

# **RECALLING A CRITIC:**

**JOSEPH WOOD**

**KRUTCH'S DRAMA**

**REVIEWS FOR**

***THE NATION,***

**1924-1952**

*Lowell A. Fiet*



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In 1975 critic Robert Brustein wrote about the "deplorable state" of contemporary dramatic criticism in the United States: "There has been so much concern in recent years over the languishing health of the American theater that it may have escaped notice how the diagnosticians are ailing too—and may even be helping to infect the patient." The situation is paradoxical, for the U.S. theater is not languishing and in its diversity, decentralization, and commitment to new writers and artistic approaches is healthier than it has ever been. Yet the general impression remains pessimistic and, as Brustein correctly concluded, "The advances of the American stage are being written on water, and nobody is keeping an intelligent record of what has been achieved."<sup>1</sup>

The implications of Brustein's analysis are several. Intellectual journals such as *The Nation*, *The New Republic*, and *The New Leader*, once the bastions of penetrating critical thought on the nature and function of U.S. theater and drama, now give only very limited and sporadic coverage to theater arts. What studied criticism is available appears only in academic journals intended for specialized readership, while popular criticism has become more nearly promotional advertisement controlled by the few daily reviewers writing for *The New York Times*. Critics of the stature of George Jean Nathan, Stark Young, and Joseph Wood Krutch, to name only a few of the important journalistic critics of the first half of the century, are no longer defining drama's role in reflecting and interpreting broader social and intellectual movements. The result is

<sup>1</sup> "No Doctor in the House," *New Republic*, 13 September 1975, pp. 23-25.



that theater's contribution to contemporary U.S. culture has diminished significantly.

No immediate solution to the dilemma presented by Brustein seems apparent. However tracing the career of one important critic of the 1920s and 1930s might serve to refocus attention on the fundamental and necessary relationship between drama, criticism, and society. That critic—Joseph Wood Krutch (1893-1970)—was a writer of rare intellectual range and depth whose hundreds of reviews and articles for *The Nation* from 1924 to 1952 provide an excellent contrast between the critical attention then given to new and innovative playwrights and theater artists and the lack of such analysis for the impressive parallel achievements of the past decade.

In the early 1920s the theater assumed a stature never before accorded dramatic activity in the United States. The last years of the previous decade had witnessed the introduction of new production ideas and techniques and the staging of plays by serious young writers such as Eugene O'Neill by the Washington Square Players, the Provincetown Players, the Neighborhood Playhouse, and other "independent" theater organizations. The critical response was positive and writers for "little" magazines and journals undertook a campaign to gain respectability for artists and playwrights, cultivate a serious audience which had previously ignored the theater, and give the new drama a solid base of support within the intellectual community. George Jean Nathan, for example—co-editor with H.L. Mencken of *The Smart Set* and *The American Mercury*—was particularly effective in championing the works of O'Neill and other new writers.

Until 1924, however, no major critic who could combine the practical skills of a popular reviewer and the more expansive view of a theoretician had focused principally on the new native drama. In succeeding Ludwig Lewisohn as the drama critic for *The Nation* in 1924, Joseph Wood Krutch began to function as a *critical thinker* who, in over a quarter of a century of almost uninterrupted reviewing, evolved a theory of drama which defined the creative impulse informing the modern U.S. theater as a search for indigenous forms appropriate to the interpretation of modern social crises.

During the 1920s and 1930s Krutch worked among such distinguished colleagues as George Jean Nathan, Stark Young, and John Mason Brown. Yet a crucial difference set his reviews apart from those of his contemporaries. Krutch was an influential social essayist, literary critic, and scholar as well as a drama critic. His criticism found an extension in major theoretical essays such as *The Modern Temper* (1929) and *Experience and Art* (1932) which deal

with the relation of art and literature to the social, philosophical, and scientific developments which have shaped the course of twentieth-century culture. *The American Drama Since 1918* (1939/1957) and "Modernism" in *Modern Drama* (1953) demonstrated his ability to give more permanent form to his initial critical reactions. As a scholar he produced impressive critical biographies of Edgar Allan Poe, Samuel Johnson, and Henry David Thoreau, and in 1937 he accepted a position in the English Department at Columbia University, where in 1943 he succeeded George C. Odell as Brander Matthews Professor of Dramatic Literature.

After his retirement to Arizona in the early 1950s, Krutch gained additional distinction as a naturalist. Along with his studies of the natural phenomena of the Southwest, *The Measure of Man* (1954) and *Human Nature and the Human Condition* (1959), which involve incisive analyses of the contradictions between human values and technological growth, were products of this more reflective period. The diversity of Krutch's interests lent special strength and credence to his critical opinions, and fellow critic Brooks Atkinson has described the personal quality which united them:

To be surprised by the range of Krutch's accomplishments is to overlook his fundamental characteristic. He had a brilliant mind. He had a passion for ideas. He had phenomenal intellectual energy. He could cope with abstractions. Although his subjects were varied, he had a major theme: the relation of man to the universe. In the world of ideas, he was at home anywhere.<sup>2</sup>

Krutch's death in May 1970 brought to a close the career of a distinguished critic of drama, literature, and culture which had extended over five decades.

By 1924 Krutch had spent nearly a decade in New York, completed his Ph.D. in English literature at Columbia University, traveled extensively in Europe, published his first book, *Comedy and Conscience After the Restoration* (1924), and written numerous articles and book reviews for *The Nation* and other magazines. During that time he was also drawn to the new developments which had awakened intellectual interest in the U.S. theater. These early experiences focused Krutch's attention on a theme which remained consistent throughout his career as a critic: the maturation of native forms of tragedy and comedy.

<sup>2</sup> "The Many Worlds of Joseph Wood Krutch," *Saturday Review*, 25 July 1975, p. 17.



The most significant of Krutch's reviews to deal with the nature and possibility of creating a modern tragedy are those devoted to plays by Eugene O'Neill. He was fascinated with O'Neill's treatment of native experience: with the playwright's efforts to achieve character depth, emotional intensity, and tragic meaning in contemporary context. In reviewing *Desire Under the Elms* (1924), Krutch noted O'Neill's use of the rural New England setting to confine and magnify the action:

It is a story of human relationships become intolerably tense because intolerably close and limited, of possessive instinct grown inhumanly powerful because the opportunities for its gratification are so small, and of physical passion terribly destructive in the end because so long restrained by the sense of sin.<sup>3</sup>

Krutch's 1926 review of *The Great God Brown* also stressed O'Neill's exceptional ability to imbue dramatic action and characters with emotional magnitude. "Essentially," he wrote, "it is a tragedy of masks, the story of a group of people who even in their most intimate moments cannot bear to gaze for more than a few seconds at the naked faces of their companions...." But he found O'Neill too close to the subject matter to handle it objectively. Although the play contained "passions as authentic and as burning" as any ever recorded, the form was marred, the characters blurred, and the action incomplete.<sup>4</sup> Over a decade later in *The American Drama Since 1918*, Krutch concluded his assessment of *The Great God Brown*: "Hence the tragedy of Dion is fundamentally the incomplete tragedy of frustration, not the complete tragedy of fulfillment."<sup>5</sup>

Krutch continued to explore the nature of modern tragedy. Of the 1926 revival of O'Neill's *Beyond the Horizon* (1920), he wrote:

The fundamentals of tragedy are a protest and an adjustment. Its subject is some flaw in man or the universe; its task the generation of some mood by means of which this flaw and its consequences are made either acceptable or at least tolerable to the human spirit.... But though the Tragedy is timeless, the form which tragedies take varies with the age which creates them, and no spiritual epoch has realized itself until it has created its tragedy, stating the gravamen of its protest and the terms of its acceptance.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>3</sup> "God of the Stumps," *Nation*, 119 (26 November 1924), 578.

<sup>4</sup> "The Tragedy of Masks," *Nation*, 122 (10 February 1926), 164-65.

<sup>5</sup> *The American Drama Since 1918* (New York: Random House, 1939), p. 93.

<sup>6</sup> "A Note on Tragedy," *Nation*, 123 (15 December 1926), 646.

The review demonstrates the crystallization of his thoughts on tragic form, its function and possibility in a scientific age. By 1929 Krutch had sufficiently traversed the subject to make one of his most controversial and enduring critical statements. "The Tragic Fallacy," originally published as the fifth chapter of *The Modern Temper*, discusses the failure of the age of science to generate the sense of spiritual comfort and confidence which had made the great tragedies of earlier eras possible. The essay remains one of the only very few major theoretical statements on tragedy by U.S. writers.<sup>7</sup>

In O'Neill's early work (1920-26), Krutch identified the forging of a serious modern form with tragic implications in which the modern individual struggled against a hostile universe of scientific definition. *Marco Millions* (1928) and *Strange Interlude* (1928) were experimental works which further revealed the playwright's poetic imagination and ability to create actions of a large scope. However it was *Mourning Becomes Electra* (1931) that most impressed the critic. He first dealt with the form controlling the play, again noting the virtue of "largeness of conception" and "more than local or temporary significance...." The theatrical impact of the production as a means of revivifying the Greek story and translating it in comprehensible modern terms was then reconstructed. For Krutch the post-Civil War setting and Freudian character motivations did not so much modify as restore the impact of the *Oresteia*. By providing native cultural referents, the "height and depth of human passions" and the "grandeur and meanness of human deeds" became visible to the audience within the realms of their own experience and the history of the United States. The result was one of the modern theater's closest approaches to tragedy: "Perhaps no one knows what it means to be 'purged by pity and terror,' but for that very reason, perhaps, one returns to the phrase."<sup>8</sup>

Krutch saw the action of *Mourning Becomes Electra* as complete and fulfilled, its characters as complex and capable of personal magnitude and dignity, and its content as consistent with classical themes of adjustment and reconciliation. He also viewed the play from the wider perspective of other tragedies in the history of

<sup>7</sup> See *The Modern Temper* (1929; rpt. New York: Harcourt, 1956), pp. 79-97. "The Tragic Fallacy" also appears in *European Theories of the Drama*, eds. Barrett H. Clark and Henry Popkin, N. rev. ed. (New York: Crown, 1965), pp. 492-501; *Problems in Aesthetics*, ed. Morris Weitz (New York: Macmillan, 1959), pp. 594-607; *Tragedy: Vision and Form*, ed. Robert W. Corrigan (San Francisco: Chandler, 1965), pp. 271-83; and *Dramatic Theory and Criticism*, ed. Bernard F. Dukore (New York: Holt, Rinehart, 1974), pp. 868-80.

Also see Fiet, "The Tragic Fallacy Revisited," *Journal of Aesthetic Education*, Vol. 10, I (January 1976), 61-74, for a more complete discussion of the essay.

<sup>8</sup> "Our Electra," *Nation*, 133 (18 November 1931), 551-52.



Western drama. Thus in what he judged at the time of the play's original production as one of the modern theater's greatest accomplishments, Krutch also identified O'Neill's major weakness—a relative inability to create language appropriate to the scope of the action: "...when one does compare it with *Hamlet* or *Macbeth* one realizes that it does lack just one thing and that that thing is language...."<sup>9</sup>

The *Mourning Becomes Electra* review is exemplary of Krutch's ability to write popular criticism firmly grounded in intellectual tradition but not esoteric, studied yet highly accessible to the general reader. The format is "classical," even though the review reveals an unfortunate fact: like Shaw's miscalculated appraisal of Oscar Wilde's *The Importance of Being Earnest*, time would refute Krutch's opinion of *Mourning Becomes Electra*.

Krutch found *Ah, Wilderness!* (1933) and *Days Without End* (1934) to be digressions in O'Neill's attempt to forge a new tragic mode: the first, though masterful in its nostalgic and comic depiction of youth, lapsed into sentiment; whereas the second was a confused problem play which, like *The Great God Brown*, was deeply felt but suffered because the play's language was incapable of fully embodying those feelings.

The reviews of O'Neill's plays between 1924 and 1934 demonstrate the quality and intellectual integrity of Krutch's weekly critical writing. He recognized in O'Neill one of the twentieth century's most forceful playwrights and subjected his plays to searching critical analyses which recorded their strengths and weaknesses, immediate appeal, and promise of permanent artistic value. Furthermore Krutch seemed to write not only for regular readers of *The Nation* but for the playwright as well. After the failure of *Days Without End*, O'Neill abandoned the New York stage and, although writing continuously, did not submit a new play for production for over a decade. The productive critical friction which existed between the playwright and his "most respected" critic was broken.<sup>10</sup>

Elmer Rice, George Kelly, Sidney Howard, Laurence Stallings, Maxwell Anderson, Philip Barry, and S.N. Behrman were among the other playwrights of the 1920s who also received close critical attention in Krutch's reviews. The Stallings-Anderson *What Price Glory?* (1924) was the first play Krutch reviewed for *The Nation* and of it he wrote:

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>10</sup> See Arthur and Barbara Gelb, *O'Neill*, Rev. and enl. ed. (New York: Harper & Row, 1973), p. 412, for information on O'Neill's opinion of Krutch.

Keen intelligence, sweeping the field of memory, has seized upon the significant fact that dramatically the most important thing about war is not death and destruction but the way of life which it develops, that the great conflict just passed lasted long enough and drew into itself a sufficient number of men to develop a civilization or anti-civilization of its own, with a language, a philosophy, and a whole *kultur* as different from that of normal life as the *kultur* and philosophy of the Stone Age were different, and yet as adapted to the conditions of life as it was lived as ours.<sup>11</sup>

Thus Krutch's first review revealed another consistent theme: the relation of theater to social reality.

Realism began to dominate the serious U.S. drama in the early 1920s. Many of the realistic playwrights of the era—Kelly, Howard, Stallings—have been virtually forgotten. In an article written in 1933, Krutch looked back on the role played by writers such as Sidney Howard in bringing the U.S. theater into closer touch with the reality surrounding it. Howard was a primary example of "Writers who are intelligent without being 'intellectual' and artistic without being in any sense 'arty,'" and who received less critical attention than they deserved. According to Krutch, Howard had written some of the country's finest plays and was one of the playwrights most responsible for rescuing "the popular drama from that sentimentality which for some reason continued to be considered indispensable there long after it had disappeared from most serious writing in other forms."<sup>12</sup>

In a 1935 series of articles entitled "The Meaning of Modern Drama," Krutch traced realism in the U.S. theater to its European roots, especially to the Ibsenesque tradition of masking conflicts of ideals with realistic appearances. Part III, "The American Tradition" (*Nation*, 141, 18 September 1935) discusses not only the impact of Ibsen's social plays but the influence of Shavian drama on U.S. playwrights of the 1920s and early 1930s as well. He picked up the theme again several years later in *The American Drama Since 1918* but noted a distinctive difference between the European dramatist-ideologues and writers such as Elmer Rice, Sidney Howard, and S.N. Behrman, claiming their success depended on the ability

to carry on from the point where the exponent of new ideas leaves off, upon their ability to vivify such ideas in

<sup>11</sup> "Our Best War Play," *Nation*, 119 (24 September 1924), 317.

<sup>12</sup> "The Dramatic Variety of Sidney Howard," *Nation*, 137 (13 September 1933), 295.



terms of situation and character, to explore their meaning in terms of specific human lives.<sup>13</sup>

If the dramatists of the 1920s were less ideological than their European predecessors and mentors, in the 1930s the realistic form would be altered by playwrights who, reacting to the economic conditions brought about by the Depression, claimed a political bias for their work. Of these Clifford Odets was the most prominent. Krutch responded positively to *Awake and Sing* (1935), Odets' first major play, but his uncomplimentary review of the weaker and more ideological *Paradise Lost*, produced later that same year, provoked hostility from members of the Group Theater—the most important new theater organization of the 1930s and the group for which Odets wrote and acted.<sup>14</sup> Krutch's reviews of *Golden Boy* (1937) and *Rocket to the Moon* (1938) recorded the playwright's departure from the use of drama as a sociopolitical instrument and placed him firmly within the realistic tradition. The *Rocket to the Moon* review concentrated on Odets' ability to handle serious subject matter without sentimentality or romantic evasion: "Yet the intensity which makes the play at moments almost unbearable is responsible also for the fact that it is more than a tale of frustration and rises above mere realism toward the tragic level."<sup>15</sup>

Other new groups such as the Theater Union and the Federal Theater Project departed more radically from the realistic tradition, and the form of the U.S. drama began to change as new techniques were imported from Germany and Russia. During the 1920s both Eugene O'Neill and Elmer Rice had experimented with Expressionism. In the 1930s Expressionism was altered to better convey political themes. Krutch's temperament more naturally drew him to favor the organic unity inherent in dramatic realism over the fragmentation of action evident in the new analytical forms. Yet when plays such as German dramatist Bertolt Brecht's *The Three-Penny Opera* and *The Mother* were staged in New York in 1933 and 1935, his reaction was affirmative. Commenting on the "transmogrified version of *The Beggar's Opera*," he found that most other reviewers, in giving the play a "tepid reception," missed the point of the play's "deliberate dissonances," adding that this "brilliant work" was truly touching in "its morbid and mordant humor."<sup>16</sup>

<sup>13</sup> *The American Drama Since 1918*, p. 24.

<sup>14</sup> See Paul Strand and Harold Clurman, Letters to the Editors, concerning Krutch's Review of *Paradise Lost*, *Nation*, 142 (15 January 1936), 72-73.

<sup>15</sup> *Nation*, 147 (3 December 1938), 600-01.

<sup>16</sup> *Nation*, 136 (3 May 1933), 512.

Krutch's preparation to deal with the more politicized theater of the 1930s had come in 1928 when he traveled to Europe to report on the condition of Russian arts. His first stop was Germany and in "Piscator and the German Tradition" he described the techniques of the innovative German director Erwin Piscator. Piscator, in Krutch's account, treated the script as a mere scenario, while using "every mechanical and electrical device that modern stagecraft has developed" not as, "for instance, Reinhardt used them, for the purpose of creating a sustained illusion, but in order continually to surprise the audience with unexpected and grotesque effects...." The method eliminated monotony, but Krutch objected to the apparent lack of organic unity: "...Piscator never speaks the same artistic language for five minutes together."<sup>17</sup>

Krutch traveled from Berlin to Moscow where he wrote a series of articles entitled "The Season in Moscow." The first dealt with the social and artistic environment surrounding the Soviet theater. Although he found ideas on the nature and function of theater often varied, Krutch also asserted that "no one thinks of discussing it except in social terms." More interesting was the relation of new production techniques to content:

The methods of presentation are many and they are often both new and effective, but the subject matter, whether it be treated with the sober, rather old-fashioned realism of the Little Theater or the grotesque extravagance of Meyerhold, is essentially the same, and in the intention of the playwrights is nearer to that of nineteenth-century playwrights like Hauptman and Sudermann than it is to that of any other body of Western European drama with which it could be compared.<sup>18</sup>

Among Krutch's activities in Moscow was an interview with noted film director Sergei Eisenstein. Krutch wrote about both theater innovator Vsevolod Meyerhold and Eisenstein and the relation of their work to postrevolutionary society in his third Moscow essay, "Eisenstein and Lunacharsky":

To my mind [Eisenstein's] films are more impressive than his theories, and to assume that either he or a man like Meyerhold is truly representative of even the more extreme wing of the Russian masses is to forget the element of futuristic diletantism which plays so large a part in determining the attitude of both of them.... But

<sup>17</sup> *Nation*, 126 (6 June 1926), 643.

<sup>18</sup> "The Scene," *Nation*, 126 (13 June 1928), 664.



neither the one nor the other is so deep, so genuine, or so significant as are the tendencies which they parody, and to my mind at least one gets much nearer to the real meaning of the whole Russian phenomenon in such relatively naive plays as *The Humming of the Rails* than one does in these sophisticated attempts to translate the impulses there expressed into somewhat dilettantish terms.<sup>19</sup>

Krutch again referred to such technical advances as Constructivist settings, platform staging, and the use of filmic projections in his last essay from Moscow. These innovations, according to Krutch, were indissolubly linked to the revolutionary culture out of which they emerged, and if moved to Berlin or New York the meaning of the Russian experiments would be dissipated: "Existing in a social void it would become, in spite of itself, merely 'art for art's sake': or, in other words, the very antithesis of what it was intended to be."<sup>20</sup> Krutch's stance on the use of such techniques in the U.S. theater of the 1930s frequently reflected that bias.

Four years after his trip to Russia Krutch wrote an essay which clarified his own views on theater's relation to society. "Drama as a Social Force" suggested that propagandistic drama is generally unsuccessful because writers fail to understand the "indirect rather than direct" way in which drama influences attitudes, opinions, and beliefs. "It changes our ideas when we do not know that they are being changed. Its attitudes gradually modify our attitudes, and we are convinced without knowing the playwright intended to convince us."<sup>21</sup>

Krutch's reviews and articles for *The Nation* frequently included vigorous discussions of acting, directing, and design as well as comments on more general production subjects ranging from a comparison of German and U.S. methods of actor training to the economic survival of the serious theater during the Depression to the long-range accomplishments of groups such as the Theater Guild. Although he did not follow a formalized performance theory, Krutch's ideas on practical theater arts were based mainly on the work of realists such as Russian actor and director Constantin Stanislavsky but tempered by the successful introduction of the New Stagecraft in the United States by designers such as Robert Edmond Jones and Lee Simonson. He saw production as the natural and necessary extension of the dramatic text; that is, performance must

<sup>19</sup> *Nation*, 126 (27 June 1928), 717. Anatoly Lunacharsky was the Russian Minister of Education when Krutch visited Russia in 1928.

<sup>20</sup> "Mise en Scène," *Nation*, 127 (11 July 1928), 41.

<sup>21</sup> *Nation*, 134 (20 April 1932), 468.

arise organically and unobtrusively from the script and not be imposed upon it.

Examples best serve to illustrate the approach. Krutch's December 1924 review of the Neighborhood Playhouse's production of the anonymous Sanskrit play *The Little Clay Cart* praised the "suggestion of the serenely curved line of Eastern architecture" and the actors' ability to create "the exquisitely artificial intonation and gesture which produce the illusion of something simpler and more satisfactory than life." But for Krutch final credit was reserved for the play: "Yet no possible praise for [the actors'] work can obscure the fact that the soul of the beauty which they have produced lay dormant in the ancient text."<sup>22</sup> The artist's task in realizing the playwright's vision was also the focus of his review of the Theater Guild's 1928 production of O'Neill's *Marco Millions*. Krutch commented on Alfred Lunt's "finely shaded" performance which suggested "both the gradual aging of Marco and the all but hidden wistfulness which the blindness of his soul, dimly aware of things which it has never seen, generates in him." From Lunt's revelation of character he turned to the scenery designed by Lee Simonson:

He has solved the apparently unsolvable problem of suggesting the magnificent exoticism of the Orient by designing stage pictures of surpassing beauty which depend for their effect, not upon an effort to reproduce the scenes naturalistically, but upon their success in utilizing the artistic conventions of the various countries.... Mr. Simonson's subtlety is typical of the subtlety which marks the entire production and which makes it, indeed, one of the most notable things the Guild has done.<sup>23</sup>

In the 1920s Krutch found particular merit in the staging techniques utilized by noncommercial groups such as the Provincetown Players, the Theater Guild, and the Neighborhood Playhouse which sought out new writers and whose commitment to forging a native theater art had produced the most striking productions of the decade. In the 1930s he extended his appreciation to similar organizations such as the Group Theater, the Theater Union, and the Federal Theater Project which, although more politically oriented, were also characterized by a lack of commercial motive and maintained a view of theater as a serious art form capable of interpreting the events of the contemporary world.

<sup>22</sup> "Pure Theater," *Nation*, 119 (24 December 1924), 715.

<sup>23</sup> *Nation*, 126 (25 January 1928), 104-05.



The nature of Krutch's criticism for *The Nation* changed in 1937 when he accepted a teaching position at Columbia University. He remained the magazine's drama critic until 1953, but his reviews were less frequent and he no longer wrote extended essays on the state of U.S. theater and drama. New dramatists such as Lillian Hellman, William Saroyan, and Thornton Wilder who emerged during the late 1930s, the 1946 production of O'Neill's *The Iceman Cometh*, and productions of plays by Tennessee Williams and Arthur Miller in the late 1940s were among the important theater events to which Krutch gave particular attention in this less active period in his career as a reviewer.

In dealing with Hellman's *The Little Foxes* (1939), Krutch stressed the playwright's ability, following Ibsen's model, to make "disagreeable" subject matter tolerable, interesting, and intense through "vivid characterization."<sup>24</sup> His comments on Saroyan's *The Time of Your Life*, also produced in 1939, set the play against the troubled political world and prominent theories of the era:

The result is fantastic, but a world of eccentrics is a gayer sight than a world of robots, and one accepts [Saroyan's] mad universe gladly because one is so willing to believe that life is less dully predictable than the "scientific" psychologist or the "scientific" Marxian would have us believe.<sup>25</sup>

The review of Wilder's *The Skin of Our Teeth* (1942) is particularly interesting because it gave Krutch a chance to modify and refine an old theme:

Meyerhold and Piscator, putting their heads together in the late twenties, could hardly have done such violence to conventional dramatic form. And yet the whole wild project comes off with astonishing success.... One naturally wonders why Mr. Wilder has been so triumphantly successful with a method which has so seldom got beyond the "interesting experiment" stage—at least since Aristophanes, who did, after all, precede Meyerhold and the Federal Theater, last used it. Possibly one answer has something to do with the fact that Mr. Wilder has given it a more imaginative, less merely neurotic, tone than most of the Russian or German experimenters.<sup>26</sup>

<sup>24</sup> "Unpleasant Play," *Nation*, 126 (25 February 1939), 244.

<sup>25</sup> *Nation*, 149 (4 November 1939), 505-06.

<sup>26</sup> "As It Was in the Beginning," *Nation*, 155 (5 December 1942), 629.

World War II interrupted the work which had been started in the late 1930s; and the post-war era brought developments which overshadowed the plays of Hellman, Saroyan, and Wilder.

In spite of his twelve years of self-imposed isolation, Eugene O'Neill's creativity was not diminished. In 1939 he completed a play which has come to be regarded as one of his most substantial contributions to modern drama. While other critics compared *The Iceman Cometh* to Saroyan's *The Time of Your Life* and Gorki's *The Lower Depths*, Krutch felt that "in theme at least the more meaningful parallel is with *The Wild Duck* where the 'life illusion' is similarly presented as the shameful prop without which most men, at least, cannot stand." He also addressed those critics disillusioned by O'Neill's apparent lack of poetic facility:

A dozen playwrights can write plays sparkling with all the virtues that O'Neill never remotely suggests. But a reputation even grudgingly granted has already, in thirty years, been somewhat tested by time, and it has survived the absence of almost every secondary support. The uniqueness of O'Neill's position testifies to the uniqueness of his quality. His somber power continues to assert itself and cannot be dismissed.... Obviously to O'Neill the tragic sense of life is an overwhelming and ever present reality which envelops everything and beside which nothing else counts.<sup>27</sup>

The 1946 production of *The Iceman Cometh* was not well received, and it took another decade for the play's importance to be fully recognized.

Reviewing *A Streetcar Named Desire* (1947), Krutch wrote of Tennessee Williams as a highly subjective playwright communicating "emotions which have a special, personal significance"—"a certain haunting dream-like or nightmarish quality." But the playwright remained objective and "the break with reality is never made, and nothing happens which might not be an actual event."<sup>28</sup>

Krutch also shared in the critical enthusiasm over Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman* (1949), but not without reservations: "To me there is about the whole something prosy and pedestrian; a notable absence of new insight, fresh imagination, or individual sensibility." The necessary comparison to *A Streetcar Named Desire* was also made: *Death of a Salesman* seemed more "old-fashioned" whereas the Williams play "offers moments of new insight, and it

<sup>27</sup> *Nation*, 163 (26 October 1946), 481-82.

<sup>28</sup> *Nation*, 165 (29 December 1947), 686-87.



reveals, as *Death of a Salesman* does not, a unique sensibility as well as a gift for language, sometimes misused and precious, but increasingly effective as it is increasingly purified."<sup>29</sup>

*A Streetcar Named Desire* and *Death of a Salesman* were not the last plays Krutch reviewed for *The Nation* but they do signify a thematic closing to his career as a reviewer, a career which made him a preeminent critic in the U.S. theater and whose incisive analyses documented and reinforced the native drama's movement toward maturity. In October 1952 Krutch delivered a series of Messenger Lectures at Cornell University which later became "*Modernism in Modern Drama* (1953), his last extended statement on the modern drama. In that work, Miller and Williams, along with O'Neill, figured strongly in Krutch's reaffirmation of the artistic strength of native drama and its importance as a cultural force in U.S. society.

After Krutch's retirement to Arizona in the early 1950s, natural as opposed to artistic phenomena became his principal interest and he only rarely looked back on his past career or wrote about theater and drama. However one statement written in 1956 summarizes Krutch's basic belief in the cultural role of theater as a humanizing force. In "Theater: Cultural common denominator" he wrote:

Of all the instruments ever invented for communicating an artist's vision, the printed word is still the most versatile. Yet it cannot communicate everything as well as certain other instruments can. Especially it cannot create certain effects which only the acted drama can create. I am not for the moment thinking of what the actor and the *mise en scène* contribute. I am thinking rather of what the audience itself contributes by virtue of the very fact that it has gathered as a group to enjoy certain experiences which it is conscious of sharing with other human beings. For such an audience a play is more than the words a playwright wrote, and more than the life the performers give them. When we are part of such an audience we are participating not only in the play itself, but also in the reactions of the other members of the audience. It is impossible for us to feel isolated or alone. Our fellows are indeed our fellows just insofar as they are being moved at the same moment by the same emotions.... They are testifying to the fact that they not only belong to the human race but to a civilization which, beneath all its divisions and diversities, is united by modes of feeling and

<sup>29</sup> *Nation*, 168 (5 March 1949), 284.

standards of value more fundamental than any of the things over which it is divided. To do that is not only to enrich the life of that society. It is also to increase greatly its chances of survival.<sup>30</sup>

Robert Brustein's comments on the "deplorable state" of criticism in the 1970s aptly recall that the legacy left to the contemporary U.S. theater by critics like Joseph Wood Krutch remains unfulfilled. A respected social and literary critic as well as a play reviewer, for over two decades Krutch informed a liberal and knowledgeable public, provided an appropriate mirror for artistic achievements, and evaluated new plays and performance techniques as they reflected and helped shape social realities. He wrote about theater as a cultural instrument capable of characterizing the best as well as the flaws in national life, and he saw in native drama a means of providing the harmony needed in a heterogeneous society without common understandings and goals and so frequently in conflict with its own origins and ideals.

Receiving only limited intellectual ventilation and finding few critical mediators to effectively convey its intentions and accomplishments to potential audiences, the U.S. theater of the past decade has been isolated from such broad and knowledgeable outside comment. Important contemporary critics such as Eric Bentley, Harold Clurman, Robert Brustein, John Simon, and John Lahr have, at times, provided the kind of critical insight and assessments which were so eloquently made earlier in the century. But their ranks have dangerously withered as forums for serious criticism rapidly decrease in number.

I am not suggesting that contemporary critics return to Krutch's perspective or methods. Artistic and social changes have radically altered form and technique in the theater and make many of his opinions and assertions inappropriate to the analysis of new writers. What can be derived from Krutch's example, however, is the need to regenerate the crucial link between theater and society which he, and the other intellectual critics of his generation, so unrelentingly analyzed and reinforced. An accessible and intelligent record of what was accomplished in the theater during the Twenties, Thirties, and Forties was assembled.

In the past two decades the theater in the United States has developed an advanced capacity to address issues vital to the well-being and cultural health of the country itself. The more than forty "alternative" or counter-culture theaters such as The Bread and

<sup>30</sup> See *If You Don't Mind My Saying So...* (New York: Sloane, 1964), p. 262.



Puppet Theater, The San Francisco Mime Troupe, *Teatro Campesino*, and Little Flags Theater, the over fifty resident professional companies located throughout the country which have raised production quality and diversity to an unprecedented level, and writers such as Arthur Kopit, Imamu Amiri Baraka, Sam Shepard, David Rabe, Rochelle Owens, Ntozake Shange, and David Mamet, to name only a very few, testify to the strength and health of the contemporary theater. Without a mediating force, however, to expose, evaluate, and clarify its meaning, the theater's contribution to social and cultural process is diminished—alienated from the purpose it best serves.