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## WESTERN EUROPE

To represent avant-garde drama in Western Europe as a linear genealogy is problematic. The influences and alliances of artists and movements in Western Europe's avant-garde drama and theater constitute a complicated and intertwined web of influence. Artists traveled widely throughout Western and Eastern Europe and to the Americas, making national demarcations misleading at best. Yet nearly all of Europe's experimental drama written between 1890 and 1945 shares the perspective of a world in chaos or what expressionist playwright Gottfried Benn called "reality disintegration." Drama in the historical avant-garde followed several common (if not uniform) thematic trends, most notably the negation of faith in God and nonrepresentational language but also political and social revolution. Drawing on Sigmund Freud's theories of sexuality and dreams and cinema's fragmentation, avant-garde drama developed an aesthetic vernacular for articulating the transformations of the early 20th century that was expressly antirealistic.

### BEGINNINGS

These cultural, social, and political changes first emerged in NATURALISM and REALISM, which drew heavily on the theories of Charles Darwin and Freud and their secular, though entirely causal, explanations of the universe and humanity's role within it. In the wake of Friedrich Nietzsche's pronouncement "God is dead," HENRIK IBSEN, EMILE ZOLA, and AUGUST STRINDBERG attempted to make up for this loss of divinity by adapting scientific analysis and positivist explanations like those of August Comte and Social Darwinism (with all its racist and gendered implications) to the existing form of the well-made play. However, the "avant-garde," as conceived by French socialist Henri de Saint-Simon, sought to transform society through science and art. This term *avant-garde* (also translated as *avanguard*, or *vanguard*) was quickly absorbed into mid-19th-century political discourse, appearing in Karl Marx's *Communist Manifesto* (1848) and later in Vladimir Lenin's *What Is to Be Done?* (1902) and inspiring the experiments of Russians VSEVOLOD MEYERHOLD and Boris Yujanin and the German EPIC THEATER, first introduced by ERWIN PISCATOR and later adopted by BERTOLT BRECHT. In FRANCE, JACQUES COPEAU's Théâtre du Vieux-Colombier (what Piscator called "the true avant-garde of French theatre") sparked further political and social experimentation among French directors such as Charles Dullin, Louis Jouvet, and Georges Pitoeff, as well as Michael St. Denis and the London Theatre Studio. The political avant-garde became widely known as "agit-prop" (AGITATION-PROPAGANDA) and was briefly popular in American theater collectives.

Such utopian visions ultimately may prove less influential than the negation for which the avant-garde has more often been known. SYMBOLISM, for example, rejected scientific explanation in favor of fate, mysticism, and the supernatural. French symbolists like Charles Baudelaire, Villiers de l'Isle-Adam, Stéphane Mallarmé, and MAURICE MAETERLINCK wrote poetic

plays that increasingly turned inward, eventually favoring the CLOSET DRAMA over the public theater. Maeterlinck's titles echo the private world he sought to create in *The Intruder* (1890), *The Blind* (1890), and *Interior* (1894). OSCAR WILDE's *Salomé* (1892) exhibits the self-conscious autonomy that Mallarmé associates with art, and even Strindberg displays the influence of Maeterlinck in his later work. Following the symbolists, Strindberg rejected realistic representation in favor of dreams, ghosts, and mystical experience in plays such as *To DAMASCUS* (Parts I and II, 1898; Part III, 1900–1901), *A DREAM PLAY* (1901), and his chamber play *GHOST SONATA* (1907). In addition to such converts as Strindberg, French symbolism also ignited a parallel movement in Russia. Valery Briusov became a leading figure in Russian symbolism through plays like *The Earth* (1905) and *The Wayfarer* (1910), arguing against the realistic style of the MOSCOW ART THEATER.

It was between the diverse impulses of positivist social change and symbolist rumination that the avant-garde's most rambunctious experiments occurred. Although ALFRED JARRY's *Ubu Roi* (1896) first appeared in the symbolist Théâtre de l'Oeuvre, its aim was no less transformative than that of the political theater to follow. Like the military shock troops for whom the avant-garde was named, *Ubu Roi* was a calculated—and effective—attack on its bourgeois audience. In stark contrast to the symbolists' ruminations, Jarry's protagonist Père Ubu was a loud, boisterous assault on his audience's good taste, openly blaspheming God, usurping the fictional king of Poland, and flushing the nobility down a toilet. According to most accounts, the first word of the play, *merdre* (a slurring comparable to *shitre*, suggesting excrement), caused a riot such that the play abruptly stopped. As W. B. YEATS reflected on the performance, "After us the savage gods."

Such assaults on reason and morality have become virtually clichéd in the history of avant-garde drama, but their significance should not be underestimated. Following the example of Jarry's excrement-laden torch, subsequent avant-garde drama began to breach the barrier between actor and audience, fantasy and reality, art and life. Perhaps the best-known example of this in drama is LUIGI PIRANDELLO's *SIX CHARACTERS IN SEARCH OF AN AUTHOR* (1921), but he was by no means the first Italian to attack the easy divisions between art and life. Italian futurists had already begun using their audiences as unwitting (and unwilling) collaborators. Like Jarry, Italian futurist FILIPPO TOMMASO MARINETTI came to modernism through symbolism, founding the symbolist journal *Poesia* in 1905. As a symbolist, he wrote two full-length plays, *King Glutton* (1905), modeled on Jarry's *Ubu Roi*, and *Electric Dolls* (1909). Though avowedly symbolist in inspiration, the latter play marks the direction Marinetti would follow in FUTURISM. That same year, Marinetti wrote the first futurist manifesto, espousing the virtues of machines, speed, and war. As futurism developed in the years leading up to World War I, playwrights adopted the form of the

sintesi: extremely short, forceful plays designed to create the maximum effect with a minimum of language and time.

For futurism, language gave way to violent gesture, and their drama violated all previous definitions of a "play." Francesco Cangiullo's *sintesi Detonation* (1915), for example, raises the curtain, fires a gun, and lowers the curtain. Manifestos, a principal art form in futurism (and throughout avant-garde drama), quickly became combined with *sintesi*, as in Bruno Corra and Emilio Settemelli's *Dissonance* (1915). Corra's *Alternation of Character* (1915) signaled a formal end to cohesive character by creating a couple, each of whom changed with each line of dialogue. Following the Bolshevik Revolution in 1917, futurism quickly spread east to Russia. VLADIMIR MAYAKOVSKY'S *MYSTERY-BOUFFE* (1918), for example, has been called both the greatest Bolshevik and the greatest futurist drama.

Emerging in concurrence with futurism, German EXPRESSIONISM followed the internalizing impulses of symbolism but turned such interiorities outward, expressing the anguish of the modern psyche not in privately understood dreams but through the transformation of physical environments. Perhaps the first major work in German expressionism came from neither a playwright nor a German but from the Russian-born painter Wassily Kandinsky. In the same year that *Ubu Roi* premiered (1896), Kandinsky arrived in Munich to study painting. Beginning in 1908, he began painting expressionistic landscapes, and his first play, the visually inspired *Yellow Sound* (1909), would follow just a year later. His abstract plays clearly indicate his primary medium—*The Green Sound* (1909), *Black and White* (1909), and *Violet* (1911)—and his alliance to *Der Blaue Reiter* (*The Blue Rider*), an artistic group dedicated to the expression of the inner life of the artist.

#### DEVELOPMENTS FOLLOWING WORLD WAR I

As Europe edged ever closer to war, representations of this inner life became increasingly darker. Austrian painter OSKAR KOKOSCHKA wrote *Sphinx and Strawman: A Curiosity* (1907) and *Murderer, Hope of Women* (1909), a play that foreshadows the phenomenon of *Lüstmord* (sexual murder) in post-World War I painting and film. Plays like REINHARD SORGE'S *The Beggar* (1911) and GEORG KAISER'S *FROM MORNING TO MIDNIGHT* (1917) used episodic structure to depict characters engaged in seemingly endless, futile searches for meaning. Like the futurists, violent, aggressive language, often directed at women, became the vernacular for such plays as August Stramm's *Sancta Susanna* (1911), Gottfried Benn's *Ithaka* (1914), and WALTER HASENCLEVER'S *THE SON* (1916). Expressionist design became as important as dramatic structure, with exaggerated facial features, shadows, and costumes standing in for characters' distorted and disturbed interior sensibilities. Such internal distortions would eventually give way to actual horror in the world's first fully mechanized war and its assault on the sensibilities of Europe through trench warfare, machine guns, tanks, and bombs. Such morbid technology and its effect on a mechanized humanity were plainly evident in

plays like ERNST TOLLER'S *Machine Wreckers* (1922) and Bertolt Brecht's early works *DRUMS IN THE NIGHT* (1922), *Jungle of Cities* (1923), and *BAAL* (1923).

As World War I broke out in 1914, various threads of the avant-garde were beginning to coalesce in Zurich, SWITZERLAND. Although some avant-garde drama was written in ENGLAND—Wyndham Lewis's *Enemy of the Stars* (1914), for example—the high concentration of European artists escaping the war created a primary center for theatrical and artistic experiment. Drawing on symbolism, expressionism, and futurism, Hugo Ball, Emmy Hennings, Richard Huelsenbeck, Marcel Janco, Hans Arp, YVAN GOLL, and Tristan Tzara gathered at the Cabaret Voltaire in 1916 to create spontaneous performances and poetry readings they titled "DADA," a deliberately nonsensical title. As Dada progressed, it transcended expressionism and futurism, becoming its own unique entity, which has become known as "anti-art." Reacting against both the self-focused intensity of expressionism and the violent dehumanization of World War I, Dada plays became experiments in collisions of sounds and images. Dada produced few texts (Ball's *A Nativity Play* [1916] is more poetry than drama), but notable among them are Tristan Tzara's *The First Celestial Adventure of Mr. Antipyrine*, *Fire Extinguisher* (1917) and *The Gas Heart* (1920), Kurt Schwitters's *Dramatic Scene* (1919), Georges Ribemont-Desaignes's *The Mute Canary* (1919), André Breton and Philippe Soupault's *If You Please* (1920), and Francis Picabia's *No Performance* (*Relâche*, 1920). It is also worth noting that Dada and later SURREALISM included women artists, though hardly as equals. In addition to Hennings, sometimes playwright Mina Loy and photomontage artist Hannah Höch were included in Dada shows, and surrealism contained a number of women, though few playwrights.

In the years following World War I, Dada gave way to surrealism in France, although the details are debatable. Following Freud explicitly, Breton formally broke ranks in 1922, declaring the unconscious mind the primary source for artistic expression. In 1924, he published the *First Surrealist Manifesto*. Surrealism, a term first used by GUILLAUME APOLLINAIRE in his preface to *THE BREASTS OF TIRESIAS* (1917), denoted a nonrepresentational or heightened view of reality. It is generally accepted that such experiments were more successful in poetry and film than in live performance, but surrealists produced several noteworthy dramas, including JEAN COCTEAU'S *Parade* (1917) and *The Wedding on the Eiffel Tower* (1921), ROGER VITRAC'S *The Mysteries of Love* (written 1924; produced 1927) and *Victor, or The Children Take Over* (1928), and ANTONIN ARTAUD'S *Spurt of Blood* (1924).

Following his early experiments in surrealism and his expulsion from the Parisian group, Artaud crafted his Theater of Cruelty as a potent blend of dream theory, antiestablishment aggression, and orientalist impressions of Balinese theater. His *Theater and Its Double* (1938) became a seminal theatrical text for the 20th century. In SPAIN, novelist RAMÓN DEL VALLE INCLÁN

experimented with surrealist techniques in his *Farce of the True Spanish Queen* (1920), as did Miguel de Unamuno in his *Dream Shadows* (1931) FEDERICO GARCÍA LORCA borrowed heavily from surrealism in the second act of his otherwise naturalist *BLOOD WEDDING* (1933), and he devoted two plays to total experiment: *The Public* (1934–1936) and *Play Without a Title* (c. 1934).

In 1933, almost simultaneously, Western European dramatic experiment ceased. With Adolf Hitler's rise to power, artistic experiments like the Bauhaus in GERMANY abruptly closed. Many artists fled, some only to be confronted again in occupied France or fascist ITALY. In 1934, purging by the Communist Party had begun, and by 1941, Joseph Stalin would emerge as the undisputed head of the Soviet government, declaring SOCIALIST REALISM as the only acceptable dramatic form and imprisoning and executing avant-garde artists. The Spanish Civil War of 1936 would similarly claim the lives of playwrights, most famously Lorca. Though drama was profoundly changed by the mass destruction of World War II, the impact of the early avant-garde has continued to influence experimental and avant-garde drama around the world.

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Sarah Bay-Cheng

#### AWAKE AND SING!

In February 1935 *Awake and Sing!* established CLIFFORD ODETS as a powerful figure who could take on the problem of the Depression in a truly socially oriented drama with a strong impact on the sophisticated audiences of the commercial theater.

Odets's portrayal of the lower-middle-class Berger family struggling to hold together in a society crumbling around them

is a play lacking any semblance of a conventional plot. In its concept of ensemble acting, there is no central character around whom the action evolves; all on stage are of equal importance, receiving equal dramatic emphasis. There is no typical plot progression toward a climactic resolution of a critical issue or the solving of a problem. The "problem" is the Depression, and it affects everyone; there is no solution. In action and dialogue, and in the setting itself, the spectators are watching a scene that could take place in numberless homes in the city around them in which the empathetic response extends to every character without distinction. And everything that happens is the fault of everybody—the small group in the crowded New York apartment and the larger society outside. The emotions aroused in watching are genuine, completely uncontrived.

Throughout *Awake and Sing!* there is constant awareness of the individual private frustrations of the characters as they speak to each other or, quite often, as they talk past each other and seem, at times, to be conversing only with themselves. The result is a unique sense of observing reality, obviously carefully planned for dramatic effect but tremendously moving. Simultaneously, the audience develops sympathy and understanding in spite of some unthinking acts and even cruelty practiced by the family members.

It is impossible not to identify with twenty-two-year-old Ralph, who must sleep on the front room daybed and cannot afford to buy a pair of black and white shoes. We cannot fault the physically attractive twenty-six-year-old Hennie, whose strong will and independence have trapped her into a loveless forced marriage. There is genuine sympathy for the hapless Sam Feinschreiber, totally unaware that Hennie's child is not his. And it is impossible to condemn the maimed Moe Axelrod who can offer Hennie the love she deserves.

Equally successful in creating audience sympathies are the members of the family's older generation. Myron Berger, inept, unable to support the family, strives for a modicum of dignity. Old Jacob, the patriarch, reduced to a life of playing his Caruso records, sees a future only in terms of a Marxist society. Bessie, the actual head of this faltering household, may well arouse considerable audience antipathy for her dominating behavior, forcing Hennie's marriage and smashing Jacob's prized records among other things; not a monster, she is really the only effective force that keeps the family from breaking apart.

"Awake and sing, ye who dwell in the dust," says the prophet Isaiah. Ultimately, despite all, the play does heed these words and does look toward a better future, as Moe and Hennie flee with Ralph's blessing, while he, in a totally upbeat curtain speech, vows to carry on as urged by his deceased grandfather to do "what is in the heart." He stands tall in the doorway as Moe and Hennie depart and the curtain falls.

Possibly Odets's best play, and probably his best known, *Awake and Sing!* makes its social point not by overt condemnation and Far Left advocacy but by highly effective underplaying.