



A Critical Introduction to Twentieth-Century American Drama: Volume 1, 1900-1940

By C. W. E. Bigsby

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This is the first of two volumes in which Christopher Bigsby offers extended critical readings of the work of the leading dramatists and theatre groups in twentieth-century America. In this century drama has emerged as one of the most exciting expressions of American creativity, and during the 1930s became a primary means of addressing the cultural, political and economic changes of the period. But it has received surprisingly little attention. This is a chronological and selective study related to American culture as a whole and providing a picture of a vigorous theatre in the process of discovering its own special strengths. Volume 1 begins with the companies who first broke away from the stifling world of melodrama and naturalism - the Provincetown and Washington Square Players. Christopher Bigsby describes the emergence of important individuals and companies throughout the period to 1940, giving extended critical accounts of some playwrights, particularly Eugene O'Neill, Elmer Rice, Clifford Odets. Thornton Wilder and Lillian Hellman, and distinguishing between the aims and policies of the various companies, including the Theatre Guild and the Group Theatre. The development of left-wing theatre from 1914 is separately discussed, followed by a chapter on the brief flowering of the Federal Theatre which popularised theatre for a mass audience via its successful Living Newspaper productions. A chapter on black drama includes works by and about black Americans during this period. Some of the important figures and productions are illustrated, and there are useful appendices listing performances by major theatre companies.

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