Broadway, Seriously: Crash Course Theater #46

Crash Course: Theater
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https://nerdfighteria.info/v/qgajQD7PJp0

Hey there, I'm Mike Rugnetta. This is *Crash Course Theater*, and yes, they say the neon lights are bright on Broadway. They say there's always magic in the air. They say that by mid century, Broadway had become a home for serious plays.

A theater district best known for scantily clad chorus girls and questionable racial and ethnic stereotypes finally made a commitment to serious drama. Because when you've been through a devastating world war and your sense of good in the world is profoundly shaken, maybe kick-lines don't cut it anymore. And besides, Broadway was losing out, to movies and this newfangled thing called television, so a bunch of theaters had closed.

They had to try something. And what they tried was a kind of realism influenced by Modernist structures and styles. Today we'll be looking at two titans and one titaness of post-War Broadway drama, Tennessee Williams, Arthur Miller, and Lorraine Hansberry. Lights up!

[*Crash Course Theater* intro]

Let's start with this guy, Thomas Lanier Williams. Better known as "Tennessee", because, I mean, as pen names go, that's awesome. He was born in Mississippi in 1911 and grew up unhappily in St. Louis, Missouri. He rattled around for a while, working as a stock boy at a shoe company and writing for local theater troupes.

But in 1944, he had his first big success with *The Glass Menagerie*, a semi-autobiographical memory play with a character named Tom who steps in and out of the action. Other characters were modeled after his mother and sister. In some ways it's a typical American family drama, but in other ways it reaches beyond realism to something more poetic and abstract.

As Williams wrote in his production notes, it was part of a call for "a new, plastic theater which must take the place of the exhausted theater of realistic conventions if the theater is to resume vitality as part of our culture." So there!

It's not that Williams's theater is unrealistic—well, I mean, some of it is—but rather that it's trying to get in touch with the passion and myth that underlies reality. A little bit like Sympolism, and a little like Expressionism.

His greatest work is *A Streetcar Named Desire*, which opened on Broadway in 1947, won the Pullitzer Prize, and ran for 855 performances. Now, that may seem like a lot... and it is. That is a ton of shows.

It's set in New Orleans, in the home of Stanley and Stella Kowalski. At the beginning of the play, Stella's sister Blanche arrives for a visit under mysterious circumstances. She and Stanley dislike each other immediately. She thinks that Stanley, a working-class guy who likes beer and poker games, is a brute, and he thinks that Blanche, who takes long baths and throws scarves over lamps in an effort to create a kind of magic, is a phoney.

They've both got their points, and Williams has sympathy for both of them. Blanche is a broken woman clinging desperately to her illusions, and while Stanley may be brutish, he has moments of longing and pathos too. Through these characters, the play charts collisions between illusion and reality, dream and violent awakening, and new and old ideas of what it means to be an American.

Streetcar was a hit on Broadway and at the movies. Remember Method acting, that American corruption of Stanislavskian actor training? Well, this is how a lot of America first got to know it, because Marlon Brando and his tight white t-shirt are method as heck.

Brando played the role of Stanley on Broadway and in the movie. Under Elia Kazan's direction, who you'll remember from our episode on the Group Theater, he mumbled and sweated and shouted, "Stella! Stella!" and... whew, is it hot in here, or is it just Method? That was pretty much everything that actors weren't supposed to do. But the Method was styled at valorized emotional truth over craft—boring stuff like posture and diction—and audiences were into it. Yorrick!

The next great, serious playwright to land on Broadway was this guy, Arthur Miller, born in Manhattan in 1915. He was an upper-middle class kid until the stock market crashed and his father's business failed, some of which he worked out it in his late play *The Price*. Like Eugene O'Neill and Williams, Miller was a semi-autobiographical writer, and one who helped to enshrine the family play as the major American style.

Like Williams, his plays are written in a style that blends realism and expressionism, though Miller's concerns are more pointedly political, and he's way less interested in his female characters. Unless they're witches, and even then...

After high school, Miller worked for several years until he'd saved up enough money to attend the University of Michigan, where he began to write plays. He landed on Broadway in 1944, the same year as Williams, with *The Man Who Had All the Luck*. It flopped, so I guess it wasn't that autobiographical.

Miller's fortunes shifted three years later with *All My Sons*. His big-deal play, *Death of a Salesman* opened in 1949 and ran for 742 performances. It won a Pullitzer, too. The play is a tragedy centered on Willy Loman, the unsuccessful salesman of the title. Miller said he wrote the play to "cut through time like a knife through a layer of cake or a road through a mountain revealing its geologic layers, and instead of one incident in one time frame succeeding another, display past and present concurrently."

His initial set design idea was to have the set housed inside a giant skull. I mean, your head's big, but it's not that big. Let's take a closer look at *Death of a Salesman* and how it combines a realistic family drama with a more expressionist style to show the corrupting influence of the American Dream. Help us out, Thought Bubble.

The play takes place in 24 hours plus flashbacks. When it opens, Willy Loman has just returned, unsuccessful and exhausted, from a sales trip. His wife Linda wants him to ask his boss Howard if Willy can stop traveling, but Willy is reluctant. Later that day, Linda tells her sons Biff and Happy that Willy has tried to kill himself. To cheer Willy up, the boys tell him that they're going to go into business together.

Biff is a dropout and a kleptomaniac, and Happy is a womanizer and a weakling, but Willy still believes that both his boys can be successful, which is all that matters to Willy. There's a flashback to happier days when Biff was a high school football star. And then there's a more ambivalent flashback which shows Willy with his mistress. Willy also has a vision of his older brother Ben who left Brooklyn, first for Africa then Alaska, and became rich. Willy has always regretted not joining him.

Willy gets fired from his job. Biff never gets to make his business proposal. During what's supposed to be a celebratory dinner, Biff tries to tell his father the truth, and Willy flashes back to the time Biff caught him with his mistress, a trauma that led Biff to give up on summer school and his hopes of an athletic scholarship. Biff and Happy leave the restaurant, deserting their father.

Later that night, Biff again tries to confess, but Willy won't hear him. Instead, he has a vision of his brother Ben. Willy is convinced that the best way to support his family is by killing himself, allowing his family to collect the insurance money. We hear him drive away, and the final scene finds the family at his funeral, with Linda revealing that she has made the final payment on the mortgage. "We're free and clear," she tells her dead husband. "We're free. We're free."

Thanks, Thought Bubble.

Well, that was tragic, and it illustrates Miller's argument that the common man is as apt a subject for tragedy in its highest sense as kings were. With its shifts in time and its emphasis on the tension between illusion and reality, comforting lies and cold truth, *Salesman* lays bear the American myth that a good life is a commercially and financially successful one. Willy is so wedded to this vision that he can't see himself or his family clearly. And yet, Miller also insists that everyone, even a man as misguided as Willy, is a creature of dignity who deserves our respect.

The last figure we'll look at today is Lorraine Hansberry. She was born in Chicago in 1930 to middle class, politically active parents. During her childhood, the family attempted to move to a white neighborhood and were met with violent racism.

Introduced to theater in high school and at the University of Wisconsin, Hansberry worked as a journalist and activist before turning to playwriting. In 1957, she wrote *A Raisin in the Sun*, loosely inspired by her family and the discrimination that they faced. The play opened on Broadway in 1959 and, as James Baldwin wrote, "Never before in the entire history of the American theater had so much of the truth of black people's lives been seen on the stage."

Hansberry was African-American, so, like Williams who was gay, and Miller who was Jewish, she was able to write about American society from the position of someone who was both inside and outside of it. *A Raisin in the Sun* is a specific, realistic portrait of a multigenerational urban black family, and also a more general consideration of what it means to live in a world that doesn't always want or value you. *Raisin*'s Walter Younger, Jr., like Blanche Dubois or Willy Loman, is trying to find his way in a world that doesn't necessarily have a place for him.

A Raisin in the Sun, which takes its title from Langston Hughes's poem about dreams deferred, centers on the Younger family. They live on Chicago's South Side in a roach-filled apartment. They're about to receive an insurance policy payout of $10,000, enough to substantially improve their lives.

Mama, the grandmother, wants to buy a house in a better neighborhood, while her son Walter wants to invest in a liquor store, and her daughter Benny wants to use the money for medical school. When Walter's wife becomes pregnant and worries that the family can't afford another child, Mama buys a house in an all-white neighborhood.

A homeowner tries to buy her out, but Mama holds firm, even after Walter loses the rest of his money to a scheming friend. As the play ends, the Youngers are leaving their home, on the way, they hope, to a better life. The play won a Drama Critics Circle Award, was turned into a movie for Columbia Pictures, and continues to be widely performed.

Just when it seems like Broadway has become the place for serious American drama, New York is going to open up a few more places not on Broadway. And it is going to call those places—you guessed it—Off-Broadway. Join us next time when we explore the rise of Off-Broadway, Off-Off-Broadway, and Off-Off-Off-Broadway—Nah, I'm just kidding. Or am I?—and the rise of the Black Arts Movement. But until then, off-curtain.

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