

American theatre

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This course is a survey in the American theatre, and it will be illustrated by four plays. The first one is *A Streetcar Named Desire* by Tennessee Williams which dates back to 1947; *Death of a Salesman* by Arthur Miller, two years later in 1949; one play by Leroy Jones, *Dutchman*, 1964. Leroy Jones has been chosen here as one of the most important representatives of the black theatre. In the years of the Black Power he called himself Imamu Baraka. And one play by Sam Shepard who is beginning to be better and better known even here in France. And the play we have chosen is *True West* which was written in 1980.

I would like first to say a few words about this choice. We have two works, two plays which were written and produced immediately after World War II. And the plays chosen here are among the best known of the two authors who are themselves now considered as classics of the American theatre. They have a very important production, each of them. Arthur Miller is still alive and still very active. He has written plays very recently like *Some Kind of Love Story* and *Elegy for a Lady*. As for Tennessee Williams, he died in 1983 at the age of 71. He reached a very wide audience partly thanks to the cinema. If I want to mention a few titles here, I would mention *Suddenly Last Summer* by Mankiewicz with Katherine Hepburn and Elizabeth Taylor and also Montgomery Clift; *The Rose Tattoo*, the director was Daniel Mann with Anna Magnani in it. There was *Night of the Iguana* in 1964 by John Huston with Ava Gardner. *Baby Doll*, before that, in 1956 by Kazan with Carol Baker, etc. And I would say that what a general audience knows of Tennessee Williams is partly thanks to the cinema.

But his plays are produced still on Broadway and off-Broadway year after year. So, in this program or syllabus, what is missing or who is missing? Well, one who is very obviously missing is the first great American playwright, Eugene O'Neill. Why is he not included? Well, one reason could be that the accent, if he was included, would be too much on the pre-war

period, which he clearly dominated from, let us say, 1916 until 1933 or even 36, which is the year in which he received the Nobel Prize for literature. He was born in 1888 and you could say that he did to the American theatre what somebody like Whitman did for American poetry or Mark Twain did for American literature at large, that is to say, to turn to America and to give it an American genre. But then he belongs to the older generation and he's a classic. But if we want to concentrate on modern theatre with even a part on contemporary theatre, this is going back a little too far.

There is somebody else who is missing and he's important too, and he belongs to the post-World War II period and he could be included. Actually, he was included at a period of time, and this is Edward Albee. He's still alive also and he has followed all the main developments of the theatre from the theatre of the absurd to the theatre of monologues more recently. He was more political for a while. He's a good playwright. The problem in including him would be a problem of choice. Let us say that a good choice would be, for instance, his best known play, which is *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf*, which has been a great success on Broadway. And if I follow what Liliane Kerjan has to say about this, I would say it's based, it was based, on a misunderstanding because it was considered as a well-made Broadway play. It was considered as naturalistic drama in the tradition of naturalistic drama with a touch of psychoanalysis to make it more fashionable. While the real interest of the play is that it is like all great plays, like Tennessee Williams's, for instance, or Genet in the *Balcony* or *The Blacks*, to take two examples. It is a reflection on illusion and truth and the way the theatre can make the truth appear or be revealed suddenly through the display of illusion.

All right, there's something else which is missing, and I'm sorry for the fact it is missing, and maybe I'll try to compensate for that a little. And it was the most lively part of the theatre in the 60s in America, in particular in California and in New York. And that was the avant-garde theatre, which was based not on plays written by playwrights, but on improvisation, on collective work. It was ensemble work, and great work was done of the actor himself and his means of expression.

A few examples are the Living Theatre with Julian Beck and Judith Malina, or the Open Theatre, which was directed by Joe Chaikin for about 10 years. I have to do a little name dropping here, but it is a way of having landmarks. And then, after that, America had what has been called the "Theatre of Images", somebody like Robert Wilson, Bob Wilson, who came to

France with some of his spectacles like *Einstein on the Beach* or *A Letter to Queen Victoria*. And these are spectacles, well, *Deafman's Gance* was the best known, and they are spectacles which are not only images, people speak occasionally, but certainly not, there is certainly not any plot in the traditional sense. And sometimes you don't even understand the language. Sometimes you hear the language from loudspeakers while the actors are silent on stage.

So the effects are very different from those of a play. Then I also would have liked to include something like the Bread and Puppet Theatre, which was this political theatre in the streets with great big puppets, not tiny ones, but big ones which would march on the streets, or the important event of Chicano Theatre which took place on open trucks during a strike in California. But then you see the problem with including these kinds of things is that we have, sometimes we have scripts, but we have a lack of documents.

We cannot, we can't study a play because some people have seen it, sometimes it's been turned into a film, but we have a document to rely on. While these things have left traces in the memories of spectators and in the books by critics, but there are few videotapes and all we can do is describe these things, try to recapture the event, but it is difficult to give as a subject for study for students who haven't seen them. So, nothing replaces direct experience in a case like this and we have to rely on a more traditional syllabus.

I could name a few of the playwrights which are also missing and which are very important and interesting developments in new American theatre. I'll just name two names here as examples. Arthur Kopit is one of them and his play *Indians* was included until last year in the syllabus and it was a great success with the students because it reflects the new conscience of Americans about the way they have dealt with their Indian problem.

And then a play by David Mamet, *American Buffalo*, is also an interesting play which could have been included. But we have selected four examples. They are only examples and I hope they will be a stimulus to students to go a little further into a study of the American theatre.

This, well what I'm going to say to you then, which is not everything that could be said, which is just a presentation, I think I'll divide into four parts. The first one will be a general presentation of American theatre before Arthur Miller and Tennessee Williams, the pre-war theatre, because it is difficult to understand what a playwright comes from if you don't have a

sense that there was a tradition before that he comes from. And then the second part will be devoted to Miller and Tennessee Williams. Then the third part would be again a general presentation of the theatre after Williams and Miller, in particular in the 60s, with this great underground movement and the emergence of the happenings, for instance, and here I'll have the occasion to speak a little more about the Living Theatre and the Bread and Puppet Theatre. I'll say a few words about Bob Wilson. I'll also talk about this new art form which developed in the 70s rather than the 60s. This is what has been called performance art, which is sometimes a one-man or a one-woman show, and it is also what has been called the multimedia form of art. I'll lay a stress on black theatre, which is an important development of the theatre. It has had very interesting achievements, and we have one play by Leroy Jones, which we'll study a little more particularly.

And then the last part will be devoted to Sam Shepard, whose play *True West* has been chosen, but other plays could have been chosen equally. So now I go back a little, and I go back to Eugene O'Neill, who is not included in the syllabus, but who cannot be totally overlooked. In a book called *A Student's Guide to 50 American Plays*, which is a useful little book to have, five plays by him have been included, and I think this is a sign of how important he's considered by American professors and by American students, by the American university, but also by American professionals of the theatre.

Every year you have one or two plays by O'Neill performed either on Broadway or off-Broadway or in American universities. And it must be said that year after year, during the 30 years of his activity, he had a new play coming out. His experience was professional. First he was the son of an actor, a famous actor, and he's devoted to his father one play called *Long Journey Into Night*. This play is almost autobiographical, and it's based on his father. James Tyron is the name he gives him in the play, and he's an actor. I quote my book here, *50 American Plays*, an actor famous for a single romantic role he has played for more than three decades. He's always fearful of financial and physical disaster. He's sharp-tongued and bad-tempered. The whole thing is supposed to take place in August 1912, and it is the end of the life of his father. The professional experience that O'Neill had was with the Provincetown players. The first production by O'Neill in 1916, a short play called *Bound East for Cardiff*, was mounted by the Provincetown players. Provincetown is on the east coast near Cape Cod. It

was a group, an interesting group, which was considered as experimental. They had been founded as a reaction against commercial theatre, which was thriving then as it is now.

And then they moved to Greenwich Village in New York, New York City, and O'Neill remained their chief playwright. And this is an experience which reminds us of things that can be compared, for instance, in the 50s and 60s in England, where you had the playwright in residence at the Royal Court Theatre, for instance, when theatres began to be subsidized. Then you had these playwrights in residence, and this allowed a whole new generation of playwrights, such as Osborne or Arden or Wesker, for instance. I think it is very important always for a playwright to have some kind of connection with the practical world of the theatre. Some of them do it by being actors, somebody like Pinter, for instance, to take an English example again. Some people do it by directing their own plays or by being associated to a company.

We have a recent example in France, which is a very demonstrative example. It is at the Cartoucherie de Vincennes, the play which was performed, *Norodom Sihanouk*, written by Hélène Cixous, directed by Ariane Mnouchkine in very close association. It is a case of a play which was definitely written with a precise company and a style of acting in view. It is a great success, I mean a success not only with the public, but a great achievement. This is one of the reasons, I would say.

To go back to O'Neill now, the plays chosen in the book *Students' Guide to 50 American Plays* include *Desire under the Elms*, and when we come back to Williams a little later, we can say that *A Streetcar named Desire* is a sort of indirect homage to the old master O'Neill. *Mourning Becomes Electra*, which is a very ambitious play. It's a trilogy based on Aeschylus, on the *Oresteia*, you know *Agamemnon*, and *the Khoiforoi*, and *the Eumenides*. And it is three plays in one play. The first one is entitled *Homecoming*, the second one *The Hunted*, the third one *The Haunted*. And by the way, this is a tradition, it seems an American tradition, Albee does it too, and Tennessee Williams does it also, to give titles to the parts of plays, which is strange because the spectators have no way of knowing the titles. They know the title of the play, but you cannot have subtitles.

And in a way it means that they consider themselves as playwrights in the sense of writers, and they write, even if it's for the stage, they write with a sense that maybe they'll

have readers as well as spectators. So, the *Mourning Becomes Electra* play is transposed, the Greek legend or myth is transposed into a family, an American family, at the end of the Civil War. And it takes place in front of the big family mansion, or inside the library of that mansion, which is a Greek revival facade with big white pillars and broad steps.

And in a way you will notice in Williams, in *A Streetcar Named Desire*, how important the pillars or columns of the big Greek house is to Blanche when she remembers her past. And in O'Neill's play, the characters are approached, and this was a new thing at the time, through the insight of Freudian psychology. Freudian psychology is something that almost all American playwrights will use in some way or another. They will use it differently. Williams makes a different use from the use that Miller makes, for instance. They cannot ignore it.

It's so much part of the American civilization, and way of life, and way of thinking, and way of reacting of American psychology by now, that playwrights have to take it into account. And of course the unconscious, the hidden motives, are always a sort of interest for dramatists and for playwrights. And the fact that a character behaves in a certain way and has motivations which would indicate another kind of behavior, this contradiction between motives and actual behavior, are also a source of dramatic interest. So you have two clans in this play. On the one hand, you have the repressed conscience of the Puritans. This is very American, too. On the other hand, you have the freedom of the unrepressed pagan hedonism, and the author's preference goes to the latter, but he gives the Puritans their chance, too.

Other titles. *The Iceman Cometh*, which I will not discuss here. And among the other well-known plays which are not included in my book, *The Emperor Jones*, which is the study of a Negro chain gang fugitive. One of the most famous, perhaps, 1921, is *The Hairy Ape*, *Le Grand Singe Velu* in French, which is the tragedy of a man. He's a steamship stalker, a worker, in other words, and he has no sense of identity. In the mechanized society he lives in, he has lost all sense of identity. And this also is illustrative of something American. These immigrants who've lost their country come to a new country, but which does not give them the roots they would like to have. And the key sentence in that play is, I don't belong. And this has become a household term in America. Do you belong? I don't belong. You want to belong. It is an expressionist play, and this is one of the reasons, perhaps, for the success of O'Neill, that he experimented with new forms. He did not remain in the naturalistic tradition, but he experimented with surrealistic elements and expressionist elements.

His plays are usually highly stylized. Another innovation he made that was in *Strange Interlude*. In that play, each character uses two voices. One is for the traditional exchange of dialogue, and the other one expresses a stream of consciousness. It is like a monologue, but in a monologue, the character is talking to himself or talking inside his head, and two different voices are used for this. All right, so much for O'Neill, which is very little.

And now to talk about the rest of the theatrical production, or about the historical movements, I'd like to borrow the categories which Françoise Kourilsky is using in her book called *Le Théâtre aux Etats-Unis*. I've included the book in the bibliography. The various categories are theatre as business. Well, theatre as business, that includes Broadway. Broadway is a big industry. And maybe I'll say a few more words about this. As opposed to this, theatre as business, or maybe we could say theatre as entertainment, there is theatre as communion. And this is a reference to a book by Harold Clurman called *The Fervent Years*. And "The Fervent Years" were the years, actually following the Depression, in which America was suddenly very socially conscious, and there was a development of radicalism. And there was a very interesting development parallel to this in the arts and in the art forms. And this book by Harold Clurman tells of the experiment of the Group Theatre, which I will also discuss a little. So this is theatre as communion, people who did theatre together, lived together, and reflected together on how they could change the theatre.

And then in the Great Depression years, there was also theatre as a weapon. The workers' laboratory theatre used theatre as a weapon. The theatre was considered something which could be efficient, which could have an effect on the consciousness of people, what would be called today the consciousness raising. Well, this was what the theatre was for, they thought. And then under the impetus given by Roosevelt in the years of the New Deal, theatre was considered then as a public service, and there was a development of the federal theatre. So, I repeat, we have theatre as business, theatre as communion, theatre as a weapon, and theatre as a public service.

A few words about the commercial theatre. Maybe we are not always conscious of this in Europe, the fact that in America, Broadway is big business. The show business is big business, we know it for the cinema, but it is true of a production on Broadway too.

A production is very expensive, and if it is successful, it can make a lot of money. And this has very important consequences, because if it can make a lot of money, it can also lose a lot of money, and you cannot afford to be experimental, you cannot afford to be outrageous, because you cannot afford to lose your audience. This is why too often the Broadway productions have only been musical comedies, not that they are not interesting, they are very fascinating genres, but they remain within a set convention.

But this would be perhaps too rigid an idea, and I think that lots of interesting stuff has come on Broadway, it has a very high professional standard, and then when a play is a success off-Broadway or even off-off-Broadway, off-Broadway and off-off-Broadway refers not only to a geographical area, but to conditions, economic conditions of production, which are different. When a play is a success off-off-Broadway, it can very well be transferred on Broadway and make its career on Broadway. An example like Sam Shepard, somebody whom we shall study, Sam Shepard is an example of somebody who started from the Café Théâtre, from the Café Chino, or from La Mama, and who is now established on Broadway.

Last thing I would like to mention is the fact that there is a very powerful union, union for technicians, union for actors, it's called the equity union, and it is drastic in its requirements, and this is part of Broadway being an industry. Now this is true for yesterday, this is true for today, now I turn back to yesterday with theatre as communion and the example, the very fascinating example of the Group Theatre.