

The American Writer: The American Theater

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It is quite beyond me to really do justice to this great occasion. The fiftieth anniversary of the Avery Hopwood awards deserves a thorough historical account of their impact on American literature. I do not mean a mere listing of the notable writers who were first recognized and encouraged by the awards, but perhaps, as important, the impact of the idea itself of a university that had the nerve not only to teach contemporary writing but, in effect, to act as its sponsor and to administer money prizes for student writing. I am not sure that this was a first, but I am certain that there could not have been many precedents fifty years ago. In fact, a look at the lives of some of our most distinguished writers who were born around the turn of the century and were of college age when universities were far more conventional in their attitudes toward the arts will show that a large number of them either never bothered to finish college or had no connection as writers with any such institution. The Hopwood awards, I believe, announced not merely annual winners but an attitude that has since spread through many other universities—that the writer can be just as valuable during his lifetime as he is afterward.

So rather than attempt some sort of historical appreciation, I think it wiser to stick to my own experience as a beginning writer, a more modest strategy, to be sure, but one that I hope will throw a more certain light on a far larger scene.

I believe I had two reasons for choosing Michigan, apart from its educational repute. The first was that they did not require mathematics. By the time I graduated from high school I was possibly the world's greatest expert on algebra;

having failed it twice, and only been passed a third time because they could not bear to look at me anymore, I came to a certain intimacy with every problem in the textbook. All I lacked was the remotest idea of how to solve them. The second attraction was the astounding news of the Hopwood awards. The idea of a university handing out cold cash to students was, I confess, almost too glorious to contemplate. The money itself was important of course—even on the lowest prize, \$250, I would later manage to live for a semester. And, of course, with money so hard to come by in the Depression thirties, giving it away for nothing more than words on a piece of paper had miraculous overtones when I had been working in industry for years for twelve and fifteen dollars a week. But the central attraction was even more mysterious. The fact that money was given out meant that the judges—unlike your mother or your friends—could really tell good writing from bad. Thus, the recognition of an award touched more than the pocket; it might even point the future.

I am forced to wonder whether, if Avery Hopwood had been a novelist and had neglected to give prizes for plays, I would not have tried harder to become a novelist. For the theater meant little to me when I began to write. I had seen only a handful of plays and those had seemed so remote and artificial that I could find no connection with myself at all in them. It must be remembered that in the thirties there was nothing that could be called an off-Broadway theater. It would have been inconceivable to draw a separation between dramatic art and show business, which were treated as one and the same. I had heard vaguely about a Provincetown Theatre, an experimental place where Eugene O'Neill had started out, but he, after all, had headed for Broadway as soon as producers would accept his plays. Later in the thirties there would be two or three left-wing theater groups, most notably the Group Theatre, but they, too, strove to succeed on Broadway even as they pronounced anathema upon its commercial greed.

Whatever triggered my imagination toward the play form is lost to me now, but it may well have been a production of an early Odets play by the Group Theatre. Oddly enough, I can-

not recall which play; all I remember was seeing actors who for the first time in my experience were physically vivid, whose faces seemed to have commonplace outlines, palpable noses and eyes that moved, and hands with veins. The *moments*, so to speak, of the play seemed superheated, isolated one from the other so that they counted eloquently, while at the same time—and this was the weird paradox—everything flowed together. More than this, I found myself believing that offstage—and I had never set foot on a stage but could imagine what it must be like back there—offstage was not offstage at all but the city itself, the New York I knew. So that the play was not like a little isolated cell where things went on disconnected from the city around us, but was one cell among the myriad, part of the sound and the anxiety and the almost universal frustration of life at that time. Had I been capable, as I was not, of rationalizing the experience, I should have called it an experience of theater as life, as much a part of life as going into the subway or bringing home a bottle of milk or sitting in the back yard and wondering anxiously what was ever going to become of me after failing algebra three times.

It would be decades before I would see it all from the opposite side of the equation—life, that is, seen as theater. Politics as theater, love as theater, lecturing on Chaucer as theater, psychoanalysis as theater, the church as theater. But perhaps there won't be time to go into all that.

Anyway, having seen that acting was not, as it had seemed till then, the art of speaking with an English accent, and that a play had something to do with sweat and hunger, I was hooked. I am speaking personally, of course, but only to support my generalizations. For example, I am sure that had I come of age in any other time and had seen some other production of high excellence, I would also have been similarly inspired. But one can't really be sure. I can only be sure that it did happen then, and I know it was not only the acting or the crazy poetry of Odets's lines. It was also what he was saying and what this whole way of acting was saying. It is a convenience to call their message Marxist or revolutionary; but for me it was more like being provided with an emotion,

an emotion appropriate to the frustrations of living in the early thirties, specifically, the verb, if you will, for protesting the cursed irrationality of our lives. For people were starving then in America, while food was being burned up on the farms for want of a price. Odets seemed to provide a license for outrage, which has to be the first step toward a moral view. To me, as to most of the critics and the media of the time, he was overwhelmingly the clarion playwright. It would be years until I discovered, quite by chance in a conversation with Harold Clurman, who had directed the Group, that Odets's plays themselves—I am not speaking of the royalties, but of his plays—never made any money. Nor, as a matter of fact, did most of O'Neill's, although his made more than Odets's. And I mention this crass subject for reasons that will be alarmingly clear in a moment, but one point needs making right now. The American theater at that time was not about O'Neill or Odets, quite obviously; it was about entertainment of a quite different kind, the kind that offers an escape from life rather than a confrontation with it. I would only add that this is what most theater in most places is about most of the time.

But when I set about writing a play for the first time, I shared a certain illusion of community, which, I think, is implicit in the act of writing for publication or production. I felt alone, of course, and I was scared of making myself ridiculous, and I felt light-years away from any suggestion of professionalism, for I was painfully aware that I knew very little about plays and nothing at all about the theater. My only hope was that the other plays being written for the Hopwood contest would be worse. This thought was the only one I had at the time that approached reason. The awards provided a world small enough to grapple with.

For the real world of theater was quite different than it is today. As I have suggested, it consisted of the commercial Broadway theater and, to all intents and purposes, that was it. How did one achieve the requisite professionalism? It was all a mystery too deep for me. I had by this time dipped into the contemporary Broadway plays, those that had been published, for very few were then, and found little I could relate myself

to. For I did not understand about charm in those days. Unawares, I had come to connect plays and the theater with some sort of prophetic function. Again, I was not in the habit of rationalizing such things, but a playwright for me was a man with his own church. Not that it was a question of preaching but rather of being the vessel of a community's need to talk to itself and to the world. It was possibly my Jewish heritage that imposed such a burden, or, if you will, such a challenge. But O'Neill was not Jewish anymore than Ibsen was, or Chekhov, Strindberg, or the Greeks. (And, parenthetically, none of those writers could run very long on Broadway either, then or now.) How odd, then, to even imagine them as spokesmen, as prophets, for such they were to me then, and conventionally are still, even though we all know that the vast majority of plays are and always have been rearrangements of trivia.

It had not seemed to me to be too short a time—the five days of spring vacation—to write a three-act play. When it won a Hopwood award it was like an artillery shell fired right through the ranks of my opposing army—down went all my old algebra teachers, for one thing. Then, soon after, another award fell upon the same play, the Bureau of New Plays prize, administered by the Theatre Guild in New York. This was a nationwide contest for college students. Another winner was a Brooklyn student who is present today, Norman Rosten. Another was a fellow from St. Louis named Tennessee Williams.

The main thing about this prize was the money—\$1,250. I had already earned more with my first play than I had in three years as a shipping clerk. Needless to say, the contrast was not lost to my mind. And if I seem to linger on the subject of money, it is, I assure you, at the center of the great tradition of playwriting. As George Bernard Shaw replied to a businessman who had asked to discuss art with him, "No, I am an artist, not a businessman; businessmen always want to talk about art, but artists only talk about money." But with all the luck I seem to have had with that first play, the idea of actually making a profession of the theater was still quite unreal.

One problem was that I had spilled out into that first play

everything I knew or could imagine about life. For I had hardly lived at all. I must invent something, I thought with sinking heart, and for this I supposed one had to have some kind of objectified technique. So, I promptly groped my way into Professor Kenneth T. Rowe's play-writing class. Such were the times—such was our theater, I should say—that one assumed to begin with that a certain technique could be learned that would more or less, if properly utilized, insure success. Again the Broadway theater loomed in the background, the only theater we had and that, indeed, rewarded certain formulas, as theater inevitably does at all times including the present. That formula had numerous variations, but if it had to have a name it might be the Theater of the Rational. A problem was put in act 1, complicated and brought to a crisis in act 2, and resolved or answered in act 3.

It is hard to define what I took from Professor Rowe's classes. Perhaps it was, above all, his enthusiasm for the catholicity of dramatic literature, the sheer variety of forms that time had developed. And, indeed, there was no single overriding style of writing in his class as there would be in the coming decades when fashion, for some reason, has so dominated and, I think, in many cases crushed invention. People then were writing Realism, Impressionism, Expressionism, poetic drama, verse drama, and Bronx comedies. It did not yet seem that there had to be obeisance to a prevailing mode. Perhaps fewer people were reading the arts section of the *New York Times* then.

I suppose it was somewhat like learning how to draw in order to go on to painting, liberated from the tyranny of line. In any event, I think I came to believe that if the dazzling glory of the masters was finally their poetry, the fundamental poem was the structure. The structure indeed, was the poem, the one element whose removal or disturbance collapsed the whole. One knew how Chekhov or Ibsen or Sophocles felt and sounded—now it was necessary to know how they were made. Paradoxically—or maybe it was quite logical—in less than ten years I would arrive on Broadway with a play, *The Man Who Had All the Luck*, that began with a problem and ended not

with a solution, but at the door of the mystery of fate—why one person is chosen to win and another to lose, a question unanswerable whatever technique might be applied to it. I might add that the play lasted four nights. There was one encouraging review, but that from an alcoholic critic who was well on his way to the big bottle in the sky.

And speaking of the big bottle, it is time, I think, to talk about the critics. It is futile to criticize critics. It is quite enough to condemn them totally. Suffice it to say, I have never met a playwright who claimed he had learned anything from a review. Perhaps it can all be summed up in a story, which may just possibly be true, told me by the late Jed Harris who was the first director of *The Crucible* and in his best time, the twenties, one of the most creative men in the American theater. When he was directing *Our Town*, the most important critic, as always, was the man who happened to be on the *Times*, Brooks Atkinson, the very dean himself. Harris, concerned that Atkinson would not understand the play, which had certain innovations in staging, asked him to lunch, and there proposed to him that he begin a course of theater training by attending a few rehearsals. "I told him," said Harris, "that he really did not know very much about acting, directing, and scene design, and that I would be glad to teach him. He sat there very sweetly, listening to me and agreeing with me. But he didn't come to rehearsals because he felt it would be unethical and might tilt his opinion of the finished production."

Harris's point was one that everyone would have accepted in the decades before and after World War II—the New York reviewer was not necessarily a man who knew anything, he merely had to react with common sense in a manner representative of his readers. Thus, among the seven or eight main reviewers from the clutch of daily papers that still existed then, one found a remarkable number who arrived at the theater opening night on a tilting sidewalk. Others were unwashed refugees from the sports department, and one or two prided themselves on being professional humorists. The intellectual critics, exemplified perhaps by Joseph Wood Krutch, mat-

tered very little to the box office, having disliked everything since the early Euripides. The reigning intellect of the Broadway scene was George Jean Nathan who, indeed, displayed occasional insights, but whose reviews, it seemed to me, most often consisted of lengthy lists of plays going back into antiquity of which the play at hand reminded him. To read American theater reviewing then and now is to be convinced that the reviewer owns a certain sacred space, which it is his moral duty to prevent the playwright from entering. It is quite as though the entire purpose of the whole theater enterprise, its very *raison d'être*, is to provide a subject for criticism. This might be acceptable if one could recall the name of a single critic who, for example, had wounded Chekhov, Ibsen, Strindberg, or O'Neill by dismissing their works out of hand.

I won a second Hopwood in my junior year, but I failed to win the big one as a senior. Nevertheless, it seemed possible to hope that I might become a professional playwright. The theater I was trying to enter seemed as always to be dominated by its critics, just as our immortal souls are dominated by our decaying flesh. But there was a certain illusion, shared, I think, by everyone involved, that I think helped to form a certain kind of play, and that kind, if I am not mistaken, was in the high tradition of the art. The illusion I speak of was that there was one single audience containing within itself in some mystical fashion the whole variety of America and Americans. The same audience that went to the Ziegfeld Follies one night might flock to O'Neill the next. And so it was not quite as odd as it might seem now that some of the reviewers would have been more at home at a ball game or a prize fight, for the same was true of much of the audience. In actual fact, of course, the audience may have been emblematic of American taste, but it was certainly not representative in the absence of blacks and workers in general. Still, there was a certain rough-and-ready air to its acceptance or rejection of a show.

The consequence to play writing, however, is what is important here. Facing such an audience, the playwright could not console himself with yearnings for another, more sensitive and cultivated audience. Balcony seats in the thirties cost

fifty-five cents and in them, at least, if not in the orchestra, were the salt of the earth—the student and his teacher, the neighborhood intellectuals of modest means, the housewives and the more culturally hip of the working class. Downstairs in the orchestra were the business people and the professionals and, for certain shows, the usual sprinkling of café society. It may have been a better mix than we have today, but on the whole it never thought it owed anything to anyone, including even a minimal acquaintance with its own historical or literary culture. If a play had an idea, it had to be embodied in action; speeches had to be short, muscular, direct. If you had a message, said the prevailing wisdom, send it by Western Union, for it did not belong in a play. Plays were for fun, for obliterating your troubles, a chance to live other peoples' lives. It was a pragmatic, fundamentally uneducated audience, and if it simply turned its back on the poetic and the philosophical far more often than it should have, it could also make a quite proper demand upon a play; specifically, that its theme flow effortlessly from its action, and that meaning and viewpoint not be smeared all over it like mustard on a hotdog. It may be because of this kind of confrontation that I would find many years later a tendentiousness in so many absurdist plays that seemed to crudely slant life in favor of the meaningless conclusion, the hero slipping on a banana peel. It is a fact, nevertheless, that in the earlier time there was a dangerous intolerance of the ineffable unless even it were made active and packed with emotion, like *The Glass Menagerie*, for example. That play, I would remind you, was regarded as certain to fail on Broadway because it seemed so delicately inactive, so ineffable and talky, and when it did succeed, it proved yet again that this audience for prizefights and ball games could be stretched and lifted by poetry if it aimed for the heart rather than the education. In effect, then, the playwright was speaking to his country, and he had no other nor was it thought that he should have.

So, he was compelled to find language and theatricality broad enough in its humanity to hold such an audience. He could not rely for support on a clique pretuned to his cultural

signals. Alienation in itself, in other words, had not yet become synonymous with style, let alone high art. And if it was mostly a theater of extroversion, its desire to make contact with the mass was not really different from that of the New and Old Testaments, the classical Greek theater, and the best of the Elizabethans. It was a brutal challenge and could be a brutal confrontation, even unfair; but to accept it was to know the difference between grace under pressure and grace before dinner.

Sometime in the mid-fifties the profound shift within the audience as well as in the organization of the Broadway theater changed all these elements forever. In a word, one became aware that the audience was losing even its former superficial unity; it had begun to atomize. In my case, it was at the opening night of *The Crucible* in 1952 that I realized I was no longer precisely among friends. I have written of this elsewhere at greater length; let it be enough to say now that I was obviously not to be a part of what was then extolled as The American Century, a dawning era when the United States was going to be the new imperium abroad while jumping with democratic prosperity at home. What it all looked like to me was fear and anxiety covered over with the same old self-infatuation that had always led us to our disasters.

I have always supposed, however, that it was *Waiting for Godot* that signaled this shift within the audience. Why precisely it should have occurred at that moment must be left to another time; it is sufficient to say now that the absurdities of life moved onto the stage as well as into the common wisdom of the time. But if the majority of the audience had no taste for shaggy dog stories and remained loyal to Broadway, most of the young left to support what now became known as the off-Broadway theater, a theater whose main stock in trade was the absurd. I cannot attempt a sociological explanation for that absurdist vogue, but I can say that until the mid-fifties it would have been impossible to have met an American who could believe that General Motors, Chrysler, and Ford would one day find themselves incapable of building an automobile competitive with, of all things the Japanese. It would have been

equally hard to convince anyone that not only a president but his brother would be gunned down one after the other. The inconceivable, in short, had not yet become commonplace. And so, where before the structures of cause and effect, of fate and character-as-fate had supported the arch of dramatic structure, now it was the inconceivable itself that was raised up and given the kind of obeisance reserved for first principles. And in one sense, it was indeed a kind of naturalistic reportage of how the world was; for the concept of the absurd tended to legitimize the common conviction that absolutely nothing followed necessarily from anything else. One of the doubtful virtues of this philosophy was to liberate some of us from having to understand anything at all, and that included dramatic structure.

There were several reasons why I would find myself somewhat uneasy with this style. In principle, for one thing, it seemed odd that whether in Paris, London, Berlin, or New York, regardless of the great differences between these societies, precisely the same mode of feeling and writing should have spontaneously arisen. In short, it seemed too obviously a fashion rather than a truth that had taken hold of the western imagination. Secondly, our American despair is not quite the same as the European variety, for we have never ceased to hope, awkward as that may be to explain to strangers. So, it seemed somehow wrong that you should enter a theater and not be sure what country you were in. And, finally, so long as a writer writes, he hopes; this is what tragic writing assumes to begin with and black humor denies. I suppose what I am saying is that a work ought to acknowledge its premises.

With the atomization of the audience between avant-garde and rear guard, a new breed of critic came on the scene. He or she was far more literary than the roughnecks of the past, far better trained academically, making the new demand for a theater of ideas, and, in many instances, the more revolutionary the better. Some were brilliant stylists, others merely wished to be; the best that might be said of them is that their appearance was doubtless inevitable in the evolution of

sophistication in American society, and the worst, that on the whole they seemed unwilling or incapable of admitting the contradictions of their own positions. Was it enough, for example, to abandon the majority audience in a democracy, or should play writing and theater in general persist in trying to find the key to that audience rather than to play reassuringly to enclaves of the washed, the already saved, and the elite?

Nor is it altogether wrong to note that some of these critics were not too revolutionary to resist the call to assume the role of critic for the better-paying magazines and even the *New York Times*. But perhaps their most harmful work was done upon the truth of history, for by the sixties they had all but persuaded their public that nothing in American theater was to be discussed in the same breath as the British, French, German—indeed nearly any other theater. Modernity was European; mere naive sentimentality belonged to us. This was more than misleading nonsense. In fact, it was almost diametrically the opposite of truth.

In the early winter of 1956 I happened to experience a moment of historical change that might throw some light on this question of the American contribution to international theater. I was in London at that time working with Peter Brook on his production of *A View From the Bridge*. At the same time my wife was starting a film, *The Prince and the Show Girl*, with Laurence Olivier. One evening soon after we arrived, he asked if there was anything in the London theater I wished to see. I glanced down the nearly full page of theater ads—there were many dozens of shows then—and was at a loss. Not only had I never heard of any of the titles, but they seemed to promise precisely the kind of precious, upper-middle-class nursery tales that had relevance, perhaps, to life among the fox hunters, but not very much else. My eye fell at last upon one title that I found intriguing—*Look Back In Anger*. It was not, of course, the looking back but the anger that seemed so un-British then. But Olivier dismissed it as an ugly travesty on English society. This made it even more interesting, and I persisted, and he finally agreed to get me a ticket. When I arrived at the Royal Court Theatre the follow-

ing evening, I found Olivier in the lobby awaiting me. He had decided to see the play again.

To be brief about it, here was the first English play I had any knowledge of that told me something about actually living in England. And I had a strange *déjà vu* sensation when I realized that it was doing for the English rather precisely what Odets had done in the early thirties for New Yorkers—letting loose a cleansing invective, an unbridled anguish and fury at the hapless decrepitude of the social system, its injustices and its frustrating stupidities.

Whether the author had ever read an Odets play was beside the point; the quite similar style, a certain apt wedding of lyricism and social outrage, had flashed out of the English sky a quarter of a century after it had done the same thing in New York, and doubtless for similar social reasons—namely, because a deadly formalized, polite and rather bloodless commercial play had dominated in both countries for several decades earlier. Incidentally, after his second viewing, Olivier ended at the bar with the young Osborne who had written the play, and while I talked with George Devine, the director of the Royal Court Theatre, I overheard Olivier asking Osborne whether he could write something for him. Which he promptly did—*The Entertainer*.

I was invited to be one of the speakers at an informal rally a few nights later in the Royal Court Theatre, where hundreds of young actors and writers had jammed the place to discuss the state of their theater. One of the recurrent questions directed to me was what they might do to begin creating plays like the Americans, plays that seemed to them so vital, so alive to current American life. There could simply be no mistaking that for these young men and women it was the American play and the American actor that had grasped the hour and the style of contemporary existence. In a few short years, of course, to listen to some of our own critics, it would be quite as though the American play and the American playwright had two left feet and could barely manage to read the hands of the clock. Indeed, this self-rejection went to such an extreme that nothing would do but an English critic had to be imported to

oversee the New York theater for the *New York Times*. Such is the ineluctable power of fashion, I suppose. Indeed, the only English-speaking place left where you could find any real critical understanding and enthusiasm for the American play, its vigor and its poetry, was precisely in Britain, especially among the British actors, authors, and directors.

I have talked far longer than I meant to, but before I finish I must complete the winding of the noose from which American theater currently hangs. I am speaking, of course, of the Broadway theater, the so-called professional theater. If it was once *the* theater in the sense that almost everything original began on Broadway to be imitated by repertory and amateur theaters, it is now quite the opposite. Nothing but musicals now originates on Broadway; what serious work is shown, and it is practically extinct, has been transferred from off-Broadway or regional theaters across the country. Broadway is hostile to serious work, that is no exaggeration, and so it should be. Is it really too much to ask that people should spend twenty-five to forty dollars a seat to watch painful scenes and troubled characters? If it makes any sense at all, which I doubt, it indeed is far more sensible for the entertainment-seeker to spend that kind of money on song and dance shows, and that is just what has happened. The great audiences, which it used to be said great poets required, are no more. The student, the teacher, the man of modest means, the working woman—these will hardly be found in a theater anymore, not at such prices. But, as if this were not enough, we have the monopoly of theatrical criticism exercised by the *New York Times*.

Now the *Times* would doubtless deny this, pointing out that its critic has sometimes praised a play that in short order has closed anyhow. This is true but not particularly heartening. The far more decisive truth is that when the *Times* condemns a play it closes, and this regardless of how many other papers may have praised it. In fact, in 1963, when the *Herald Tribune*, the last of the *Times*'s competitors, shut down, the editors of the *Times*, led by their chief, Clifton Daniel, were sufficiently worried about the monopoly that had befallen

them to call a meeting of theater people, at which I was one of the panel of speakers, in order to gather suggestions as to how that monopoly could be mitigated. I suggested that they provide readers with a healthy variety of views, three, four or more critics to each show, but Mr. Daniel feared that nobody would know *who represented the opinion of the New York Times*. I thought this quite astonishing. It sounded suspiciously like an unacknowledged desire to wield the very power that they denied wishing to possess. But no matter—the absurdity remains, and given the massive domination of the *Times* over the theater, it is by no means an exaggeration to say that if every book published by a major American publisher—poetry, history, fiction, or whatever—were to be judged by a single individual and his word taken as to whether it ought to live or die, it would be an equivalent situation to the one obtaining on Broadway right now. Even in the Soviet Union plays can only be killed by a committee and not one man.

And on the outside chance that some of you may think me biased against the *Times*, let me say that in 1947 my first successful play, *All My Sons*, was recognized almost alone by Brooks Atkinson of the *Times*, his colleagues having been either indifferent or hostile to it. Having said that, I ought to add that the serenity of my confidence in critics is what it is because the same group of negative reviewers turned themselves around by the end of that season and voted *All My Sons* the best play of the year. Such is life among the playwrights.

It seems to me that after fifty years of Hopwood awards a cycle has been closed. I am sure that when Avery Hopwood conceived of financing prizes for young writers it was in some part an act of subversion against the commercial system of theater. I am also sure he wanted to encourage and support writers who would not only entertain but prophesy, and to give them a couple of years to strengthen themselves for a hard life. The Broadway theater today is, if anything, even more hostile to serious work than it was a half-century ago, but all is not by any means lost. Today, unlike in Hopwood's time, there is a truly decentralized system of theaters spread across

this country. Much fine work is done in these theaters—indeed, much of their work is stolen by Broadway. If there is any note of lamentation in this speech it is not for a lost glory—there was never very much of that. But there was a level of professionalism in production, design, and performance that is not easy to find anymore. We have it still in the musical theater on Broadway, which is the best of its kind in the world. But the origination of serious theater is a thing of the past. Nor can one imagine how this will soon change; how forty-dollar seats will ever again come down in price, or how the monopoly of the *New York Times* will be broken, given the ingrained habits of theater-goers who follow the lead of that paper's tastes.

But maybe there is a disguised blessing in all this. A decentralized theater may turn out to be closer to the people than the New York-based one was, and perhaps this closeness will reflect itself in a more mature drama that reflects more of the balance of light and darkness in the country as a whole. I can see but one long-term danger, and it comes down to the problem of subservience. It is something that has cropped up frequently in the American theater since the early nineteenth century when Washington Irving complained that American authors and producers seemed to need the reassurance of foreign models for their works. Except in the musical, our most democratic form in the sense of its being adored and understood by the vast majority of the people, we seem uncertain about both the value of our own works as compared to foreign ones, and, more importantly, what the nature of serious theater really ought to be at this historical moment.

That last, of course, is a subject all by itself. Right now, one fundamental point might be made: what is evil in the United States and what is good, what is confused and what is clear, what is progressive and what is retrograde and reactionary, this whole crazy house—apart from this or that judgment upon it—is in the vanguard of history, and continues to create the century in ways that no other civilization can. Whether into the morass or onto the higher altitudes, we do break the ground. Our drama, therefore, has the right if not the obliga-

tion to see itself as a vanguard, as confronting human situations as though they had never existed before in quite the same fashion and bearing quite the same significance. I have traveled a great deal and in every kind of extant social system, and whatever may be the local opinion of us, it is from this land that they wait for news, for what's coming up, for word of our state of mind, our hopes, and our despair. Confronted by a professional theater that, between its greed and its irresponsibility, no longer has use for him, the American writer must now write for his own people, for the theaters he finds around him. There is no center anymore, and in this sense the writing of plays is no longer a profession but a calling to be practiced for the love of it or not at all.

I hope that what I have said has some truth in it. But since it is of the theater I have talked, and in a larger sense America herself, whatever is true now probably has been changing as we sit here. All I can hope for is that you will catch her on the wing, willing and ready to fly to wherever in her unpredictable wisdom she decides she wants to go.