Little Theater and American Avant Garde: Crash Course Theater #40

Crash Course: Theater
https://youtube.com/watch?v=sYJosVHkwgo
https://nerdfighteria.info/v/sYJosVHkwgo

===== (00:00) to (02:00) =====

(PBS Digital Studios Intro)

Hey there. I'm Mike Rugnetta. This is Crash Course Theater and today, we're talking about American modernism, which arrived late. As you may remember from our earlier episodes, it took the US a long time to get a theater at all because of Puritans and war and then America spent most of a century doing redface, blackface, wild west shows, and bad imitations of English comedies and Uncle Tom with crocodiles, which is to say, it took American theater a really, really, really long time to get good, but it happened.

Today, we'll look at the United States' embrace of realism, the rise of the little theater movement, and the turn towards the kinds of experimental forms that Europe had pioneered a couple decades earlier. Why so tardy? Lights up already!

(Crash Course Intro)

As we discussed before, America loved melodrama. It went hard for spectacle, intrigue, and cardboard characters. Probably the first guy to try realism in the states was James A. Herne, an actor and eventually a playwright. He collaborated with David (?~1:15) on a few melodramas and then decided that maybe he should try to find a kind of playwriting that mirrored life as people lived it. He wrote the 1890 play "Margaret Fleming" as a vehicle for his actress wife. It's about a wife and a mother who discovers that her mill owner husband, Philip, has fathered an illegitimate child. When the child's mother dies, the mother's sister attempts to shoot Philip, and Philip runs away. Margaret offers her breast to the starving baby and then goes blind from the stress of the whole thing. Philip tries to kill himself and is eventually rescued, but it's unclear whether the couple will ever reconcile. That is one eventful mirror of life.

Now, maybe this doesn't seem that different from domestic melodrama, but there are no soliloquies and no tableau and no one is tying anyone to a railroad track.

===== (02:00) to (04:00) =====

Herne was hailed as an American Ibsen, although Ibsen might have found the sudden blindness a little extra. The writer William Dean Howells, one of the few people who saw the play, wrote, "Margaret Fleming clutched the heart. It was common. It was pitilessly plain. It was ugly. But it was true and it was irresistible." For Howells, maybe, but most critics were happy to resist. Even after Herne made the ending happier, it never caught on with the public either, who were like, eugh, depressing. Give us train tracks.

Herne had more success with "Shore Acres", a gentler attempt at realism that's about a stage Yankee-type, Uncle Nat, who successfully reunites his family. Other writers also tried realism, Clyde Fitch, William Von Moody, even Henry James. Yeah, that Henry James. His play, "Guy Domville" was one of the all-time great belly flops of the late 19th century. The audience booed him for about 15 minutes straight. 15 minutes! Who has that kind of time? That seems like it would get boooooo-ring.

American realism wouldn't really come into its own until the arrival of Eugene O'Neill. It's funny that O'Neill became the champion of American realism because is father, James O'Neill made his fortune performing in the romantic melodrama, "The Count of Monte Cristo". Eugene spent his early life touring with his alcoholic dad and his morphine-addicted mom. He went to Princeton for a year and then dropped out and sailed the ocean. After coming ashore, he worked as a vaudeville actor and then a newspaper reported. After tuberculosis landed him in a sanitarium, he studied at Harvard with George Baker, who ran a famous class called Workshop 47 that taught the fundamentals of playwriting.

A year or so later, he became involved with the Provincetown Players. We'll talk about them in a minute. First, he wrote realistic seafaring plays and then he wrote realistic land lubber ones. As we discussed previously, his work took a turn towards expressionism with plays like "The Emperor Jones", in which an African-American actor, Charles Gilpin, starred on Broadway, a first.

===== (04:00) to (06:00) =====

O'Neill wrote experimental plays that tried out some of those cool newfangled European techniques and even invented newfangled techniques of his own, like having the characters voice their internal monologues. O'Neill was one of the first American playwrights to put lower class characters on stage and to write in an American vernacular, well, an American vernacular besides stage Yankee. Late in life, he returned to realism with a run of plays that include two acknowledged masterpieces, "The Iceman Cometh" and "Long Day's Journey Into Night".

"The Iceman Cometh" takes place in a seedy, waterfront tavern based on a dive where O'Neill tried to kill himself as a young man. It's frequented by drunks and lowlifes who keep themselves going with pipe dreams. The arrival of Hickey, a traveling salesman, blows those dreams away, for a moment at least. "Long Day's Journey Into Night" is O'Neill's most autobiographical play, written in tears and blood with deep pity and understanding and forgiveness and only performed after O'Neill's death. It spends a day and then a very late night with the Tyrone family.

O'Neill isn't for everyone. The plays are long and overwrought and O'Neill never met a theme that he didn't want to hit again and again and again. On his studio wall, he wrote, "Before the soul can fly, its wings must be washed in the blood of the heart." What a guy, but the desires of the characters are so strong, their pain is so real, and their tragedies feel so inevitable that his plays have an undeniable force.

His plays are about individual characters and families, but they're about the United States, too, and its greediness, alienation, and perpetual dissatisfaction. "I'm going on the theory that the United States, instead of being the most successful country in the world, is the greatest failure," he told an interviewer. It's possible that we wouldn't have O'Neill without the little theater movement.

===== (06:00) to (08:00) =====

The little theaters were inspired by European theaters like the (?~6:05) and the Independent Theater Society. The little theaters provided alternatives to Broadway and to theaters across the country that were tightly controlled by a syndicate who programmed them pretty exclusively with popular, non-threatening stuff, you know, train tracks plays.

The little theaters were like, we're not here to make money. We don't care if people buy tickets. There will be no train tracks here at all, or, if there are, they're gonna be weird, expressionist train tracks. There were several little theaters in 1920s New York, like the Washington Square Players, the Harlem Lafayette Players, and the Neighborhood Playhouse. Boston, Chicago, and Detroit also had little theaters.

The most famous of them was the Provincetown Players, which started, you guessed it, in Provincetown, Massachusetts, but because even anti-commercial theaters want to make a splash, the Players moved to Manhattan. The Players got started in 1915 by the writer Susan Glaspell and her husband George Cram Cook. They produced their work and the work of friends. The second

season included Eugene O'Neill's "Bound East for Cardiff".

The theater became a home for poets like Edna St. Vincent Millay and Wallace Stevens, and for female playwrights like Djuna Barnes, Neith Boyce, and Glaspell herself, who would later win the Pulitzer Prize for drama. O'Neill's plays made the theater a hit, but this was never what its founders wanted, so it disbanded in 1923. Let's look at one of Glaspell's plays, "Trifles", written in 1916. This is both a realistic play and an experimental one, and one of the earliest examples of feminist theater. It's also a murder mystery.

Help us out, Thought Bubble. Like Sophie Treadwell's (?~7:40) from our episode on expressionism, "Trifles" was inspired by an actual murder case that Glaspell covered, in which an Iowa woman was accused of murdering her husband with an axe. "Trifles" begins in a farmhouse a few days after a murder. A neighbor discovered the husband, John, dead in his bed upstairs. The wife, Minnie, claimed a burglar had strangled him.

===== (08:00) to (10:00) =====

Now, the county prosecutor plus the neighbor and the sheriff and their wives have come to the farmhouse to look for clues and gather up a few of Minnie's things. CSI: Double Date. They come into a living area and the prosecutor asks if there's any evidence here, but the sheriff says, "Nothing here but kitchen things." So the men leave the unimportant kitchen things to the ladies. "Women are used to worrying over trifles," the neighbor says. That is when the ladies crack the case. While they're looking at her preserves and her bread dough and her quilting, they find an empty birdcage and then the dead bird. "It's been strangled the same way that John was strangled." The women come to understand that John had isolated his wife and mistreated her and then killed her bird, so she retaliated. "I know how things can be for women," the sheriff's wife says, "We all go through the same things. It's just a different kind of the same thing." Thanks, Thought Bubble.

This is a naturalistic play but it's clear that what's natural in a marriage means different things to the male and female characters. The men can't understand why a wife would kill her husband. The women get it. They sympathize with Minnie. They don't share her motive with the men and they conceal the evidence. Why is the play feminist, thugh?

Well, not only because it's a portrait of an abusive marriage that is sympathetic to the wife but because the wives are more perceptive than their husbands and ultimately they solve the mystery. O'Neill and the Provincetown Confederates weren't the only American (?~9:36) though.

Living in France, American Gertrude Stein was writing some very strange plays that don't move or feel like plays at all. Works like "Ladies Voices" and "What Happened" aren't big on character or plot, but they're full of words that swirl and dart and loop and repeat in a continuous present tense. Everything seems to always be happening at the same time. You can even call her plays cubist, the literary analog of the Picasso paintings that Stein loved, and over in Connecticut, Stein's friend Thornton Wilder was writing quiet, philosophical, bittersweet plays that played with structure and design, like "The Long Christmas Dinner" and "Our Town".

===== (10:00) to (11:20) =====

Though the plays seemed to tackle typical subjects, a family, a romance, they take a wry, metaphysical approach to everyday life, presenting an audience with a mostly bare stage and asking them to use their imaginations and their own life experiences to fill that stage back in.

Thanks for watching. Next time, we're going to be heading to the Renaissance. The Harlem Renaissance. A movement that encouraged a flowering African-American theater and performance. But until then, curtain.

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