



american  
avant-garde theatre  
: a history

arnold aronson

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# American Avant-garde Theatre

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This stunning contribution to the field of theatre history is the first in-depth look at avant-garde theatre in the United States from the early 1950s to the 1990s. *American Avant-Garde Theatre: A History* offers a definition of the avant-garde, and looks at its origins and theoretical foundations by examining:

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- John Cage
- the Beat writers
- avant-garde cinema
- abstract expressionism
- minimalism

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**Arnold Aronson** is Professor of Theatre at Columbia University. He is author of *American Set Design* and *The History and Theory of Environmental Scenography*, and he served as editor of *Theatre Design and Technology* from 1978 to 1988.

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### **American Avant-Garde Theatre: A History**

*Arnold Aronson*

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# American Avant-garde Theatre

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A history

Arnold Aronson

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# Preface

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In his famous 1939 essay on avant-garde and kitsch, an essay that some have suggested signaled the start of the American avant-garde,<sup>1</sup> art critic Clement Greenberg marveled at a contemporary Western culture that could produce simultaneously T.S. Eliot and Tin Pan Alley lyricist Eddie Guest, or the art of Georges Braque and *Saturday Evening Post* covers. “What perspective of culture,” he wondered, “is large enough to enable us to situate them in an enlightening relation to each other?”<sup>2</sup> We might marvel similarly at the theatrical culture of the 1950s. If Greenberg was amazed at the seeming contradictions and disparities within the broad scope of Western society – even though high and low art have dwelt in an almost nurturing symbiosis throughout history – what are we to make of the relatively narrow discipline of American theatre, which, within a single decade, could give birth to *My Fair Lady* and *18 Happenings in 6 Parts*, *Gypsy* and *The Marrying Maiden*, or *Picnic* and the John Cage performance piece at Black Mountain College? Having acknowledged that they are all species of theatre in that they involve performers, discrete performance spaces, temporal structures, scenic design, props, costumes, and scripts of some sort, it is nonetheless hard to comprehend them as part of the same art form, let alone to envision them emerging from the same culture.

In those societies that have spawned organized forms of theatre, performance can generally be divided into three broad categories:

- All societies have had a theatre of popular entertainment – the theatre of the marketplace and music halls, which combined physical virtuosity, individual talent, and comic invention.
- Most societies have had some version of bourgeois entertainment, such as boulevard theatre or the West End – the mainstream

narrative theatre that reflected, reinforced, and sometimes shaped societal attitudes and popular tastes.

- And some cultures have developed elitist theatres such as masques and other court entertainments – rarefied forms of performance available to limited segments of the populace and whose understanding and appreciation required some degree of training or special knowledge.

In some periods, such as Elizabethan England, the forms have intertwined and overlapped. The late twentieth-century United States contained all three forms: the popular theatre was subsumed by television; bourgeois theatre existed on Broadway, Off Broadway, and to an extent in the movies; and the elitist theatre was represented by the avant-garde.

Because the avant-garde often contains within itself the intentionally shocking and provocative, and because – by definition – it constitutes an attack upon the established practices of mainstream culture and society, it has been regarded with suspicion and has often been poorly understood. Somewhat like the term “modern art,” “avant-garde” has been applied indiscriminately, almost as an epithet, to a wide range of performance that falls outside the boundaries of naturalism or realism – that is, narrative, psychological, melodramatic theatre. It is applied to almost any form of performance that is in some way confusing, difficult, or aesthetically displeasing by some received standard of Western culture. The absurdity of such an approach can be seen in the extreme in critic Louis Kronenberger’s description of the 1952 musical *Wish You Were Here* as “a wistful comedy of manners ... in the bold *avant-garde* manner of David Belasco.” This “manner,” according to Kronenberger, consisted of “a real swimming pool, real hot dogs, and what appeared to be real rain.”<sup>3</sup> If the André Antoine–David Belasco school of naturalism – a more than sixty-year-old tradition by the time of Kronenberger’s review – could be labeled as “avant-garde,” then any useful definition of the term will be problematic.

I have proposed a narrower definition in the following pages and have attempted to show the origins, development, and ultimate decline of the very vital American avant-garde theatre in the decades following World War II. Although the avant-garde theatre – both broadly and narrowly defined – has received a great deal of critical attention, there have been surprisingly few books devoted to a larger overview of the phenomenon. This book is an attempt to provide that overview and place the avant-garde within a critical context. Even so, this book is

not a comprehensive study of American avant-garde theatre. I have had to make some difficult choices. Some groups and individuals who are mentioned here only in passing or not at all – Bread and Puppet Theatre, Mabou Mines, Playhouse of the Ridiculous and the Ridiculous Theatrical Company, Martha Clarke, and Meredith Monk; a whole host of Happening and Fluxus artists, including Red Grooms, Robert Whitman, Dick Higgins, Claes Oldenburg, George Maciunas, and Yoko Ono; California groups including Soon 3, Snake Theatre, San Francisco Mime Troupe, El Teatro Campesino; postmodern dancers Ann Halprin, Yvonne Rainer, Trisha Brown, Steve Paxton, David Gordon, and others; and performance artists Eleanor Antin, Suzanne Lacy, and others too numerous to list – were significant contributors to the ongoing development of the avant-garde and deserve greater attention. I have chosen to focus on those who I felt broke new ground or had the greatest impact on the evolution of the avant-garde. For that reason, I have often concentrated on the early work of these artists rather than later developments. Someone constructing a different narrative might make other choices.

I have also tried to strike a balance between description and explication. All theatre is a performative medium, a visual medium; but in much of the avant-garde theatre performative and visual elements are foregrounded. Photos or fragments of a script alone cannot convey the impact or meaning of a production. Therefore, I have tried to describe what an audience saw on the stage. In many cases I have turned to contemporary observers or the participants themselves to capture a sense of the sometimes electrifying, sometimes shocking, almost always revelatory impact of these works in their initial presentations. I hope that it will provide at least a hint of the excitement for those who were not there.

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avant-garde theatre were done under his guidance in the pages of *The Drama Review*. Michael read an early outline of this book, and his comments and criticisms helped to shape the current results. I regret that I did not complete this work before his death.

Finally, I must thank my wife, Ruth Bayard Smith, who was my tireless editor and sounding board and who patiently read each draft while providing unstinting encouragement, and whose love and support made this book possible.

## Chapter I

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# Origins of the avant-garde

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Actually America has an intellectual climate suitable for radical experimentation. We are, as Gertrude Stein said, the oldest country of the twentieth century.

John Cage<sup>1</sup>

To some observers, the postwar era in American theatre was a period of steady and ineluctable decline. If the American theatre is equated with Broadway – and it was and still is for many commentators and audiences – then statistically at least, it could be argued that the theatre *was* in fact deteriorating at a fairly precipitous pace. The number of new productions decreased with each season, the range of theatre produced narrowed alarmingly, the financial burdens grew more overwhelming, and audiences stayed home to watch television. But if one shifted one's focus away from Broadway (and its low-budget clone, Off Broadway), it became clear that the theatre was not dying at all. What was in decline was an institution – a particular means of creating and producing theatre – and the style of theatre it generated. In fact, American theatre was heading into one of the most vibrant, creative, and productive periods in its history. An evolutionary process was occurring, and the American theatre was transforming into something different from what it had ever been, something that reflected the changing needs of artists and audiences alike and that could adapt more readily to a new world.

In the roughly thirty-year period from the mid-1950s to the mid-1980s, there was an eruption of theatrical activity in the United States that would ultimately reshape every aspect of performance and have significant influences both at home and abroad. The alternatives to Broadway were bursting with energy, talent, and new ideas. The myth of declining theatrical activity was easily belied by looking at the weekly

## 2 Origins of the avant-garde

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theatre listings of the time, especially in a newspaper such as the then counterculture *Village Voice*. By the late 1960s, on any given weekend in New York, it was possible to choose from over 250 events covering the whole range and gamut of theatre. The most significant of these performances were forging new paths in acting, directing, staging, and design, and were redefining the very notion of theatre. In the words of critic Stanley Kauffmann, “there was a sense of bursting creativity, of things rushing into life. Some cheery souls even called it a new Elizabethan age.”<sup>2</sup> Never before in American theatre history had the foundations of the art been examined so minutely, been so challenged, and been so radically altered. The driving force at the center of this activity was the *avant-garde*.

The concept of an avant-garde was something new in American theatre. The European theatre (and art, music, and literature) had experienced waves of avant-garde activity since the emergence of symbolism in the 1880s, but there was no equivalent in the United States. Granted, the American theatre had experienced its own rebellions since the early years of the twentieth century, notably in the Little or Art Theatre movement, which flourished in the teens and twenties, introduced new European works to American audiences and gave birth to Eugene O’Neill and the New Stagecraft, and again in the alternative theatre of the 1930s, which included agitprop performance and the Federal Theatre Project’s Living Newspapers as well as the political dramas of the Theatre Union, which was among the first to produce Bertolt Brecht in America. And it is true that by the second decade of the twentieth century American playwrights were beginning to incorporate avant-garde elements from European models: aspects of symbolism, expressionism, and surrealism found their way into the plays of Zona Gale, Susan Glaspell, Alfred Kreymborg, John Howard Lawson, Elmer Rice, and, of course, O’Neill, and would emerge in more sophisticated forms later in the century in the works of William Saroyan, Arthur Miller, Tennessee Williams, and others who employed Strindberg-like inner landscapes, dream sequences, flashbacks, poetic language, lyric realism, symbolic settings, and archetypal characters. But all these writers continued to work within a basically realistic framework and psychological character structure. Themes that would have been easily recognizable to Ibsen – questions of morality, social responsibility, the individual versus society at large, and familial relationships – remained clear and dominant; the exploration and pursuit of the elusive American dream informed most of these plays or lurked just below the surface. Avant-garde elements could be found *within*

the new plays, not as a *basis* for creating the plays. The fundamental building blocks of a radical European avant-garde became mere stylistic conceits in the hands of most American playwrights. As a result, the works by these playwrights remained within the establishment; Broadway welcomed every new generation and easily absorbed what changes or permutations each had to offer.

The general thrust and tenor of pre-World War II experimental theatre was summed up by Lee Strasberg, one of the founders of the Group Theatre and later head of the Actors Studio. Writing in 1962, Strasberg declared that

the theatre generation after the First World War felt itself to be part of a new dream which it hoped would lead to a new theatre. It was not to be words, scenery, and acting as separate elements uniting into a somewhat mechanical entity. It was to be the word transfigured from its purely logical and literary meaning on a page by the living presence of the actor whose creation of the moment the event, the situation, brought out or added dramatic meaning to the word.<sup>3</sup>

Although he went on to cite Edward Gordon Craig and “the art of the theatre,” Strasberg saw the problem not with the existing drama *per se* but with contemporary production practices. “This dream was shattered ...,” he continued, “by the fact that the central element for the creation of the art of the theatre – a coherent unified company of actors with artistic leadership to express its vision of the dramatist’s intention – was missing.”<sup>4</sup> Strasberg was advocating neither a new form of theatre nor a radically new dramatic content; he was simply advocating the need for art to take precedence over commerce.

What began to emerge in the 1950s, however, was something quite different. There was a bold spirit of experimentation – a rebellion against the mainstream commercial system and the utter rejection of the *status quo*. What happened in the postwar era was the evolution of a theatre diametrically opposed to the conventions of dramatic practice common in the West since the Renaissance; it was an approach that rejected the beliefs and expectations of traditional audiences and radically altered both the aesthetic and organizational basis upon which performance was created. And because the traditional theatre provided little in the way of precedent, this new theatre drew heavily upon iconoclastic movements within the plastic arts, with the result that traditional barriers between theatre, dance, music, and art began to crumble.

Historically, the function of the avant-garde, as art historian Thomas Crow has suggested, has been to serve “as a research and development arm of the culture industry.”<sup>5</sup> But as the 1965 Rockefeller Panel Report on the state of the arts astutely observed, Broadway, through the first half of the twentieth century or so, was sufficiently successful, productive, and financially solvent that it could accommodate and support experimentation within its own confines.<sup>6</sup> Broadway, in other words, served as its own research and development laboratory. O’Neill’s investigations of expressionism, for instance, or Tennessee Williams’ memory plays, with their stylistic and structural echoes of symbolism, and even the Federal Theatre Project’s Living Newspapers, resided quite peacefully within the Broadway milieu of melodrama, social drama, and the well-made play. These experiments were part of a larger institution – demonstrated by the fact that, almost always, the organizations or individuals who rebelled against or critiqued the traditional theatre were nonetheless absorbed into the onrushing mainstream. But by the 1950s, this process of absorption was being disrupted. The avant-garde theatre that emerged in the 1950s could not coexist within the larger framework because it had never been, in conception or execution, part of it. Its relation to conventional theatre consisted of its use of structural components common to all performance, but the compositional attributes that accrued to Western drama, from the neoclassicism of the Renaissance through the absurdism of the mid-twentieth century were virtually absent from the avant-garde of Happenings and chance theatre and the later formalist inventions of Richard Foreman or the Wooster Group. As composer and theoretician John Cage understood, the new spirit of experimentation was “not bound to the past [or] traditions.”<sup>7</sup>

In a 1944 essay, artist Robert Motherwell noted that painting “has always been a species of abstraction: the painter has selected from the world he knows, a world which is not entirely the same in each epoch, the forms and relations which interested him, and then employed them as he pleased ... The art of Picasso has differed in the degree of abstraction, but not the kind of abstraction, from the art of the Renaissance tradition of which he is the bitter finale.”<sup>8</sup> Motherwell went on to declare that in the twentieth century something quite new had begun to happen: “the external world is totally rejected as the painter’s model,” and as such, non-objective art “differs fundamentally, differs epistemologically, one might say, from other modes of art.”<sup>9</sup> In theatre too, a “non-objective” form emerged that was not simply a subspecies of the post-Renaissance narrative-psychological tradition.



Historically, the theatre artist, like the painter, had selected elements – that is, abstracted – from the known surrounding world in order to create a play. Conventional forms and structures were used to evoke the physical and emotional properties of the experiential world. In early twentieth-century modernism, this process simply moved inward, creating a conventionalized reality based on an understanding of an inner world of emotion and the subconscious workings of the mind. Thus we may look at, say, Samuel Beckett in the same manner that Motherwell looked at Picasso. Beckett's world may be initially less recognizable to the average spectator than that of Ibsen, for example, yet Beckett too marks the end of a tradition stretching back to the Renaissance; he is not, as some would have it, the epitome of the avant-garde but an end point of the modern (i.e., post-Renaissance) theatre. The avant-garde theatre that emerged in New York and elsewhere in the 1950s, however, created neither an abstraction nor a distillation of the concrete world; in a sense it did not create a world at all, at least in any common understanding of the term. It created an art in which the reference points were other forms of art, the creative process of the artist, and the theatrical experience itself – not the external or so-called “real” world. As Jean-François Lyotard said in discussing the aesthetic developments engendered by Denis Diderot, “Art would no longer imitate nature but would create a whole other world, *eine Zwischenwelt* [a between world] as Paul Klee would later say.”<sup>10</sup> To borrow from Michael Kirby's definition of Happenings, avant-garde theatre, by and large, created a structure and experience that was neither logical nor illogical but, rather, “alogical.”<sup>11</sup>

In stating that this new theatre did not evolve from neoclassical and Renaissance models – that it did not create a world – I am suggesting that this theatre was not fundamentally linear, illusionistic, thematic, or psychological, certainly not in any conventional sense. It was a non-literary theatre – meaning not that it lacked language but that it could not be *read* in the way a work of literature could be. Avant-garde theatre was primarily formal, schematic, intellectually derived, and dependent upon aesthetic rather than visceral emotion. The American avant-garde theatre that made its first appearance with a production of Erik Satie's *Ruse of the Medusa* at Black Mountain College in 1948 and evolved slowly over the next ten years drew its energy and inspiration from the compositions and theories of John Cage, the writings of Gertrude Stein, action painting, the work of Antonin Artaud, and a dash of Bertolt Brecht. And from those artists who sought refuge in the United States from the ravages of Nazism and World War II came

the ideas of symbolism, expressionism, futurism, surrealism, and especially Dada. These influences intermingled in the American artistic melting pot to create a new avant-garde theatre.

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The historical roots of the term “avant-garde” lie in French military terminology. The term was apparently first tied to art by Henri de Saint-Simon (1760–1825), whose writings were to exert a profound influence on Karl Marx and who, together with Auguste Comte, was a founder of sociology.<sup>12</sup> In his last major work, *Opinions littéraires, philosophiques et industrielles* (1825), Saint-Simon proposed a utopian society to be led by a triumvirate of scientists, industrialist-artisans, and artists, with the last constituting an elite force within this group of leaders.<sup>13</sup> “It is we, artists,” says a speaker in Saint-Simon’s Platonic dialogue, sounding not unlike one of the romantic poets, “who will serve you as avant-garde.” Saint-Simon goes on to rejoice in the role of the arts in this new society:

What a most beautiful destiny for the arts, that of exercising over society a positive power, a true priestly function, and of marching forcefully in the van of all the intellectual faculties, in the epoch of their greatest development. This is the duty of artists, this their mission.<sup>14</sup>

Thus, from the very beginning – from the instant that the military term became descriptive of artists seeking new paths in the cultural landscape – it carried with it a sense of missionary zeal as well as political and sociological implications. Because of the self-referential and formalistic tendencies of much of the avant-garde throughout its history, it is often forgotten that initially the avant-garde was meant to transform society, that it was seen initially as a utopian program for creating an idealistic world for the future. The tensions and contradictions between art as a socially transformative tool and art as aesthetic exploration would present an ongoing struggle for avant-garde artists. For these artists, the challenge was to transform society while standing apart from it.

In fact, a true avant-garde theatre must seek an essential change in audience perceptions that, in turn, will have a profound impact on the relationship of the spectator to the world. “A primary function of art and thought,” as critic Lionel Trilling has pointed out, “is to liberate

the individual from the tyranny of his culture in the environmental sense and to permit him to stand beyond it in an autonomy of perception and judgment.”<sup>15</sup> The American avant-garde theatre that emerged in the 1950s was firmly in this modern tradition of liberation and enlightenment. Even without a specific political agenda, successful avant-garde theatre has political, social, and personal implications for its viewers. But this alteration of audience perceptions comes through the experience of the work, not through the mere presentation of ideas, as is the case with much social drama. An axiomatic precept of the avant-garde is the substitution of experience for “aboutness.” “The world doesn’t fear a new idea,” D.H. Lawrence observed. “It can pigeonhole any idea. But it can’t pigeonhole a new experience.”<sup>16</sup> Ideas alone can be subsumed into a passive response, but the avant-garde requires engagement on some level. In a conventional work of theatre or literature, certain elements – plot, for example, or theme – can be extracted and stand on their own, thereby allowing a discussion of the ideas of a traditional work of art separately from its presentation. The work thus has a meaning that exists independently of the execution or observation of the work itself. In the avant-garde, though, the meaning is inherent in the work and cannot be separated from it without destroying both sense and art. The avant-garde embodies ideas within the performance or work of art itself, consequently implicating the spectator and making the viewer complicit in the work. Ideology and performance are an integral and inseparable whole. In this it is similar to “content” in abstract art, which, critic Clement Greenberg noted, “is to be dissolved so completely into form that the work of art or literature cannot be reduced in whole or in part to anything not itself.”<sup>17</sup>

Avant-garde performance strives toward a radical restructuring of the way in which an audience views and experiences the very act of theatre, which in turn must transform the way in which the spectators view themselves and their world. Traditional ways of seeing are disrupted so that habitual patterns, which inevitably reinforce social norms, are broken. A change in an individual’s attitudes, associations, or beliefs is effected not through a straightforward presentation of ideas but through a fundamental restructuring of perception and understanding. In other words, the very notion of what is theatre is brought into question. It requires, in the words of Lyotard, “letting go and disarming all grasping intelligence.”<sup>18</sup>

On one level, the concept of the avant-garde is best explained through reference to semiotics. If we accept Jiri Veltrusky’s statement

that “all that is on the stage is a sign,”<sup>19</sup> then the understanding of these signs is fundamental to the theatre event. Performer and audience alike must be able to interpret the signs to achieve what Keir Elam calls “theatrical competence.”<sup>20</sup> The most fundamental competence depends on the ability to recognize that one is watching a performance in the first place. As simple as this sounds, the recognition of the theatrical event is based upon a shared set of culturally learned rules and hinges upon the presence of a framing device (literal or metaphorical) that differentiates the theatrical activity from everyday life. Simply put, basic theatrical competence allows spectators to know that they are watching a performance and not some segment of daily existence. The illusionistic tradition of post-Renaissance theatre, however, has placed such a premium on representation that “good” theatre has often been synonymous with the suspension of disbelief – a willing inability to distinguish between illusion and reality. The Western tradition seems to thrive on reducing aesthetic distance to the barest minimum and flourishes on the resultant tension. While the avant-garde occasionally followed this tendency to extremes (historically, in fact, naturalism may be seen as an avant-garde movement; some three-quarters of a century later the Living Theatre’s 1959 production of Jack Gelber’s *The Connection* was a brilliant example of such a strategy), more often it sought to alter perceptions in other ways.

Much of the history of the avant-garde can be seen as an attempt to create strategies that will undermine theatrical competence. Normal systems of communication – the recognition and interpretation of signs – are thwarted or disrupted; signs become divorced from their culturally accepted signification, or the cumulative effect of the signs cannot be understood in any historically or culturally accepted way. Framing devices become vague or unfamiliar, so that the difference between life and art is brought into question. In some cases, the frame apparently disappears altogether. As a result, the emphasis shifts from the understanding of signs *per se* to the process of decoding signs. For much of the avant-garde, the emphasis shifted from questions of meaning to a focus on process. As new structures, strategies, and patterns were established, new understandings became possible and new forms emerged.

For the traditional spectator, the rules that govern how one views a musical, a comedy, or a drama have long been established. The customs of the playhouse, and the audience behavior therein – the sequence of events from the buying of tickets to rituals such as the

dimming of the house lights as the orchestra begins the overture, to the behavior of the actors, and the cues for applause – are well known. Part of the delight of going to such theatre comes from the comforting and pleasurable repetition of these rituals. In many historical and classical forms of theatre, both East and West, actors were expected to replicate in detail certain gestures, actions, and speeches from performance to performance and from generation to generation – something still true to an extent in opera. The rituals link the cultural-aesthetic experience to the existing society while placing the experience in a historical tradition. Attending such a performance and participating in its rituals confirms the spectator's place in that society or initiates the viewer into the secrets and legacy of the culture. Because the traditional artwork appears to reinforce habitual ways of thinking and affirm accepted wisdom, ideology, and emotions, the spectator is comforted. But, as avant-garde playwright and director Richard Foreman has noted, such an approach may have a tendency to induce a somnambulist response to the theatrical event, which in turn prevents any sort of active engagement with the work. "I don't want to reinforce what people already think," he declared. "I don't want to refrighten them, or reconvince them that they love what they already love. I don't want to deepen the roots of emotional habit."<sup>21</sup> Three centuries earlier, Blaise Pascal saw the same ironic contradiction: "How empty a thing is painting, which pleases us by its resemblances with objects that cannot please us!"<sup>22</sup> If the purpose of art is to create experiences one cannot have in everyday life – to create, in fact, a theatre that is not comforting – then a theatre that replicates the everyday world is meaningless and pointless. The aim should be, according to Lyotard, "no longer to please a public by bringing it into a process of identification and glorification, but to surprise it."<sup>23</sup>

In many forms of drama, especially in Western theatre, the predominant structural device has been the narrative. This was particularly true of the American theatre that emerged out of the nineteenth century. At a basic level, almost any play one can select from the repertoire – from *Oedipus Tyrannus* to *Miss Saigon* – are all *stories*. They may be told in varying degrees of complexity with a variety of performative components and strategies, but they are stories nonetheless. The old axiom that all drama is reducible to "boy meets girl, boy loses girl, boy gets girl," is not only a fairly reasonable synopsis of much of the world's drama, it also emphasizes the privileging of narrative in the dramatic form. In most performances that can be classified as avant-garde, however, narrative structure is eliminated. Narrative in the



drama functions much as the objective image does in painting: it is an illusionistic replication of the external world framed and placed in a context so as to convince the observer of its reality, or at least of its clear connection to a recognizable and identifiable object, action, or emotion. Gertrude Stein was keenly aware of the prevalence of narrative in art and its function as a means of structuring and understanding everyday life. Because it was such a commonplace device it had limited power as an artistic tool, and she recognized the need to disrupt it in order to achieve the surprise that is essential to the avant-garde:

Something is always happening, anybody knows a quantity of stories of people's lives that are always happening, there are always plenty for the newspapers and there are always plenty in private life. Everybody knows so many stories and what is the use of telling another story. What is the use of telling a story since there are so many and everybody knows so many and tells so many. In the country it is perfectly extraordinary how many complicated dramas go on all the time. And everybody knows them, so why tell another one. There is always a story going on.<sup>24</sup>

If theatre is to be a place for art, that is, for an experiential alternative to everyday life, then it must, according to the artists of the avant-garde, present a work or event not available through normal systems of behavior. Not only images and ideas, but whole patterns of reception and response to events must be challenged, disrupted, and reconfigured.

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Why did it take sixty to seventy years from the beginnings of the historical avant-garde to the development of an American avant-garde theatre – from the symbolist productions of the Théâtre d'Art to the John Cage events at Black Mountain College, Happenings, and the work of the Living Theatre? Part of the answer lies in the necessity of the avant-garde's adversarial position within the traditional culture, the need for the avant-garde to emerge in opposition to an established, dominant culture – an ensconced and static culture. Lionel Trilling, for instance, discussing writing (although his observations apply equally well to theatre), stated that “any historian of the literature of the modern age will take virtually for granted the adversary intention, the

actually subversive intention, that characterizes modern writing – he will perceive its clear purpose of detaching the reader from the habits of thought and feeling that the larger culture imposes.”<sup>25</sup> Such a culture simply did not exist in the United States until the mid-twentieth century. Furthermore, as Andreas Huyssen has pointed out, this adversarial stance is generally taken against the dominant position of high art within the culture. “A European avantgardist revolt against tradition,” Huyssen explained, could not make sense in the United States until “high art had become institutionalized in the burgeoning museum, concert, and paperback culture of the 1950s, when modernism itself had entered the mainstream via the culture industry, and later, during the Kennedy years, when high culture began to take on functions of political representation.”<sup>26</sup>

While “high culture” may not have entered the mainstream of American society until the 1950s, it is questionable whether a theatrical high culture *ever* entered the mainstream. The dominant theatre of twentieth-century America was determinedly bourgeois and middle-brow, and though style and content may have become a bit more sophisticated, mid-twentieth-century American theatre was clearly descended from the melodrama and well-made plays of the nineteenth century. Certainly in the 1880s, the time of the first avant-garde in Europe, mainstream American culture was populist, not high, one reason being that there had already been a revolt against high culture – it had been a rebellion in the early part of the nineteenth century against the domination of English art and society, especially in theatre. The “official” culture, as it were, of the United States in the early nineteenth century, the culture adopted by the upper echelons of society, was resolutely English. Such events as the notorious Astor Place riots of 1849 were part of a populist attempt to overthrow imported elitist arts, manners, and customs while establishing an American identity. The American culture that triumphed over the English was popular in nature – an accessible art that reflected the spirit of the masses.

The new “official culture” that emerged with a self-consciously American identity was inevitably a product and reflection of the general perception of the country itself, which had become mythologized in a romantic aura. America was the land of the quest, the search for innocence and the ideal in opposition to the corruption and decay of the Old World; a land of perceived equality (no matter that the realities of the socio-economic structure may have suggested anything but such egalitarianism); and a land of endless bounty and ever-receding frontiers. In such a land, hope was eternally renewable by simply picking up