stands for the popular playwright and Susan Glaspell the experimental dramatist. The powerful behind-the-scenes producer takes center stage in Frances Parkinson Keyes's article on Theresa Helburn, while the critical intelligence of the female spectator shines through the writing of Willa Cather, Dorothy Parker, Mary McCarthy, Elizabeth Hardwick, and Susan Sontag. With Wendy Wasserstein, we get the playwright of post-feminism, and with Anne Bogart, the female director as creative artist.

Another important strand is that of popular entertainment. I believe that the American theatre is at its most authentic in demotic forms like the minstrel show, vaudeville and burlesque, farce comedy, and unabashed melodrama. So I have favored pieces that relish them and tried to find some unlikely enthusiasts. It may not be out of keeping that Gilbert Seldes, promoter of *The Seven Lively Arts*, should praise Al Jolson and Fanny Brice, or that Fred Allen, once a variety ventriloquist, should rhapsodize over bygone vaudeville. However, the reader may enjoy the surprise of Henry James enthusing over acrobatic pantomime, or the progressive clergyman Rollin Lynde Hartt admiring cheap "mellers," or the pundit Edmund Wilson chortling over Minsky's burlesque.

Perhaps the subterranean theme running through this collection is the American audience. In the very earliest pieces by Irving and Trollope, its crudeness is deplored, while Whitman revels in the butch masculinity on display at the Bowery. Audiences made up of special communities—Mormons, Jewish and Italian immigrants, Chicano farm workers, black attendees at a Masonic Temple—are closely observed and described. How audiences react around a burley-cue runway or thrill to a show of patriotism or respond to WPA agitprop is vividly recreated. One of the most interesting essays is Elia Kazan's about soldier shows in New Guinea during the war in the Pacific: he sees the twelve million men in the conflict as the basis of a new audience that will demand a better theatre. In the flower-child era of audience participation, Elizabeth Hardwick staunchly refuses to join in. All this is a reminder that live theatre is a two-way experience.

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The American Stage features many writers witnessing unforgettable performances: Arthur Miller realizing when Lee J. Cobb “got” Willy Loman; Walt Whitman marveling at Junius Brutus Booth as Richard III; William Winter unraveling how Edwin Booth portrayed Hamlet; Elizabeth Hardwick capturing Helen Hayes’s magic; Harold Clurman grappling with whether Marlon Brando’s Stanley unbalances A Streetcar Named Desire; Frank Rich catching one of Carol Channing’s final performances as Dolly Levi. How great to have all this in one book! What am I forgetting?

I would add Henry James’s memories of the Ravel pantomime troupe, Stark Young’s lovingly detailed anatomy of John Barrymore’s Hamlet, Ezra Pound’s pungent paragraphs about Sarah Bernhardt, Djuna Barnes on Nazimova’s aura, and Gilbert Seldes celebrating Al Jolson and Fanny Brice as the daemonic element in American theatre. The list peters out in our own age, because, as critic John Mason Brown notes, the actor has become a “last-paragraph figure” in contemporary criticism. Writers who devote pages to analyzing a scene in the film no longer show much interest in dissecting an actor’s performance. Perhaps it’s because, to do so, one has to attend several performances over a period of time and know something about the technical side of acting (as well as directing and design). One side note: Elizabeth Hardwick’s remarks on Helen Hayes are sarcastic and suggest that her “magic” is a bag of shopworn tricks.

The critical reviews in the nineteenth century by the likes of Poe, Cather, and James seem much more acerbic than those of the last century. Can we attribute this to the mismatch between the reviewer’s talent and what he or she was reviewing or was that the style of the day?

The opening articles by Washington Irving are affectionately mocking and they are followed up by disdainful critiques by Fanny Trollope, Edgar Allan Poe, and Walt Whitman. There has always been a wide gulf between the hopes of the intelligentsia for art and ideas in the theatre and the exigencies and compromises of actual performance. Unlike painting or writing, the theatre is a synthetic form meant to engage a living audience here and now. The interaction between actor and spectator may override the playwright. So men and women of letters often distrust theatre. As to the journalists, they have their own need to entertain their readers. This was especially true in the 1920s, when a blasé pose of bitchy superiority was regarded as the height of sophistication. I often point out in my headnotes that a given reviewer—Alan Dale, Dorothy Parker,

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Alexander Woollcott, John Simon, Eric Bentley, Frank Rich—was banned by producers or attacked by actors because their harsh appraisals contradicted the ballyhoo needed to keep a show running. Willa Cather is scathing because her artistic ideals are so lofty; Mary McCarthy is withering because she distrusts what she perceives to be middle-brow. The relative mildness of most contemporary reviewers is a compromise between whatever concept of theatre they may have, the commercial needs of their paper's advertising and those of an economically unstable art form. Nevertheless, as Frank Rich once pointed out, there can be great joy in being present at a classic fiasco. *Schadenfreude* is a much under-rated pleasure.

I'm hard pressed to say which I laughed harder at: Robert Benchley's series of scathing weekly one-line listings over the 2,327-performance run of Abie's Irish Rose or the madcap scene from Ring Lardner's I Gaspiri—"The Upholsterers." Which do you get the biggest kick from?

Of the comic pieces, my favorite is S. J. Perelman's "Waiting for Santy." The parody so accurately skewers Clifford Odets's style and substance that it helps if you are familiar with *Awake and Sing!* or *Paradise Lost*. Even without that, the basic concept—Santa's toy factory as a sweatshop run by Yiddish-inflected gnomes—is loony enough, and anticipates Mel Brooks.

In his 1955 essay, "The American Theater," Arthur Miller writes, "The American theater occupies five side streets, Forty-fourth to Forty-ninth, between Eighth Avenue and Broadway, with a few additional theaters to the north and south and across Broadway. In these thirty-two buildings every new play in the United States starts its life and ends it." Many people probably believe this to be true. Do the entries in The American Stage support Miller's assessment or argue against it?

Miller's statement is partly tongue-in-cheek, but it does reflect a widespread belief. It's noticeable that as the anthology proceeds, its geographical scope diminishes. From the nation's foundation to about 1900, there are reports from Boston, Philadelphia, San Francisco, Salt Lake City, Cincinnati, and Lincoln, as well as accounts of German, Norwegian, and Irish playwrights. Touring is part of an actor's normal activity, and the vaudeville and burlesque circuits crisscross the country. By 1890 the theatrical syndicates had imposed a certain degree of uniformity on American theatre with road companies origi-

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nating in New York. Once the theatre district moves to the Times Square area, these commercial interests become more concentrated. Thereafter, New York City receives the lion's share of attention and the theatre, like Caesar's Gaul, gets divided into three parts: Broadway, off-Broadway, and off-off-Broadway. Much of the liveliest writing appeared in newspapers or magazines (*The New Yorker*, *The Nation*, *The New Republic*) located in Manhattan. My unabridged selection included more pieces on regional theatre by Ben Hecht, Norris Houghton, and Ted Hoffman, but they didn't make the final cut.

Your fifteen-page introduction offers a concise history of American theater from colonial times to the present. Could I press you to characterize in broad strokes how the theater has changed over that time? Might we say, for instance, that the nineteenth century was the era of star actors like Edwin Forrest or Edwin Booth, with producers dominating the turn of the century until the 1927–28 season on Broadway with its 264 plays in seventy theaters, which then turned into the era of the playwright when O'Neill, Miller, and Williams became household words, followed by the era of directors and today's era of director/playwright collaborations?

In very broad terms, the pageant of the American stage over the last two centuries moves from uniformity to ever greater diversity. At first it was highly derivative of the British stage in personnel and repertory, with a very limited audience, since the godly and respectable avoided it. The introduction of American themes and stars—Mrs. Mowatt's *Fashion*, Edwin Forrest's robust style, the dramatizations of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*—helped enlarge its public, but it remained a phenomenon of urban centers. The star performer, an avatar of the Romantic hero, was what drew the audiences. Tastes were catholic. Look at Charles King Newcomb's journal entries from 1866 to 1870: he knows his Shakespeare by heart, and also appreciates the "leg show." After the Civil War, the huge popularity of slapstick comedy, burlesque, and melodrama was spread by rail transport to smaller communities. Every hamlet had its "opery house" where anything from grand opera to dog acts counted as theatre. Cheap lithography enabled posters and trade cards to spread the imagery of the stage into every household.

Theater-going had become far more respectable by the turn of the century. Sensing a lucrative market, the theatrical trusts attempted to impose uniformity on both the "legit" theatre and variety, but the influx of immigrants meant that various ethnic traditions were maintained in the shadow of big-time

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“show business.” That business reached its apex in the mid-1920s, but succumbed to sound films and the Depression. In the 1930s, theatre became, on one hand, a luxury item, and, on the other, a channel for social and political protest, nourished by experimental trends that had begun much earlier. Audiences did not greatly overlap. The wide acceptance of O’Neill, Miller, and Williams in the late ’40s and 1950s may mark the last time playwrights were widely accepted as the most eloquent spokesmen of the American experience. Urbane critics such as George Jean Nathan, Brooks Atkinson, Harold Clurman, and Mary McCarthy assumed they were addressing a like-minded, well-educated readership of regular theatregoers.

The communal, anti-establishment, anti-realistic theatres of the 1960s and ’70s splintered the audience once again, alienating the traditional entertainment-seekers; the liminal moved to the center, attracting a younger crowd that had cut its teeth on rock concerts and mass rallies. At least for the cognoscenti, directors occupied the star status once held by performers. Economics once again changed the scene: the increased expense of staging a play pushed experiment back to the fringes—universities, subsidized troupes, semi-professional operations—while producers bet only on sure things. There is now no assurance that those who buy tickets for a mainstream musical like *Cats* will also seek out an unconventional musical like *Spring Awakening* or (for that matter) that those eager to see a production of the original Wedekind play *Spring Awakening* will go to its musical version. Henry Louis Gates’s essay on the Chitlin Circuit makes it clear that a similar disparity holds in current African-American theatre. Each theatre must find and cultivate its own particular adherents and this, alas, often means preaching to the converted. Today theatrical diversity might better be characterized as fragmentation.

In 1840 Alexis de Tocqueville distinguishes between the theater of literature aimed at the intellect and the theater of the emotions which “most people who attend plays go in search of”—and these seem to be two separate streams that run throughout the history of American theater. Henry Louis Gates, Jr. probably captures both streams best in “The Chitlin Circuit” when he contrasts the work of America’s most critically esteemed black playwright August Wilson with the less heralded but phenomenally successful, carnivalesque shows on the Chitlin Circuit that black audiences seem to enjoy much more. Have these two streams ever come together?

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Tocqueville's remarks were very much informed by French culture, wherein a court-subsidized theatre competed with a popular box-office-driven theatre from the seventeenth century on. He overlooked the interwoven strands of high and low in the Elizabethan and Jacobean stage. The fact is that, as William Dunlap's account of antitheatrical prejudice in early Boston shows, Americans lumped all entertainment together: Shakespeare and rope-dancing were on a par. A division begins as the theatre tried to achieve respectability in the eyes of religion and society. The Genteel Tradition, personified by William Winter (see his piece on Booth's Hamlet) and carried on by James G. Huneker (his piece on Frank Wedekind is typical of his proselytizing for European modernism) and even Eric Bentley, makes a distinction between literary drama and "mere" entertainment. This explains the critics' need to tout James A. Herne as "the American Ibsen" and to celebrate Eugene O'Neill as an American playwright finally worthy of European notice. It also explains why, in the 1920s, thinkers like Gilbert Seldes and Edmund Wilson felt it necessary to boost the "popular arts." As Thomas Disch eloquently demonstrates in his 1991 article on the death of Broadway, once movies and then TV and video became the most popular formats for the performing arts, theatre either sought to cater to the mass public through the blockbuster musical or limited its appeal to a coterie. There is very little cross-over between those who flock to Bramson, Missouri, to see clapped out soap-stars in a Neil Simon comedy and those who huddle in a backroom in the East Village to watch a confessional self-mutilation. These are extremes. Still, it is hard to identify "the average playgoer" and, consequently, to write and produce a work that will have wide appeal and artistic integrity. In the last pieces in this anthology, Anne Bogart, David Mamet, and Tony Kushner all take the side of the artist's integrity and the need to keep the audience off-balance.

I'd like to return to a theme you mentioned. Immigrant cultures bring their theater with them. Hutchins Hapgood recaptures the Yiddish Theater of the Bowery at the turn of the twentieth century. Luis Valdez outlines the political charge behind El Teatro Campesino in the '60s. Langston Hughes, Lorraine Hansberry, and Ed Bullins each testify differently to the challenges of black performers and writers in the theater. There seems to be a perennial tension between a minority culture's need to keep itself separate and pure and its desire to become successful and make an impact by entering the mainstream. Does it have to be a choice?

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Immigrants are torn between nostalgia for the familiar way of life they have abandoned and the need to assimilate into the new society. The Yiddish theatre, as recorded by Hutchins Hapgood, and the Sicilian theatre, described by Carl Van Vechten, bring together a community in a common language but in a secular setting. At the same time, the theatre introduces unfamiliar elements: English words, American customs and habits. As the process of assimilation proceeds, the communitarian function of these theatres evaporates, as do the theatres. Attempts to keep them alive are antiquarian at best, because theatre thrives best when it addresses what's on an audience's mind.

The African-American theatre is a different case. Black intellectuals have regularly argued for a distinctive art theatre or political theatre or socially progressive theatre of their own. They have regularly railed against the caricatures or stereotypes prevalent on the mainstream stage. There is clearly a difference between Lorraine Hansberry seeking opportunity for black artists in mainstream theatre and August Wilson insisting on separatism. But, as Henry Louis Gates, Jr. points out, the garden-variety black spectator prefers the moralizing cartoons of the Chitlin Circuit to Wilson's prize-winning dramas. Is this a question of education or of access or of cultural underdevelopment? When it comes to theatre, you can't say, "You must eat this because it's good for you." Ham hocks and greens may in fact have more nutrients than blackened redfish and be more satisfying in the eating.

In his 1996 essay "Gay Theatre," Charles Ludlam distinguishes "gay theatre"—"really a political movement to show that gay people can be admirable, responsible members of the community"—and what he does, "queer theatre," which "embraces more variation, and the possibility of something being odd or peculiar rather than just simply homosexuality." Do you find distinctions like these useful in understanding the role homosexuality has played in the history of the American theatre, both as a subject and as a force?

From the earliest times, the actor's display of his or her body has suggested that he or she was sexually available to the audience. This sexual outlaw has always been good copy, from Adah Isaacs Menken (see Mark Twain's "The Menken") to Paris Hilton. The push for theatrical respectability throughout the nineteenth century tried to suppress this element of performance. It goes much deeper than Olive Logan railing against women in tights ("About Nudity in Theatres"); many, like William Winter, regarded the introduction of Ibsen on the

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American stage as a sign of corruption and moral breakdown. It takes progressive actors like James A. Herne (see Hamlin Garland's "James A. and Katharine Herne") and Mrs. Fiske ("Mrs. Fiske on Ibsen the Popular" by Alexander Woollcott) and missionary critics like James Huneker and Ezra Pound (in his essay "Mr. James Joyce and the Modern Stage") to insist that a theatre for adults has to deal with sex.

Recently, a number of books have appeared to enumerate the number of "gay" eminences in the American theatre. This is rather a pointless exercise, since the theatre has always been a safe house for extravagant behavior and unorthodox sexuality. If one wanted to align the authors and subjects in this book along a Kinseyan sliding scale, at least a third would gravitate to the homosexual end. But even then, there is a great deal of variation between the near asexuality of Thornton Wilder and Alexander Woollcott and the unabashed queerness of Charles Ludlam and Tony Kushner. How such a thing as a "gay" sensibility may matter in the opinions of a Susan Sontag or Gore Vidal is highly debatable. Eric Bentley's review of *Tea and Sympathy*, written long before he came out of the closet, deserves close reading as an undeclared gay man's take on a play that cannot come to terms with its own homosexuality.

Ludlam always argued that theatre was "queer" by its very nature and that his forays into histrionic tradition were homages to an illustrious past. In her "Notes on the New Theatre" in the 1960s, Elizabeth Hardwick, no pushover, admires the unfettered imagination displayed in late-night camp extravaganzas of the Theatre of the Ridiculous. However, the increasing discussion of homosexuality in drama and the candor of homosexual artists about their preferences have not seriously affected social attitudes. Kushner's "gay fantasia on national themes," *Angels in America*, for all its prominence, is usually pigeonholed in popular parlance as an AIDS play, whereas "gay" here means "an outsider's view." In the theatre, this is almost redundant and Kushner takes as his models Arthur Miller and George Bernard Shaw, not Oscar Wilde.

What was your first exposure to the stage? How did you become editor of The American Stage? Do you have any favorites among the pieces?

Growing up in Chicago in the 1940s, I was taken to the Goodman Theatre at about the age of eight, to see a Chinese fairy tale. I still vividly remember the flags on the backs of the messengers. Shortly thereafter, I was enrolled in courses at the Actors Theatre, a repertory company cum school and became a professional juvenile actor. I avidly read everything about the theatre I could get

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my hands on, devouring the monthly *Theatre Arts* from cover to cover. The omnivorous reading came in handy when I worked for degrees in comparative literature from Northwestern and Harvard.

One summer night, sitting on my porch with the poet and music critic Lloyd Schwartz, who edited the Library of America Elizabeth Bishop volume, I mentioned that the press had anthologies on food, baseball, World War II, New York City, film critics *e tutti quanti*. Might it be interested in one on the theatre? He thought so, I submitted a proposal, and a contract was issued. Now if one is of a certain age and has spent a life reading on a given subject, one is a natural anthologist. I already had a list of likely inclusions and began to seek out other pieces to provide a more panoramic view. Friends were generous in suggestions, some of which made it into the final volume.

Besides the Lanford Wilson, which I've already mentioned, I'm very fond of the "archy and mehitabel" poem, "the old trouper" by Don Marquis, which sums up a type—the outdated tragedian or "fallen star"—frequently encountered in fiction and drama. I was delighted to discover Willa Cather's compulsively readable criticism (of which there is a bundle). And I believe John Mason Brown to be one of the overlooked critics of the twentieth century, far more discerning and thoughtful than many whose names are better remembered.