

The American Century Theater
Presents

Drama Under the Influence

**AUDIENCE
GUIDE**

Featuring plays by
Sophie Treadwell, Susan Glaspell,
Gertrude Stein, Dorothy Parker,
Eulalie Spence, and Rita Wellman

Conceived and Directed by Steven
Mazzola

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Written by Andrew White, PhD, Dramaturg
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About The American Century Theater

The American Century Theater was founded in 1994. We are a professional company dedicated to presenting great, important, and neglected American plays of the Twentieth Century... what Henry Luce called “the American Century.”

The company’s mission is one of rediscovery, enlightenment, and perspective, not nostalgia or preservation. Americans must not lose the extraordinary vision and wisdom of past playwrights, nor can we afford to lose our mooring to our shared cultural heritage.

Our mission is also driven by a conviction that communities need theater, and theater needs audiences. To those ends, this company is committed to producing plays that challenge and move all citizens, of all ages and all points of view. In particular, we strive to create theatrical experiences that entire families can watch, enjoy, and discuss long afterward.

These study guides are part of our effort to enhance the appreciation of these works, so rich in history, content, and grist for debate.



Table of Contents

<i>Making a New Play Out of Old Pieces</i>	4
By Jack Marshall	
The Historical Context	7
By Andrew White, PhD.	
Women, the Theatre, and the Avant-garde	9
By Andrew White, PhD.	
The Playwrights and Their Plays	
By Andrew White, PhD.	
Sophie Treadwell	12
Susan Glaspell	13
Gertrude Stein	15
Dorothy Parker	16
Eulalie Spence	17
Rita Wellman	19

***Drama Under the Influence:* Making a New Play Out of Old Pieces**

By Jack Marshall

After decades, indeed centuries, of conclusive evidence to the contrary, many play-goers persist in believing that all a director does is tell actors where to move, just as many believe that an actor's greatest challenge is memorizing lines. Undoubtedly, there *are* some directors, even some well-known and critically acclaimed ones, who don't do much more than direct traffic, and there are definitely professional actors who can't learn lines. But *Drama Under the Influence*, the latest addition to The American Century Theater's "Reflections" series, demonstrates the stage director's creative and substantive role in communicating ideas, subtext, historical commentary and emotions that would not register on the audience without his efforts. When a director does this, and good directors do it often and well, it is an act of creation that uses the original work (or in the case of this play, *works*) as a springboard to a new and original artistic statement.

Drama Under the Influence is a collection of seven short plays by six female playwrights who were active in the 1920s. Director Mazzola had long been interested in exploring the essentially forgotten works of early 20th Century women writers as a source of enlightenment on their times as well as a trove of still engaging plays that never had a fair chance to succeed commercially. With valuable suggestions and assistance from historian Deborah Martinson, he found many suitable plays from the period. A typical director would have just chosen the "best" that could fill out an evening, arranged them to maximize set change efficiency and casting economy, and put them on the stage, each standing on its own with little relationship to the others.

Most one-act evenings, sad to say, are constructed exactly like that, with a unifying theme or title ("the short plays of Tennessee

Williams”); one-act comedies; stage adaptations of short stories) and nothing more, creating the dramatic equivalent of a musical variety show. Such shows are diverting but somehow unsatisfying, like a buffet dinner in which one’s plate includes Beef Wellington, garlic scampi and Waldorf salad.

Mazzola, however, took the necessary next step, beginning the inherently scary process in which the director must not only become an artist, but must take on the responsibility of shaping another artist’s creation, a creation that was a personal statement, made in her unique voice, of inspirations generated in her brain. If the director destroys the essence of that creation, he buries the last living spark from a remarkable mind that exists no more. If he has integrity and respect for the artist, he must find a way to preserve her message while employing it in his own. This is a test of skill as well as character. Many directors think nothing of warping and distorting a playwright’s work to fit their own agendas. Think of all the feminist versions of *The Taming of the Shrew*, complete with newly written endings, Peter Sellars’ *King Lear* as a mundane modern dress play about the homeless problem, and *The Importance of Being Ernest* with an all-male casts. No matter how clever or well-executed such exercises are, they are examples of the original material serving the director rather than the other way around.

Drama Under the Influence is something very different. The plays themselves are not altered at all; each playwright would recognize hers and find it free of interpretations and characterizations that undermined its original intent. The plays do, however, reinforce each other, and form a collage telling us much more about what it meant to be a woman during the Prohibition years than any one of the plays could. We see courageous women, desperate women, mad women, angry women, women who feel sisterhood with one another and women who have a sense of humor. Launched into our evening’s journey by Sophie Treadwell’s expressionistic dissection of the disparate and incomplete roles society forces women to play---daughter, lover, sex object, wife---we see the fault lines and stresses of a gender in crisis and flux, paraded before us

in distinct styles and attitudes using a remarkable emotional palette that no one playwright could bring to the stage. Tying it together further are the design elements: the set, the lights, and especially the music, matching and contrasting feelings, smoothing transitions, intensifying atmosphere.

The result is one play, not seven, and yet seven too. The combined work has a different feel and message than any of its parts, and yet it is consistent with all of them. They are made stronger by their association with each other. *Drama Under the Influence* is a new play, fashioned by the director from old pieces abandoned in the American theater's attic. And it is a powerful example of the responsible way a skilled director can make his own voice heard in harmony with the voices of great artists of the past.

Author's Note: Director Mazzola did not have any notice that this article was being written for the Audience Guide. If he had, he almost certainly would have asked that it not be included. But I feel that it is critical for our audiences to appreciate the origins of this play and his extraordinary role in bringing it to our stage, and so, while extending him my apologies, the article remains. JM.

The Historical Context of *Drama Under the Influence*

By Andrew White, PhD
Production Dramaturg

The plays featured here reflect one of the most remarkable chapters in the history of women in America, and of American society in general. The first decades of the twentieth century saw a number of revolutionary changes in politics, industry, and culture, many of them driven directly by women's organizations.

Domestic life was being forever altered by the introduction of gas (for heat, cooking and light), electricity, and the telephone. By the 1920's, these technologies were commonplace in cities like New York, and revolutionized how women managed their homes. The school subject of "Home Economics" developed in response to these advances, and reflected the perception of modern home-making as a science.

This "technologizing" of traditional women's work developed in parallel with industrialization and the increasing emphasis on work outside the home. Women (and their children) were employed in large numbers at factories and sweatshops, almost always under grueling conditions. Because unions like the American Federation of Labor (AFL) were male-centered and hostile to women in the workplace, women nationwide formed their own labor unions to negotiate wages, hours and working conditions.

Another significant development was the admission of women to colleges and universities. The generation that came of age in the 1890's – including most of our playwrights – saw unprecedented numbers of female undergrads. By the turn of the 20th century nearly 40% of college students were women. Once graduated, many of these women chose independent, professional careers over family; a significant number, too, were now free to choose women instead of men as life-partners, forming relationships that they considered marriages even though society at large

dismissed them as “sexual inverts.” Lesbian communities tended to be clustered in urban areas like New York City, but some women— like Gertrude Stein – found accepting communities overseas.

With the increase in leisure time brought about by new technology, and higher degrees of literacy and education, women across the country began to form clubs for various purposes – charitable, social and explicitly political. These women’s societies became the driving force behind major social and political change. The campaigns for “temperance” – prohibition of alcohol – and suffrage had been linked together as women’s political causes from the very beginning, and became the law of the land during the period when these plays were first produced. Newly-empowered women continued to be at the forefront of movements for progressive causes throughout the 1920’s.

The United States’ entry into World War I in 1917 was as controversial as our decision to fight wars overseas today. The war also created serious divisions within the women’s movement; some calculated (perhaps correctly) that going along with Woodrow Wilson’s war-mongering would help them get the right to vote, while others insisted that war was antithetical to traditional women’s interests. American women presided over women’s peace conferences overseas while the U.S. remained neutral in the Great War, and the Women’s Peace Party grew out of American contacts with activists in Europe. As in wars before and since, women took jobs traditionally reserved for males while the men fought, and some served as nurses in Europe alongside male pacifists who worked in the Ambulance Corps.

The dark shadow cast by World War I during the 20’s and 30’s cannot be underestimated. A host of novels, poems, memoirs and films lay out in shocking detail what the conflict was really like. The propaganda for “God and Country” had little relationship to a war in which poison gas, tanks and other “weapons of mass destruction” destroyed the lives and minds of an entire generation. The devastation of the War and its aftermath was not as keenly felt in the United States as in Europe (we “won,” after all), but many Americans who served or lived in Europe came away from the experience profoundly anti-war.

Another contradiction in women's movements during this period was that although white women's movements appeared "progressive" on the surface they rarely admitted black women as members. They were, as often as not, hostile to equal rights (including voting rights) for blacks. Black women formed their own political organizations and labor unions, and when allowed to speak to white audiences would remind them that the prospects for all blacks, men and women alike, were far bleaker. Artists, like the population at large, tended to work within their own social and racial circles.

Shortly after the end of Reconstruction, African-Americans began moving north in greater numbers in search of factory jobs, and found themselves confined to the poorer districts in the north's major cities. But relative prosperity, coupled with the success of new black colleges and universities led to a period of intense literary and artistic activity, including the Harlem Renaissance. Although traditional histories of this period have focused on the work of male writers, black women were equally prominent in this movement as novelists, playwrights and critics.

Then the Great Depression brought a decade of expansion and empowerment to a screeching halt. With unemployment reaching 33% or more in some parts of the country, women and children were "sent back home" so that men could take what few jobs remained. Prospects for higher education disappeared along with the money needed to pay the tuition. The advances of a past generation were effectively wiped out, and it would not be until the U.S.'s entry into World War II that women would again be valued for their intelligence, spirit and insight.

Women, the Theatre, and the Avant-Garde.

By Andrew White, PhD

Production Dramaturg

By the early 1900's, middle-class white women could adopt the stage as a profession and enjoy respectable careers as actors or playwrights. It was still a struggle, however, for female playwrights to get their works produced. Some of them simply shelved their plays; others responded by

creating their own small companies. In 1916, Susan Glaspell co-founded the Provincetown Players with her husband; based in Greenwich Village and the Cape Cod city of the same name, Provincetown featured works that covered a wide range of theatrical styles; among her collaborators was Eugene O'Neill.

Like their male peers, women tended to write light theatrical fare. This isn't surprising, because the theatre had the same entertainment function now taken up by television and film: then as now, the proportion of high quality work was very low. As women became more politically active, however, they began to address contemporary issues in otherwise conventional plays. And the growth of the Little Theatre movement, in both white and black communities across the country, offered greater opportunities for productions of daring, higher-quality material.

Although realism was the most popular theatrical style, white *avant-garde* artists in Europe and the U.S. had long since abandoned realism and moved on to greener pastures. (Constance Stanislavsky toured the USA in the 1920's with his Moscow Art Theatre; the first season, consisting of his old realist masterpieces, was well received; his second season, featuring his more experimental contemporary work, was panned.) Perhaps the first great *avant-garde* movement was the Symbolists, who were inspired in many instances by the Orthodox Christian vision of the material world as a veil of the sacred. Symbolists from Moscow to Paris experimented with ways of evoking spiritual and supernatural presences on the stage.

The Expressionists, meanwhile, took some of the more histrionic acting techniques developed during the nineteenth-century and focused them to create more shocking effects on their audiences. Melodrama, for example, allowed middle-class patrons to watch sympathetically from a distance as tragic, "transgressive" women died rather than challenge society's hypocritical values. Expressionism also forced audiences to experience the hell created by their own hypocrisy, through the state-of-mind of its tragic heroes and heroines, challenging the *status quo* in a more visceral way.

The other international movement from this period emerged out of the moral wreckage of World War I: Dada (French for "hobby-horse," and a

word that also has rude sexual connotations). Launched at the Cabaret Voltaire in Zurich, Dada mocked everything that was sacred and politically expedient with what, on the surface, looked like utter trash. There was method to the madness, however. Dada was profoundly anti-authoritarian in an age when authority (especially in Europe) had proven to be morally bankrupt. Language – the ultimate tool of government propaganda – became a plaything, with a greater emphasis on sound than sense and little concern for niceties of grammar or syntax.

(Tristan Tzara, one of Dada's leading lights, once offered this recipe for writing a Dada poem: 1) take a newspaper and scissors; 2) cut up the paper into individual words; 3) place these clippings in a bag and give them a shake; 4) pull the words out one by one and write them down in the exact order they come out. Check out those refrigerator magnet word games the next time you're in your kitchen!)

The mechanized nature of modern warfare also led Dada to question the value of the human being in a machine-driven world. Meanwhile, photography, a technology initially dismissed as “artless,” had become a fascination among the *avant-garde*. Gertrude Stein's good friend Man Ray began to experiment with a variety of subversive photographic and filmic techniques.

The 1920's was an especially fertile period for black theatre and drama. Harlem had a dozen theatre companies, with nearly as many ideas about the nature and purpose of black theatre. Some companies, in the tradition of the great nineteenth-century actor Ira Aldridge, insisted on including European classics and Shakespeare in their repertoire. Others confined themselves to light fare and melodrama. Others still indulged in blackface performance; indeed, it wouldn't be until the 1940's that black entertainers finally stopped “corking up” for their shows. A debate raged over what black drama was and what it should be. Should it copy prevailing European styles? Should it portray black life as it is? Or should it go back to its African roots and incorporate more traditional forms of storytelling, song and dance?

Harvard graduate W. E. B. DuBois, founder of the N.A.A.C.P., argued passionately for the portrayal of blacks as human beings, and started a movement for theatre “about us, by us, for us, and near us.” Some

advocated “folk plays” that portrayed blacks using the *patois* of their own communities (like Zora Neale Hurston’s Florida or Eulalie Spence’s Harlem). On the other hand “race plays,” as championed by W. E. B. DuBois, were overtly political and confronted the most compelling political issues of the day.

Because black writers were excluded from most literary contests downtown, Harlem had its own dramatic competitions sponsored by the seminal black magazines *Crisis* and *Opportunity*. In the years 1925-1927, the variety of prizewinning plays, many written by women, attested to the vitality of the black theatre scene at that time.

The ‘teens and twenties witnessed a wide variety of artistic movements, and the plays selected here show how American women playwrights worked in all of them.

The Playwrights and their Plays

By Andrew White, PhD
Production Dramaturg

Sophie Treadwell (*Eye of the Beholder*)

Sophie Treadwell was born in 1885 in Stockton, California, the only child of a half-Mexican, absentee father (who worked as a judge in San Francisco) and a difficult mother. There is a tendency among critics to emphasize the autobiographical nature of Treadwell’s plays, and this is misleading. Although Ms. Treadwell may have drawn on her own experience – what writers don’t? – her interest in *avant-garde* dramaturgy indicates that she was able to move beyond her own experience and frame her characters with an aesthetic and emotional distance.

After a troubled upbringing noted by frequent moves and poverty, Treadwell enrolled at U.C. Berkeley where she performed regularly with the drama club and began writing poetry and short stories while moonlighting as a campus reporter for the *San Francisco Examiner*. After graduation in 1906 (disrupted by the earthquake that year),

Treadwell taught in a one-room schoolhouse in the Sierra Nevadas, later settling in Los Angeles to try a stage career. This fizzled, but later while working as an assistant to famed Russian émigré actress Helena Modjeska, Treadwell was encouraged to submit her plays for production – often under a male pseudonym. Treadwell also went on to become a crack reporter, serving as a foreign correspondent in Europe during World War I. She achieved a measure of fame as the only American journalist to interview Pancho Villa at the height of the Mexican Revolution.

Treadwell moved to New York in 1915 and was based there for a number of years, dining regularly with a Who's Who of the *avant-garde*: Dadaists Marcel Duchamp and Francis Picabia, poets Wallace Stevens and William Carlos Williams, dancer/choreographer Isadora Duncan, and others. Her exposure to contemporary trends in art, and the dawn of the jazz age, may have persuaded her to ditch realism in favor of a more expressionistic style. *Eye of the Beholder*, with its treatment of the modern woman's dilemma (and the challenges she faces at the hands of controlling men and women alike), can be seen as an exploration of artistic territory that would form the basis for her greatest commercial and critical success, *Machinal* (1928). In *Eye of the Beholder*, the predicament of Mrs. Wayne – caught between a manipulative husband, a young lover still under his mother's thumb, and above all a mother who keeps her under her thumb – was not uncommon even in this progressive age. Treadwell's strategy for staging it was designed to make contemporary women's issues even more compelling than before.

Susan Glaspell (*Trifles*)

Born in 1876 in Davenport, Iowa, Ms. Glaspell was among the women of the 1890's generation who insisted on a college education and a life independent of farm and family, then the prevalent lifestyle in the Midwest. After graduating from Drake University in Des Moines with a Bachelor's degree in philosophy in 1899, Glaspell was hired as a reporter for the *Des Moines Daily News*.

During her short career at the *Daily News*, Glaspell covered the sensational murder of John Hossack, a prominent 60-year-old farmer allegedly axed to death by his wife Margaret in December, 1900. At first

Glaspell appealed to her readership's lust for blood and vengeance, but a visit to the Hossack household changed her attitude completely. From then on, Glaspell portrayed the suspect in more sympathetic tones, and the suspect's plight attracted so much attention (in part because of Glaspell's coverage) that a State Senator served as Margaret Hossack's defense attorney. Hossack was found guilty of murdering her husband based on circumstantial evidence in April, 1901, and sentenced to life imprisonment at hard labor (a verdict later overturned on appeal).

After Glaspell filed her last report on the Hossack case she resigned from the *Daily News* so that she could devote herself to fiction. She moved back to Davenport and eventually fell in love with a twice-divorced socialist, George Cram Cook. Because their marriage and politics were not welcome in her home town, Cook and Glaspell moved to New York City in 1913. There, in their cheap bohemian digs in Greenwich Village, they began to collaborate on a play lampooning the craze for Freudian psychoanalysis. Translations of Freud and Jung's works abounded, along with crackpot interpretations of their work; as Glaspell later wrote, "You could not go out to buy a bun without hearing of someone's complex." She wrote a play, *Suppressed Desires*, that was created through Cook and Glaspell's informal back-and-forth banter by their fireplace. It did not find a theatre willing to produce it at first, so Glaspell and Cook gave informal performances both at their vacation home in Provincetown, Massachusetts, and in New York. These performances inspired Glaspell, Cook and a few other friends including Eugene O'Neill, to found the Provincetown Players. *Suppressed Desires* was part of their first New York season in 1915-1916.

Originally, Glaspell had intended to write a short story about the Hossack case, and eventually she did: "A Jury of Her Peers." But the Provincetown Players' first two bills, performed in their summer home in 1916, proved so successful that Cook announced to everyone (except his wife) that Susan Glaspell would premiere a new one-act in late August, at their Wharf playhouse. This being Glaspell's first solo effort as a dramatist, it is perhaps not surprising that the Hossack case and the Hossack household immediately suggested themselves for a play – especially one that had to be written without any advance notice, and under an abominably short deadline. Although *Trifles* seems to follow closely Glaspell's own experience with the case, the details portrayed in

the play and her new verdict on Mrs. Wright/Hossack indicate a more nuanced approach, and a more complex agenda.

Gertrude Stein (*Photograph: A Play in Five Acts*)

Born in 1874 in Allegheny, Pennsylvania, and reared for a time in Oakland, California (of which she once famously said, “there’s no *there* there”), Gertrude Stein was among the first women to enroll in Radcliffe, Harvard’s sister college, where she studied under the philosopher/psychologist William James. After some post-graduate work at Johns Hopkins University in medicine (where classes in obstetrics and sexuality proved too stressful for her), Stein came to realize her attraction for women. Realizing also that her hometown of Baltimore would be hostile to her lesbianism, Stein moved to Paris in 1904 and settled into an apartment with her brother Leo. For several years, Stein hosted parties for some of the most innovative, *avant-garde* artists of the time. Alice B. Toklas, the love of Stein’s life, first came to Paris in 1909 and moved in with Gertrude and Leo in 1910. Leo soon moved out, and soon after that Toklas became Stein’s gatekeeper, inviting only selected guests.

From her childhood readings of Shakespeare onward, Stein had a special fascination for the mechanisms of language, and during her first years in Paris she became friends with Spanish painter Pablo Picasso. Stein and Picasso – who was in the midst of his “cubist” period – found they could talk about painting and writing in terms of each other. Constructions using color and shape were equivalent to constructions using nouns, verbs or adjectives, and where Picasso preferred laying bare the mechanisms of how images are created, Stein preferred laying bare the roots of narrative language in sound and sequence. The Dada movement’s rejection of language and meaning, as radical as it may have been for the general public, was in some ways a sign that the rest of Europe was beginning to catch up with Stein’s early experiments.

Another of Stein's friends was the photographer Man Ray, famous for his experiments with shape, composition and exposure techniques. When he wasn't depicting a woman's back as a violin or suggesting that a model's head and forearm were disembodied like a department-store mannequin's, he was placing everyday items onto unexposed photographic sheets and – by simply turning on a light in the developing room – creating images that had nothing to do with the objects themselves. Ironically, Picasso and Ray's visual experiments with 'deconstructing' images proved popular while Stein's deconstruction of language met with condescension and ridicule for many years.

Photograph, because Stein calls it a play, creates opposed expectations of a stage performance (which audiences generally expect will make sense) and a joyride of sound (which, in Stein's world, cannot make sense in the traditional sense of "making sense"). So there are a number of ways to approach it: you can begin with Stein's resistance to being taught the nuts and bolts of human reproduction, and contrast it with her fascination for the act of photographic reproduction. Then there is her idea that bearing identical twins may make women literally into "baby-making machines;" her play on words, like the 'enlarged' photograph and her own 'enlarged' figure; sighing to play, playing with sighing – whatever. In performances of Stein's work – such as *Four Saints in Four Acts* – actors were always free to create whatever "interior monologue" they chose.

Dorothy Parker (*Here We Are*)

She was born in 1893 (not that it's any of your business!). She may have been born a Rothschild, she may even have had a little dough; but she wasn't one of *the* Rothschilds; and it didn't help much that daddy sent his nice Jewish girl to Catholic school. The nuns had to put up with an "unbeliever" who insisted that the Immaculate Conception was just spontaneous combustion.

So after school, and after her dad dies, around 20 years old, Dorothy takes up playing piano at a dance school: on the side she starts publishing witchy poetry in *Vanity Fair* and the *New York Tribune*, a lot of it in the form of monologues and dialogues. Soon she quits dancing school, and becomes *Vanity Fair's* drama critic; she dishes Ibsen,

especially *Hedda Gabler*; and after trashing *Ziegfield's Follies* and Billie Burke (Ziegfield's wife), she discovers the joys of free-lancing.

Dorothy hooks up (not in the modern sense) with the satirist Robert Benchley, whose sense of humor is just as dark as hers; they become tight literary colleagues. She hooks up (this time, *in* the modern sense) with a nice New England boy, Edwin Bond Parker II, has to put up with anti-Semitic in-laws, but marries him anyway. Later, she claims she only did it so that she could ditch that "Rothschild" moniker. Eddie serves with Ernest Hemingway, e.e. cummings, and others in the pacifist Ambulance Corps during World War I. Already a professional drinker, his brief visits "on leave" with Dorothy are less than idyllic.

Dorothy's best jokes, it is said, were at her own and at women's expense. At any rate, they were often too amusing to make it to print in those days – "Wasn't the Yale Prom wonderful? If all the girls there were laid end to end, I wouldn't be at all surprised!" – "You may lead a horticulture, but you can't make her think." – "They're playing *ducking* for apples? There, but for a typographical error, is the story of my life . . ."

After the war, Dorothy starts frequenting the Algonquin for lunch with the literary lights of New York, where the "Roundtable" was attended by aficionados of the fine art of putting cigarettes out in each other's eyes. Eddie can't keep up with the verbal darts, and Dorothy can't keep up with Eddie's drinking; Eddie splits. Dorothy indulges in a series of affairs when not cooking up new and exotic ways to commit suicide. At one point she decorates the wall of her office with covers of magazines from the funeral home industry. She favors the 'cologne' endorsed by nine out of ten undertakers...for their corpses.

Here We Are comes seven years after Parker finally divorced Eddie, after sixteen years as an acid-penned humorist, numerous affairs, several suicide attempts, and one abortion (which, one year after *Here We Are*, became the subject of her monologue, "Lady with a Lamp"). On the surface, *Here We Are* can be read as a hilarious demonstration of the oldest oral method of birth control, cooking up arguments. Behind it, of course, lies the fact that most girls had *no idea* what was expected of them as wives, how they were expected to do it, or where and for how long, while men were expected to have been around the bend a few

times, sometimes with the “social diseases” to prove it. Margaret Sanger was still fighting the designation of birth control pamphlets as pornography, after all.

Eulalie Spence (*Hot Stuff*)

Born in the British West Indies in 1894, Eulalie Spence’s family immigrated to New York after their sugar plantation was wiped out by a hurricane. Living first in Harlem, the Spences eventually settled in Brooklyn. Her mother prized education and would read to Eulalie and her siblings regularly, but both Spence’s parents struggled to make ends meet, having the added disadvantage of being West Indian blacks.

By 1914, after graduating from High School and studying at the New York Training School for Teachers, Spence was hired to teach English and Elocution at Eastern District High School in Brooklyn. She had spent over a decade of teaching and writing little skits when she met W. E. B. DuBois and became involved in the black theatre movement in Harlem. DuBois’ company, The Krigwa Players, based at the Harlem Public Library, produced her plays and Spence won a series of prizes at drama contests, including those sponsored by *Crisis*, the NAACP magazine edited by DuBois. One of her plays, *Fool’s Errand*, even won the Samuel French Prize at the National Little Theatre Tournament in 1927.

Although he famously articulated the vision of black theatre as being “About us, by us, for us, & near us,” and formed the Krigwa Players to set an example for black theatre companies nationwide, DuBois also believed that black drama should be explicitly political: “All Art is propaganda,” he declared. *Crisis*, under his editorship, included anti-lynching reports and news from Pan-African congresses (Marcus Garvey was active during this period). But the magazine also featured stories, poems, baby pictures, wedding announcements, etc., seeking to attract a broader readership. Spence can be seen as addressing the broader spectrum of *Crisis’* readers; she chose to define herself as a “folk” dramatist, more interested in creating well-crafted plays about contemporary black life. In her article “A Criticism of the Negro Drama,” Spence insisted that plays obey the rules of dramatic form, not a political agenda: “To every art its form . . . and to the play, the

technique that belongs to it.” Her gift for comedy is also reflected in another dictum of hers, “A little more laughter, if you please, and fewer spirituals!” Spence lampooned “church ladies” just as readily as anyone else.

Given the reputation political plays have (then and now) of being pompous and poorly written, Spence’s refusal to write “Race Plays” in DuBois’ preferred style was understandable. But the impact of racial discrimination was never far from the surface of Spence’s plays and her characters, however amusing, can still be read as a subtle indictment of the racism and economic deprivation blacks faced in 1920’s America. Spence went on to earn Bachelor’s and Master’s degrees in the late 1930’s.

Spence wrote a companion play the same year as *Hot Stuff*, “The Hunch,” in which the numbers are a major plot element. Characters discuss their dreams – and the numbers those dreams imply for betting purposes (before Freud, dreams were a money-maker!). A central character hits the numbers 2-7-1 in their correct order, and actually collects on his bets (his bookie is more honest than Fanny in *Hot Stuff*). The number for the day is even written on the sidewalk, to make sure everyone knows it.

Rita Wellman (*For All Time*)

Born in Washington, D.C. in 1890, Rita Wellman studied at the Philadelphia Academy of Fine Arts and enjoyed a long career as a professional writer and translator. Although little is known of her personal life, education and influences, she had a remarkable breadth of interests as a writer. After marrying Edgar O. Leo, Wellman adopted a variety of *noms de plumes*, from “Rita Leo” to “Rita Edgar” and in between. Because of her multiple literary *personae* scholars, are still trying to assemble her work, which remains scattered in various collections.

Wellman joined the Provincetown Players in 1917 at a critical period in the company’s development, during the national debate and eventual vote in favor of U.S. entry into World War I. Like society at large, the

Provincetown company was deeply divided on the issue; after the war they produced Edna St. Vincent Millay's anti-war classic *Aria da Capo*; but before the US joined the fighting they had also staged Eugene O'Neill's *The Sniper*, which echoed pro-war propaganda about German atrocities allegedly committed in Belgium. (Ironically, W.W.I's anti-German propaganda was extreme, while W.W.II propaganda underestimated the extent of the Holocaust until it was too late). One Provincetown actress served as a nurse overseas, and died there.

A series of plays from this period reflect Wellman's keen eye for bohemian life in Greenwich Village and her ability to write about the war from a variety of perspectives. *Barbarians*, staged by Provincetown in February 1917 as part of their "War Bill," borrows elements from Shaw and Chekhov in depicting the excitement of three young women when enemy soldiers come to their town (when they arrive, they're actually quite shy and dull). Other plays lampoon sexual infidelities, and the nuttiness of some well-traveled independent women in her circle. Wellman also wrote about the devastation of the war from a European perspective: *For Fireside* (1917) features a soldier who returns home to discover that his wife has been forced by poverty into prostitution.

For All Time, completed after the Armistice, was inspired by an essay by Maurice Maeterlinck, who is recognized today as one of the most important dramatists of the Symbolist movement. Maeterlinck wrote mystical, sacred dramas, and productions of his work experimented with medieval-style staging techniques (intoning dialogue with Gregorian chant, etc.). By the late teens and early 1920's, Symbolism had gone mainstream with Austrian director Max Reinhardt's production of *The Miracle* drawing massive crowds all over Europe. (*The Miracle*, based on Maeterlinck's play *Sister Beatrice*, opened in New York in 1924 to rave reviews). In harmony with Maeterlinck's approach, Wellman's characters do not dwell so much on the brutal facts of Maurice's death; instead, there is an emphasis on the spiritual devastation his death has caused, the competition for 'ownership' of his soul, and the comfort of his mystical, spiritual presence in the household.