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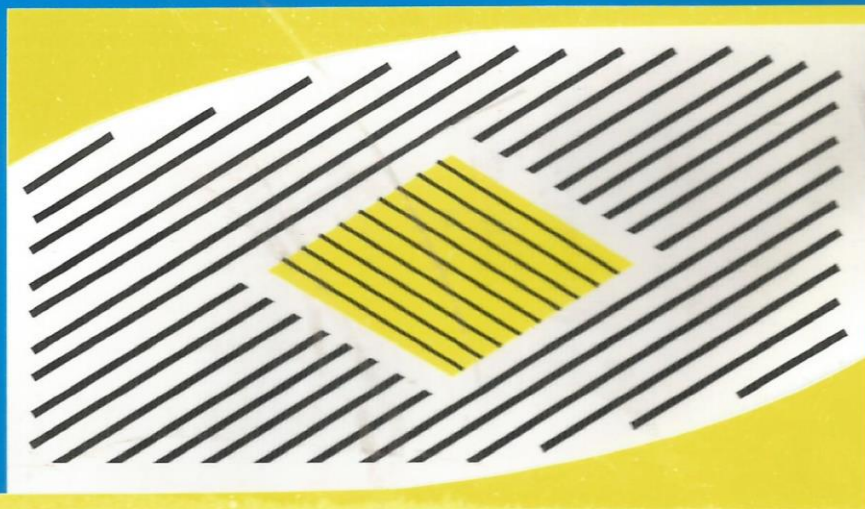


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***The Cult of Newness  
in Twentieth-Century American Theatre.\****

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**Introduction**

To deal with the American theatre is to talk about periods, schools, groups, figures, doings and undoings. Though it is not possible to talk about the whole American theatre, even within the confines of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, in a 'small talk' like the present one, I consider it possible to render a curt synopsis of its general trends and prominent figures, each pretending to be new, but each drawing to a close after a certain period of existence, and paving the stage for something new.

What is really particular about the American theatre in the 20<sup>th</sup> century? In fact, it is only in this century that the American theatre knew a brilliant and a new start; it ceased to be a show – only a spectacle – and became an art. In the preceding eras (18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> cc.), American theatre had not been well integrated in the national life as it had been the case for the arts of – let's say – the essay and of poetry. Such a decline of the dramatic art could be partly explained by the situation of the New World: America was discovering its lands, renewing its frontiers and exploring its dreamland. The whole country was in the process of building a new nation. Consequently, the art of entertainment had little place as compared to more urgent tasks. Besides, the Puritan mood with its mores and taboos had been undoubtedly representing a difficult – but not impossible – obstacle to the flourishing of the most social of dramatic arts.

At this stage, and before tackling 20<sup>th</sup> century American theatre, it seems essential to render some methodological clarification on the concept of newness, for the sake of a better understanding of its application on our subject.

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\* This article is based on a talk given at the multi-topic seminar, organized by the English Department in March 11<sup>th</sup> 1998. It was mostly intended to initiate students to modern American drama.

Conceivably, a quite important reason behind the cult of newness that marked the theatre in question might be closely connected to the concept of the American Dream. The success-worship impetus – that is the prominent facet of such a Dream – was surely behind a lot of theatrical attempts to bring about something new. But this reason, undoubtedly common to other fields in American life at large, wears thin when we take into consideration the whole theatrical adventure from start to finish (is there any ‘finish’ at all?), and when we bear in mind that the very glory of mammon was under harsh criticism in many dramatic works. It seems that other incentives, deeper ones, are showing through, as in filigrane, to give a sufficient explanation to the urge of newness in modern American theatre.

In his pertinent discussion of the myth of newness, Mircea Eliade dwells upon details on rites and practices of the different tribes and people in different parts of the world, and comes out with the conclusion that, in such attempts of renewal, the main belief is that:

*‘the World should be annually renewed, and that such renewal is operated according to a **model**. (...) But there is always the idea of a **cycle**. That is, a temporal duration with a beginning and an end’.*<sup>1</sup>

In this quotation, the words ‘model’ and ‘cycle’ take on a considerable importance and are highly pertinent to our subject. Since the lifespan of a theatrical group, a playwright’s career, or a dramatic trend can not be measured by years, but rather by decades and scores, the beginning of each decade in 20<sup>th</sup>-century America marked, in fact, a new ‘cycle’ and an opportunity to suggest a new ‘model.’ The turn of the century was even a bigger opportunity. But behind every new model, and at the outset of each new cycle, there was – there is – a “regenerative impulse,”<sup>2</sup> so intrinsic in any American literary endeavor, and so inherent in all the domains of American life. The will to change was constantly triggered by the succeeding events or the intermittent circumstances (political, social, or economic) in an attempt to adjust to the new climates, to transcend them, or even to escape them.

Accordingly, the cult of newness stands clearly behind the division of the 20<sup>th</sup> century into clear-cut decades – especially in the first half of the century. Seen from this synchronic perspective, each ‘theatrical’ period was conveying a

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<sup>1</sup> Mircea Eliade, *Aspects du mythe*. Paris: Gallimard, NRF, 1963, p. 58. The French text is as follows: “... le Monde doit être annuellement renouvelé et que ce renouvellement s’opère selon un **modèle**. (...) Mais il s’agit toujours d’un **cycle**, c’est-à-dire d’une durée temporelle qui a un commencement et une fin. » In both quotations, the bold type is mine.

<sup>2</sup> Charles Carpenter, “American Drama : A Bibliographical Essay,” *American Studies International*. Oct. 1983, vol. 12, N° 5, p. 1.

particular development and representing a new step in the course of this art. It follows that this part of the century can be perceived as being roughly divided into three distinctive periods:

- 1- Before the 1920s
- 2- The Jazzy Age and the Theatre Guild (the 1920s)
- 3- The Fervent Years (1930s)

But as far as the second half of the century is concerned, the emergence and the prominence of new elements and phenomena necessitate a different classification for an appropriate approach and a better appreciation. Accordingly, this theatre can more appropriately be dealt with under the following classification:

- 1- The theatre of figures (1945-1960)
- 2- Performance schools (The 1960s and 1970s.)
- 3- The 1980s and 1990s : Decentralization of theatre

This time-sequence classification is not wholly inescapable, but it seems highly profitable for the understanding of this theatre, without disregarding or underestimating the possible overlapping of periods, schools and theatrical experiments. Such is the particularity of this social art.

## **1. Theatrical Decades**

### **1. 1. Before the 1920s**

In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the audience in little towns, between the two oceans, applauded little theatrical performances of itinerary troupes only because these had been applauded by big cities such as Philadelphia, New York or Boston. The dramatic works were mainly written by European playwrights, and the short visits of some European artists played an important role in disseminating a more urgent taste for continental forms of theatre, and had a considerable effect on pre-20<sup>th</sup> c. American theatre. Yet, there were no American playwrights who could be compared to their preceding men of literature in this country, such as Hawthorne, Emerson and Whitman (to name only three of many.)

Theatrical conditions in the U.S. were even less conducive to the creation of durable plays in the decades before Eugene O'Neill. Accordingly, and by the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the American theatre was still reflecting and echoing the European forms and issues of theatre. Nevertheless, the turn of the century is also known as the 'age of realism,' thanks to playwrights and playwright-directors as August Daly, David Belasco and James A. Herne (known as the American Ibsen.) A more serious and adult theatre began with the poet-dramatist Vaughan Moody and his play *The Great Divide* (1906). But these were just preliminaries to an era of flourishing drama and playwriting.

At the beginning of the second decade, there was a growing prosperity of industry and commerce, and a substantial rise of the standards of living in little towns of agricultural states. The new climate conduced to new forms of entertainment for a certain part of the population and saw the emergence – by 1912 – of what was to be known as the ‘little theatres.’ These small theatrical groups of amateurs were inclined to stage and try out a **new** kind of plays, the shorter and simpler the better. Worth mentioning, in this respect, are groups like the Washington Square Players (1914) and the Provincetown Players (1915). The latter performed O’Neill’s *Bound East for Cardiff* in 1916. This, indeed, marked the beginning of a remarkable era in the theatre of this country. This new departure generated new themes taken from the field of social problems and psychoanalysis, and gave birth to styles related to expressionism and radical realism.<sup>3</sup> Another interesting new factor that affected deeply the theatre of this period – and even the succeeding periods – was the opening of ‘Dramatic Arts’ Departments in the American Universities since 1913. Such Departments formed actors, critics and even authors. They prepared technicians in laboratories, where decorators, stagehands, sound and lighting agents could learn their arts. Other actors and agents preferred to learn them inside troupes and amateurs groups.

Eugene O’Neill, as the first representative of the American theatre, did a great deal to establish the modes of theatre for the succeeding generations in the United States. His work illustrates one of the main trends in modern American drama; one of its conspicuous features is what Marcus Cunliffe calls ‘the combination of drab prose realism and of boldly inventive expressionist technique.’<sup>4</sup> This clearly accounts for the psychological depth which marks characterization in all his plays.

On the whole, the American theatre – in these two decades – was still relying on the long-established conventions of the dramatic art. Slowly, however, it echoed the new trends of the European Continent and responded to the influence of such dramatists as Ibsen, Strindberg, Hauptman, and Shaw. But things began to change on a quicker scale in the next decade: the ‘Jazzy Age’, or the 1920s in America.

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<sup>3</sup> Heinrich Straumann, *American Literature in the Twentieth Century*. London: Hutchinson’s University Library, 1951, p. 161.

<sup>4</sup> Marcus Cunliffe, *The Literature of the United States*. Harmondsworth (England): Penguin Books Ltd., 1971, p. 437.

## 1. 2. The Jazzy Age and the Theatre Guild

Constricted between the First War, at the beginning, and the Depression, at the end, the carefree, prospering 1920s stand as an isolated decade in twentieth-century America. Some even considered it as the beginning of “modern era,” the real emergence of the consumer society and of mass culture in America.<sup>5</sup> Others proved through an analogy with the past that the country was ‘owing to its wealth, the United States was due for a renaissance of art and culture.’<sup>6</sup> One of the cultural manifestations, Jazz music, and the Prohibition, as a socio-economic phenomenon, undoubtedly stamped the 1920s in America with unmistakable features, and forever. Another cultural and artistic phenomenon of the period was theatre.

The First War highly contributed to liberate the American stage from its regionalism and opened it to the European forms of theatre and drama. This partly explains why the 1920s were, on the literary level, marked and affected by Chekhov’s naturalism, Strindberg’s Expressionism and Ibsen’s realism. It’s as though American playwrights wanted to establish an Ibsen-like psychological and visual realism, instead of the ‘spectacle’ theatricality that dominated the American theatre so far. But they also wanted to show that they could create a homemade theatre, using American materials: language, situations, settings, characters and issues.

The social factor is not to be underestimated: The progress in Secondary and University instruction, and the access to study for a larger part of the American population – which had known a certain stability – gave gradually way to the emergence of a new audience, more intelligent, more exacting (hard to please) and, above all, more open-minded. The mass of schools, troupes, international dramatists and national playwrights gave birth to many spectacles, which were diversified to answer the demands of different and growing audiences. The new taste for theatrical spectacles accounted for, at least, three consequential phenomena: the construction of new theatres, the emergence of the 'Star System' in Hollywood and Broadway, and the activity of *Off-Broadway* theatre. Only one thing was missing: a method of theatrical acting; it was the Moscow Art Theatre which inoculated, in 1923, the American theatre with the Stanislavski virus.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Sylvie Le Bars, *The American Twenties (1918-1928)*. Rennes: Presses Universitaires de Rennes, 1993, p. 5.

<sup>6</sup> Harold Clurman, *The Fervent Years. The Group Theatre and the 30's*. New York: Da Capo Press, 1983, p. 3.

<sup>7</sup> Franck Jotterand, *Le Nouveau théâtre Américain*. Paris : Editions du Seuil, pp. 13-14.

Among the figures of this era, Maxwell Anderson experienced in social comedies, social protest, character problem plays and even in tragedies in classical form. Elmer Rice is well remembered for his experimental play, *The Adding Machine* (1924), in which some characters are symbolically given 'digital' names; there is Mr. Zero and his friends Mr. and Messrs. One, Two, Three, Four, Five, Six, and their respective wives. This expressionist handling was intended to show man as a cipher in the wheel of big Business. John Howard Lawson is also worth mentioning in this context. But all these playwrights were less important than Eugene O'Neill, who was exploring an inexhaustible talent. He became in fact the spokesman of the 1920s. Each of his plays was a new experiment in form, but with a growing emphasis on the psychological analysis and the symbolic representation of character. As for theatrical groups of this period, most of them staged plays of famous European playwrights. The Civic Repertory Theatre, the New York Theater, and the Theatre Guild hosted works of playwrights such as Ibsen, Chekhov, Kaiser, Pirandello, and Giraudoux. But the Theatre Guild – founded in 1919 – was, by far, the most active one, with its large repertory of national and international plays. From this European rich heritage, staged by the American groups, 'the new American playwrights took what they wanted to fashion their individual styles.'<sup>8</sup>

However, such groups could not incarnate real schools, qualified to engender real actors or playwrights. They were like business firms – in this time of Success –, 'concerned solely with marketing their products.'<sup>9</sup> So, by the end of the 1920s, expressionist techniques were modified by the Depression years.

### 1. 3. The Fervent Years

The Fervent Years, the Depression, the Black Years, the Red Decade, or even the Leftist Decade are some of the epithets used – or, at times, misused – to design the particular 1930s in America. After the economic crisis of 1929, the harsh reality of the Great Depression acted as a cataclysm which shook most of the American playwrights. This was no time for comedy, nor for mere artistic experiment with symbolism and expressionism, nor for detached Freudian speculation about the individual and his neuroses.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Robert Warnock, *Representative Modern Plays*. Chicago: Scott, Foresman and Company, 1952, p. 7.

<sup>9</sup> Clurman, *Op. Cit.*, 1983, p. 23.

<sup>10</sup> Robert Warnock, *Representative Modern Plays*, p. 11.



The 1920s became a dream, remembered at first with bitterness for their irresponsibility and recklessness and only recently with an affectionate nostalgia for that marvelous Jazzy Age. The 1930s were rather a time of social protest, and for the young playwrights it was a time of commitment. ‘*What’s the use of writing pretty novels about ladies and gentlemen?*’<sup>11</sup> cried Clifford Odets, one of the emblematic figures of the time. Theatre was responding to the difficult economic and social situation by tackling social problems and trying to give the American society remedies of hope and pride. Thus, almost all intellectuals and playwrights were deeply committed to this cause, in a way or another; the others were either silent or living in an ivory tower. Many playwrights opted for more or less communist or leftist solutions. Some of them imported not only social and revolutionary ideas from Russia, but even a new method of acting. The Stanislavski System – the professional training of an actor – was highly praised and widely practiced on the American stage. This was literally and actually conquered by a host of actors and a galaxy of groups. Apart from Broadway, which had always been the home of musical comedies – a very American form – the other groups were mainly ‘agit-prop’\* or left-wing ones. The list is very long; yet, we can not fuse them all in the same melting pot.

There was first the already existing groups of the twenties such as the Theatre Guild, the Provincetown Players, and the New Playwrights' Group. Then, there were others which came to existence after the crash, and which better represented the Depression theatre. Along this line worked groups such as the Theatre Union, the Federal Theatre Project, the Labor Stage, the Theatre of Action, and the Group Theatre.

Most of these groups and theatre people laid great stress on theatricality, and more particularly on the ‘ensemble system’ and the techniques of acting and performance. The bare text, even while being a deeply committed one, had no intrinsic value unless it was cried out on the stage with raised fists. ‘Strike! Strike! Strike!’ were the last cries in Odets’ *Waiting for Lefty*, and were also the last cries of the audience! In most cases there was no frontier –visible or invisible– between the public and the actors on the stage.

In playwrighting, the three leading figures of this Depression theatre were Sidney Kingsley, Lillian Hellman and Clifford Odets. The latter was hailed by the

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<sup>11</sup> Frederick Lewis Allen, *Since Yesterday: The Thirties in America, September 3<sup>rd</sup> 1929 – September 3<sup>rd</sup> 1939*. New York: Perennial Library, Harper & Row Publishers, 1972, p. 203.

\* **Agitation and Propaganda.**

press as ‘Revolution’s Number One Boy.’<sup>12</sup> Indeed, all the playwrights were fired by a new social conscience and brought to light the poverty of the under-privileged and the growing social unrest in America through this era.

When this fervent decade drew to a close, some inner and external changes took place and affected the American theatre. The rise of Nazism and Fascism, the Spanish War (1936) and the booming of the cinema – which had been speaking since 1927 – all influenced the theatrical stage and the themes of American drama. Even censorship had its share in affecting the theatrical issues and spectacles. Most of the playwrights who could live up the changes severed their connections with the Depression theatre and came to the realistic conclusion that they had to try something new. Moreover, a great part of the theatrical production of this socially committed period was shadowed and, unfortunately, attacked by the Cold War atmosphere. Both this and the Second War created new situations, brought out new emotions, new visions and new ideas.

## 2. Post-War Theatre

### 2.1. The Theatre of Figures (1945-1960)

Under this denomination, ‘the theatre of figures’, we point out to the different playwrights whose works represented a particular trend in theatrical writing. Even though they found themselves writing for a nation still coping with the aftermath of Second World War, such playwrights managed to adjust their genius to the given conditions, and thus to new ways of playwriting, yet without veering away from their specificity as individual talents.

During the Second War, theatre, like the other kinds of institutions and industry (the cinema and the war industry), had been active because people, in that frenetic atmosphere, looked for moments of entertainment to forget – even momentarily – about the atrocities and nightmarish images of the war. A critic of the time expressed this mood with so pungent a tone:

*“Our theater is as tired as the postwar world in general, and audiences at the moment clamor for a comedy of escape – even second-rate comedy rather than too close a scrutiny of the harsh realities of the present.”*<sup>13</sup>

The audience gave less attention to *war plays* and more importance to comedies and plays related to family life and the American way of life. But the subsequent

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<sup>12</sup> John Mc Carten, "Revolution's Number One Boy." *The New Yorker*, Jan. 22, 1938, pp. 21-27.

<sup>13</sup> Warnock, *Op. cit.*, 1958, p. 16.

years (between 1945 and 1960) were considered as the richest era in American theatre and drama. The theatrical activities and productions that came into existence in that lapse of time, and the corpus of plays written then were clear evidence of the richness of the American theatre and the ability of its playwrights to resist the big events of history and even to take some advantage of them. Such activities and figures can be summarized in the following points.

### **2.1.1. O'Neill's Last Plays:**

The era witnessed first the performance of O'Neill's last plays: *The Iceman Cometh*, *Long Day's Journey into Night*, *A Touch of the Poet*, and *Hughie*. Such plays, which represent, in fact, the culmination of O'Neill's talent, were performed in this period. Among the striking characteristic of such plays is the unusual length of their stage directions. The growing importance of performance-consciousness of playwrights was behind the technique of loading the theatrical text with lengthy stage directions, giving full details and clues to the manners of acting, both at the linguistic, the physical, and the emotional levels.

The other new element that O'Neill so vehemently advocated through his plays is what Miller calls 'the tragedy of the common man.'<sup>14</sup> Together with the other figures of modern American theater – Miller and Williams –, he managed to delineate the tragedy of the modern common man, be it a salesman, an iceman, or any ordinary member of society.

### **2.1.2. Arthur Miller and Tennessee Williams:**

The first plays of these most productive playwrights in the twentieth century – after O'Neill – were also written and performed in these years. Tennessee Williams began an extraordinary career with *The Glass Menagerie* (1945), a play in which realism is freckled with poetic and symbolic touches. Since the *glass* menagerie is partly a reflection of memory, the play assumes at the same time realistic and non-realistic, poetic aspects.<sup>15</sup> Then a long list of masterpieces followed, each representing a new experiment in what came to be called Williams' poetic realism. The new element in Williams dramatic work is his contribution to the Southern Renaissance that was affected by other novelists such as Faulkner, Wolfe, Caldwell, McCullers, Capote and others.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Edwin Wilson, *The Theater Experience*. New York: McGraw-Hill Publishing Company, 1991, p. 264.

<sup>15</sup> Tennessee Williams, *Sweet Bird of Youth. A Street Car Named Desire. The Glass Menagerie*. Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin Books, 1985, p. 233.

<sup>16</sup> Sigrid Lenea Falk, *Tennessee Williams*. New York: Twayne Publishers, 1961.

A considerable number of his plays emphasize a Southern predicament caused by the split between two central trends: a certain romantic hedonism, on the one hand, and a decayed Puritan tradition, on the other. Probably most important of these plays were *A Streetcar Named Desire* (1947) and *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* (1955). The latter is a drama concerned with the threat to individualism by the forces of greed and materialism.

Arthur Miller began to achieve fame in 1947 with the production of *All My Sons* 'about a dishonest war-time manufacturer.'<sup>17</sup> Then a flood of plays followed: the very famous ones were *Death of a Salesman* (1947), *The Crucible* (1953) and *A View from the Bridge* (1955). While Miller – coming from the north – developed a kind of (Ibsenic) critical realism, Williams – coming from the south – tried to nurture critical realism with a kind of poetic romanticism and intensive symbolism. While Arthur Miller adopted the ordinary man as a hero and used him/her to tackle big social philosophies, Williams attempted to help contemporary Man to look for a lost identity, a lost self.

### **2.1.3. The Established Playwrights**

With the coming peace, the already established playwrights – the survivors of the Depression – beat a retreat to their earlier manners and material or attempted to renew the forms and the ideas of their theatre. Maxwell Anderson returned to his historical plays (*Anne of the Thousand Days*); and G. S. Kaufman returned to his comments on American life. Lillian Hellman (*Toys in the Attic*, 1960) and Clifford Odets (*The Big Knife*, *Country Girl* and *The Flowering Peach*) seemed to forget their social protests of the 1930s and offered more or less serious studies of individual men and women, while bearing touches of humanism and poetic realism.

### **2.1.4. The Emergence of New Playwrights**

Successful new playwrights emerged in this period and promised a continuity of the American theatre: William Wister Haines (*Mister Roberts*, 1948), William Inge (*Picnic*, 1953, and *Bus Stop*, 1955), Truman Capote, Carson McCullers, and Edward Albee. But among younger dramatists, only the latter seemed to approach the power of Williams and Miller. In his plays (*The Zoo Story*, *The American Dream*, *Fam and Yam*, etc.) Albee was mingling the comic with the poetic and the horrible. Dogs, in his poetics, refer to men, and cats to women. Likewise, animals refer to voluptuous, sexy men, and vegetables to weak females.

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<sup>17</sup> Cunliffe, *Op. cit.*, 1971, p. 447.

### 2.1.5. The Beginnings of Off-Broadway Theatre

Off-Broadway was marked by inexpensive productions of Samuel Beckett and Eugene Ionesco. Many of these performances took place in college campuses.

So the theatre of this important period was one of figures, both prominent and new ones, 'Fam' or 'Yam'; and the dramatic priority was given to the word. This situation would not last for a long time, because of the new tide of performance experiments.

### 2.2. Performance Schools (The 1960s and 1970s)

The playwrights of this period could not be totally indifferent to the events that befell the American nation: the murder of President Kennedy, the Vietnam war, the struggle for Civil Rights, and the threat of a nuclear war. But more focus was given to the special reaction of the American society in general and the American family in particular. Close attention was given to analyzing the specific traditions, myths and morals that govern social relationships in America.

At the level of presentation, the period was more concerned with bringing about new techniques and going through new experiments that laid much stress on performance. Critics claimed that, once again – as it had been the case in the 19<sup>th</sup> century – the play itself was subordinate to the techniques of acting and directing: design, lighting, sound effects, decoration, architectural or space investigations, etc. It was the new sensibility. Musicians, actors, sculptors, painters and other artists met to do new kinds of spectacles on the stage, or in the open air, or to commune and communicate with a near audience. We don't know really who is watching the spectacle or who is playing it. This 'New Theatre', defined itself by techniques involving a particular list of sound and visual effects: silence(s), street noises, bird twitters, vans, televisions, motion, architecture, etc. The New Theatre consisted in many forms; each is regarded as a considerable experiment in innovation on the level of performance. But the new vein in all those forms was an unremitting call for the participation of the audience. Both individual talents and collective groups '*worked in progress*'<sup>18</sup> to elaborate a spontaneous work with the participation of actors, authors, directors and spectators. Some of these forms are considered under the following items.

#### 2.2.1. John Cage and the Happenings

This form is characterized by an extensive use of music. Thanks to John Cage, music, *per se*, has become theatre. Yet, this is not the only theatrical element. This form, known as the Happenings, is also based on sound effects, or more adequately, it is a combination of multi-media effects (sound, visual and even olfactory) with improvised performances. John Cage's play, *Silence 4' 33''*<sup>19</sup> is a perfect example of such a form.

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<sup>18</sup> Jotterand, *Op. cit.*, 1970, p. 69.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 75.

### 2.2.2. Collective improvisations

#### a. *The Living Theatre* :

Founded by Julian Beck and Judith Malina, and dealing mostly with shocking subjects, this kind of drama emphasizes on improvised theatre and non-conformist, non-traditional dramatic performance. This is most probably the cause of its being known as 'alternative theatre' (alternative to repertory productions). Among its significant productions, Jack Gelber's *Paradise Now* (1968) presents Anarchist ideas on art and life.

#### b. *The Open Theatre* :

Initiated in 1963 by Joseph Chaikin, the Open Theatre is another form of collective improvisations, laying stress on the dramatic performance. The Spectacle is gratuitous, and the spectators sit on the or on the floor. In *Serpent* (1969), the actors distribute, at the beginning of the performance, apples to members of the little audience.

### 2.2.3. Off-Off-Broadway<sup>20</sup>:

When Off-Broadway grew very commercial, another exodus became necessary to Off-Off-Broadway, the very terms are revealing. This new form presented the different themes of the new sensibility (drugs, politics and a range of surrealistic issues) in improvised locals such as cafe-theatres and churches'cellars. Off-Off-Broadway was first considered as a testing place for spectacles intended for Off-Broadway or Broadway presentation. But later on, it has become one of the autonomous and independent domains of American theatre. Many forms can be classified under the item Off-Off-Broadway:

- a. *The Cafe Cino*: It is a coffeehouse theatre, in which Joe Cino (or Cino the Sicilian) used to receive new American writers (more than a hundred). He was serving coffee and Italian sandwiches to his artists-guests. And everyday, there was something new, but participation was the constant rule. Even Sam Shepard frequented the Cafe Cino in a stage of his career. Now the Cafe Cino is a mere souvenir.
- b. *La Mama* (Experimental Theatre Club – ETC): Founded by Ellen Stuart, La Mama is an oblong room with a back wall as a backstage, and surrounded by the audience from three sides. The latter have very small tables to drink their coffee on. At the beginning of every spectacle, Ellen repeats in a ritual way, may be for the thousandth time: « *Good evening, Ladies and Gentlemen, and welcome to La Mama ETC, devoted to authors and to all forms of theatre.* » Among the representations of La Mama, *Hair* and *Tom Paine* were directed by Tom O'Horgan. The latter's basic principle was that theatre should not represent, but should rather be. "*To be –not to represent– to be!*" he insisted. The elements were varied, consisting in the use of dance, improvised gestures, fabrics and props, calls or questions to the audience.

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<sup>20</sup> I am mostly indebted in this sub-section to Franck Jotterand, *Op. cit.*, 1977, pp. 130-145.

- c. *Church Theatres* : Escaping the trade unions of actors, some theatrical groups of amateurs took refuge in the cellars of some churches (such as Joseph Church, Washington Square Methodist Church, St Clement's Episcopal Church, and St Mark Church-in-the-Bouwerie.) The aim of these theatres was to help and encourage young playwrights. Every week, writers came to read their work publicly or in private.
- d. *Sam Shepard* : He is considered as the leading figure of Off-Off-Broadway theatre and the promising playwright of the late twenty years [mid-1970s to mid-1990s]. And with this genius we go into another era.

### 3- The 1980s and 1990s: Decentralization of theatre

Since New York is no longer the capital of theatre, other figures and groups all over the United States burgeoned and snatched from Big Apple its status as the hall of fame and as 'America's central locus of theatre production.'<sup>21</sup> Even it seems quasi impossible to track and record the flood of productions and the platoons of ambitious new playwrights. Only history – a particular lapse of time – will enable theatre critics to assess and elect the most prominent figures and productions. Yet, the 'regenerating impulse' and the so intense vein of newness are already inciting certain names to give more and sorting out certain promising voices.

One of such voices was Wendy Wasserstein, another Off-Broadway playwright, mostly concerned with feminism. *The Heidi Chronicles* (performed in 1989) and *The Sisters Rosensweig* (1992) posed new questions on the situation of women in the American society and solidified the position of women as a vital force in playwrighting as well.

In California, David Henry Hwang, of Chinese origin, was battling with the new forms of racism in the American society, though in the latter part of his works he discarded ethnic issues for the sake of more universal ones. But the most important contribution of this playwright was the inclusion of Chinese theatrical devices in his drama, as is the case with his play *M. Butterfly* (1988).

In Chicago, David Mamet fashions his settings and devises his fragmented language in the manner of Sam Sheppard:

*"His dialogue is often strung out of mere fragments of language: the tortured syntax of everyday speech, rather than the turned phrases of eloquent discourse."*<sup>22</sup>

Yes Sam Sheppard. This playwright is still experimenting with new devices in language, themes and settings. *A Lie of the Mind, States of Shock* (1991) and *True West* have won universal acclaim and have been recently canonized even in Moroccan universities as set plays in the 'Modern Drama' course. Shepard's enthusiasts argue that he is not *talking* about anything but rather *making* something, that he speaks more to the eye, or to the ear than to the mind.<sup>23</sup> After having given a pertinent description of Shepard's theatrical world, its influences, materials and

<sup>21</sup> Robert Cohen, *Theatre*. Mountain View, CA: Mayfield Publishing Co., 1994, p. 331.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 337.

<sup>23</sup> Richard Gilman, "Introduction," in Sam Shepard, *Seven Plays*. London: Faber and Faber, without date, pp. xii-xii.

perspectives, Richard Gilman points out that ‘his plays emerged far more from **new** movements outside that theater than from with it.’<sup>24</sup>

But most of recent playwrights, having gone through experiments in American subtle realism, seem to lose their ‘linguistic’ grip on this reality and, hence, to somewhat resign themselves to presenting spectacles ‘as open to interpretation as the world around us.’<sup>25</sup> Another common factor on the America of this era and the preceding one is the performance tendency. ‘Performance art’, a type of experimental theater combining ‘elements of dance and the visual arts with theater’<sup>26</sup> came into prominence in the 1980s.

### Conclusion

One final thought for the future. It seems that it is again the age of performance and the ‘Actor Unbound’. Is it really time to talk about the ‘death of the playwright’? In this time of cybernetic culture and worldwide webs, what will be the share of theatre? Will the virtual *image* prevail on both the *page* and the *stage*? The cult of newness is still the key answer to such questions.

The American theatre has so far resisted the radio, the cinema and the TV. It has even made use of these media forms. This fluent art has proved itself to be constantly subject to progress, evolution, change, fluctuation and many kinds of influence. Yet it is so firmly rooted in the human condition that it may never be supplanted by any other form.

More than that, concerning the American theatre in particular, all the figures and the theatrical forms that we have mentioned have determined, in their different ways, that the best artistic results – the most vital productions and the highest level of individual and ensemble performance – can be achieved, under a repertory system, by the constant alternation of ‘revised’ or ‘revisited’ classic works and contemporary experiments. In such repertories, I believe lies the best, if not the only hope for the American theatre future. On the level of playwrighting, every boom in theatre activities is followed by the emergence of individual talents. And the current experiments in American theatre will surely engender some playwrights of the same caliber as O’Neill, Williams or Miller.

The cult of newness was an impetus of theatrical creativity and renewal both at the level of groups, in the manners of performance, and of playwrights as individual geniuses. Heedless to the chances of error that constantly threaten the theatrical experience, the careers of notable American playwrights and directors – from the early beginning to the last twinkle of the twentieth century – have gone through different veins of dramatic writing and ventured in many forms of theatrical performance to bring about something NEW, that is, original, unprecedented and attractive more than ever.

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<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, p. xv.

<sup>25</sup> Adrian Page (ed.), *The Death of the Playwright. Modern British Drama and Literary Theory*. London: Macmillan, 1992, p. 2.

<sup>26</sup> Wilson, *Op. cit.*, 1991, p. 438.