

**MY FIRST FIFTY YEARS**

**IN THE THEATRE**

**BY**

**OWEN DAVIS**

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IN THE THEATRE

# **MY FIRST FIFTY YEARS IN THE THEATRE**

*The Plays, the Players, the Theatrical Managers  
and the Theatre itself as one man saw them in  
the fifty years between 1897 and 1947*

BY  
*Owen Davis*

Boston  
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*To the good comrade*  
ELIZABETH BREYER DAVIS  
*who took this long journey with me*

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# My First Fifty Years in the Theatre

## PART I

### *Trying to Break In*

FIFTY YEARS seems to be a long time when you talk about it, but the fifty years since I saw my first play produced have rushed by me at such furious pace that if it hadn't been for my desk calendar I never would have known when one year ended and another year began. No man is ever bored when he is never called upon to do any work other than the work he loves, and time can't very well hang heavily on a man's hands when he has found it quite impossible to find the time to do all of the work he has laid out for himself. My first fifty years in the theatre have gone by like a brief but very delightful dream, and now I find myself forced to look forward to the next fifty years to accomplish some of the fine things I have always wanted to do—but never seemed able to get around to. It takes a long time to learn how to write a fine play, but as I have always been an incurable optimist, I have faith enough to believe that if I can get a hundred years of experience behind me I may be able to come nearer to it than I have done in these absurdly brief fifty years. My quarrel with myself, and with the work I have done, is not that I have been what is often scornfully called a "Commercial Playwright" because, quite frankly, that is what I have always intended to be. I was confronted, at an early age, with the usual necessity of making a living, and knowing that I lacked the high talents necessary for the really great dramatist, I decided to learn all that it was possible to learn about all the branches of the theatre and make a careful study of all the work of all the dramatists, past and present, and above all, to watch and to judge the reactions of theatre audiences and to fully understand why they laughed, or cried, or shuddered when they were supposed to laugh, or cry, or shudder—or why they didn't. Much of this I learned by years of study, but what I blame myself for is that I did not realize that nothing in the changing theatre of the last fifty years has changed as much as have the reactions of a theatre audience. The great Dion Boucicault, who knew far more about how to construct a play than any man I have ever known, once told me that, in the end, if a play was to be a success it must be "written by its audience,"



that a good play's conclusion, sad or happy, must be exactly the same as the composite conclusion of the thousand or more persons who had gathered to see it. When Mr. Boucicault said this I am quite sure that it was true, just as I am sure now that it isn't true any longer. It isn't possible today to get a composite reaction out of any gathering of a thousand people, or even to gather a thousand people together under the same roof whose mental, moral, social and ethical standards are in anything like agreement. And if, by some miracle, this could be done, you would discover that they were so blinded by their political prejudices that what seemed white to one section of the audience seemed black to many of the others, not to mention the large section who wanted it to seem red.

Words are, after all, the only things the poor author has to build with, and words don't seem to mean just what they used to mean, nor do they mean the same thing to everyone who hears them. Gone are the days when "All for Love and the World Well Lost" will meet with a very enthusiastic approval from an audience, and "The Wages of Sin Is Death" is by no means as sure-fire as it used to be. Now no political, moral, social or ethical conclusion of a dramatist can hope to convince a large enough proportion of an audience, to give what Boucicault said a successful play must have, full agreement between the audience and the man who wrote it. This is, of course, the cause of the trouble our writers are having today, and the reason why the "story play" is no longer of much value. That leaves nothing but the play of true character, which is by no means an easy sort of play to write, or the propaganda play of "race prejudice" or "social inequality." These plays, although easy enough to write, are usually not at all easy to sit through. To me sermons belong in churches and political speeches belong in the lecture hall, or on a soap box, while the theatre audience has a right to demand some amusement, or some excitement, or something that will bring about a mood of hope, or faith, or exaltation, and that's not an easy one to write, either.

On looking back over all these years I see many things I did that I shouldn't have done, and many things I should have done that I didn't do, but as I started these confessions by stating that I have never aspired to be named as one of the great, I will make the even more shameful confession that to me these fifty years have been well spent, and that I have used my very moderate talents to, on the whole, a fairly satisfactory end. At least I have lived in comfort and decency, and had far more than one man's share of happiness, and, as the years went past me, I have been rewarded by various expressions of confidence from the men and the women with whom I have been working. I was the last president of the old Society of Dramatists and Composers, that was founded many years ago by Bronson

Howard, and I was the first president of the Dramatists Guild and later president of the Authors League of America. In 1923 my play "Icebound" won for me the Pulitzer Prize, and my election as a member of the National Institute of Arts and Letters.

These honors were, no doubt, more than I deserved, which is probably one reason why I value them so highly. I entered Harvard in 1889 and for some odd reason I studied practically nothing that could be of much practical use to a writer of plays, most of my courses having to do with geology and paleontology. When I left college in 1894 I worked for a little more than a year in a coal mine in the Cumberland Mountains. One year being rather more than enough of that I made a straight dive for the theatre and arrived in New York with no friends, and no influence at all, and with twelve dollars in my pocket. All I had was a firm decision to make a place for myself, which was just about as difficult a thing to do then as it would be to do today. The greatest difficulty confronting a dramatist then, just as it is now, is that he faces either a feast or a famine; the writer of a successful play makes a lot of money, far more today than it was possible fifty years ago—but then, and now, the writer of a failure makes absolutely nothing. The only way a young writer, without financial backing, can live long enough to learn what a play really is, and how to write one, is for him to find a job, in, or at least in the atmosphere of, the theatre, until at least some of its mysteries become clear to him. Little as I knew back there in the middle nineties I knew that, and I had made up my mind, as I have said before, to learn something of every part of the show business, and this I did, helped at first by the kindly advice of A. M. Palmer, one of the great managers of that day. Mr. Palmer made a place for me as an actor of small parts and assistant stage manager of one of his companies of which Madam Januscheck was the star. Madam Januscheck was a really brilliant actress, one of the truly great, and the season I spent in her company was a valuable experience. In her support were some of the best known players of the day—William H. Thompson, George C. Boniface, Joseph Whiting, Blanche Walsh, Katherine Grey, Orrin Johnson, Annie Yeamans, Jenny Yeamans and Sally Cohan. I was young then and a willing and eager listener, which is all that is necessary to win the affection of old actors. I was really an amazingly bad actor and my salary of twelve dollars a week was not enough, even in those days, for anything beyond a rather Spartan scale of existence, but everything was quite all right with me. I was getting what I wanted, the chance to study the methods of a great actress and to understand, in part at least, why an audience surrendered itself so willingly to her art. That season I began to write plays, but I was fated to hold many positions in the theatre before I could get my plays produced

and dared to depend on them as a means of livelihood. I worked as an actor, stage manager, press agent, company manager, advance agent, stage director and in the box office of a theatre and at last, just fifty years ago, I saw the first production of a play of which I was the author. The play was a "Romantic Historical Comedy" called "For the White Rose." Years ago I lost the only manuscript I had and only two things about it seem now to be clear in my memory, these being that I knew practically nothing about the "War of the Roses" and very much less about how to write a play. It really is a very difficult form of writing and, in spite of the fact that I have had many more plays produced than any man who has ever lived, I am frequently made aware of the fact that there are still a good many things about it that have escaped me. This habit I have fallen into of judging myself has been made necessary by the fact that there really isn't anyone else to judge a playwright. All the other arts have their acknowledged masters; the painter, the musician and the sculptor and the novelist can go for a word of advice or caution to one of these masters, but the dramatist must always be a lone wolf. There are not, or at least there shouldn't be, any set rules for the writing of a play, and any of the hundreds of rules a beginner must learn are never of the slightest use to him until he has forgotten them. As a matter of fact, I have never yet met anyone capable of judging a play until he has seen it before an audience, an unproduced play being only an embryo that has no life until its audience is joined with it. Then of course it never is of much use for a young playwright to go for advice or encouragement to any of his brother dramatists. We dramatists find it rather difficult to work up much enthusiasm for any plays other than our own. This apparently ungracious reaction is sometimes spoken of as stupid and narrow and selfish, but really it isn't. It is simply a spasm of our defensive mechanism and entirely instinctive. No one ventures to condemn a mother for thinking her own baby is pretty good.

*The Theatre in 1897*

(The Plays, the Players, the Dramatists and the Theatrical Managers as I came in Contact with them between 1897 and 1907)

**I**N THE fifty years, from 1897, when I made my very humble and faltering entrance into it, the American Theatre became for the first time a business. Before that it was a rather slap happy sort of a racket where practically nobody at all ever made any real money and nobody ever really expected to. It is true that one or two great showmen had been developed, P. T. Barnum, Oscar Hammerstein, and one or two other bold spirits, but it was not until the Frohman, Klaw and Erlanger Syndicate was formed that the old Strolling Player, Vagabond theatre was finally laid to rest. At this time the theatre began to be molded into the well oiled and very profitable business machine that it was for twenty-odd years, and that it could have continued to be. Unfortunately, however, these strong and ambitious men, Frohman, Hayman, Klaw and their associates, were better architects than they were house furnishers. They performed miracles in building up a really imposing structure, but after it was built they never had the slightest idea what to do with it. I have watched the rise, and later the slow decay, of these well-planned and ambitious syndicates more times than I like to think about, and I have come to the conclusion that it would have been a good thing if, in each of these groups of hard-headed businessmen, there had been at least one of them who had had a vague idea of what the theatre really ought to be.

The Klaw and Erlanger Syndicate was not the only one, although until the Shuberts came down from Syracuse their power was unchallenged; the Stair and Havlin Circuit in the popular-priced houses, the Columbia Wheel that dominated the burlesque shows, and the Keith, Albee, Orpheum vaudeville combination, all built up amazingly successful structures, and let them fall down about their ears because they knew so much more about their business detail than they knew about their shows. The big minstrel troupes and the circuses pined away for the same reason, and later the picture business was threatened by the same fate, but was saved, at least for a time, by the arrival of the talking picture and the colored film.

The war has made for us millions of new theatre-goers, their pockets full of money, but in 1897 our public was very much smaller and they had very little money to spend. At that time the arrival of "The Business Era" of the theatre had not, as yet, greatly affected the well established old line managers, who were in many ways a

different breed of cats from most of the men who have succeeded them. Men like Daly, A. M. Palmer, Charles Hoyt and Edward Harrigan did more than lease a theatre and decide upon what play was to be performed there. All these men were directors as every theatrical producer ought to be. They selected a play and worked with the author on it and built it up and brought it into life. To these men every play they produced was something to love and cherish, and they produced their plays with their own money—the clamoring crowd of backers, angels, investors and suckers being as yet unborn.

The leading dramatists of that period were Bronson Howard and Augustus Thomas, Edward Harrigan, Charles Hoyt and James A. Herne, good men, all of them. Hoyt was our best farce writer and none of us has ever equaled him. Thomas was a master of sane melodrama and a man of great dignity and force. James Herne's plays were good melodramas and in the case of a little known play of his, "Margaret Fleming," he rose way above melodrama into what I think was the first fine naturalistic folk play ever written by an American.

Edward Harrigan had a place all his own as a dramatist until, later, George Cohan came along with the same shrewd sense of values and the same photographic sense of the characters we all of us knew and met every day along our streets. There were not so many new plays produced in those days and Charles Frohman had already started importing the plays of the best of the English dramatists.

There were, at that time, many fine actors, the greatest of them being Edwin Booth, who, to my mind, towers above any other actor I have ever seen—fully as much as Shakespeare towers over all other writers for the theatre. Joseph Jefferson was playing "Rip" and "The Rivals" and he was also a great actor. Nat Goodwin remains in my memory as one of the very best and Richard Mansfield was always well worth seeing, not in the same class as Booth or Jefferson, but a real actor of power and great vitality. Ada Rehan, Modjeska and Madam Januscheck and in some parts Fanny Davenport were the outstanding women players and Viola Allen was following in their footsteps. This was a little after the Belasco and DeMille days, and Belasco had just come back to prominence with Mrs. Leslie Carter in a rather preposterous affair called "The Heart of Maryland" and was started again on his remarkable career. Belasco was never really a dramatist, but he was a splendid director, and he belonged in the theatre and, on the whole, his influence upon it was worth while. In later years I was to know him well, but at the time of which I am now writing, our paths were far apart. I had had one play produced, although I seemed to be about the only one who knew anything about it, and having tasted blood I was eager to try it again. I wrote several rather ambitious plays and

submitted them to Daly, Palmer and Charles Frohman, but as I remember it, they didn't even get a laugh, and in desperation I tried my hand at a lurid melodrama. As this type of play was at that time very popular, I had no great trouble in placing the first one I tried my hand at. It was a rather terrifying opus called "Through the Breakers," and that was one there never was any doubt about. It played for three seasons in the "popular-priced" theatres and was produced successfully in England, Australia and South Africa. At the time I wrote it I had only intended to write one play of this sort in the hope that it would give me money enough to exist on until I could place a more ambitious sort of thing, but it didn't work out like that. Before I realized what had happened, I found that my thumb was so firmly caught in the machinery that it was ten years before I could get it out again.

In the meantime, the more ambitious sort of play seemed to be getting along all right, without me. Charles Kline and George Broadhurst had come into the picture and among the actors Maude Adams and Ethel Barrymore had made their start, a start that was to take them on the long and glamorous journey that is part of all our memories of the theatre. Ada Rehan was dropping out but John Drew, who had been Miss Rehan's leading man with the Daly company, became a star under the Frohman management, and stepped gracefully from one smart but rather light-waisted polite comedy to another. Mr. Drew was a sound as well as a charming actor, and a man who, if he and Mr. Frohman had ventured, could have made a success of much more vital characters. He made a great name for himself in what he did, and he made a lot of money and hundreds of important friends, so I have no doubt he was well satisfied.

After the production of "Through the Breakers" I had no trouble at all in finding a market for as many of that type of play as I cared to write, and I plunged ahead with the wholehearted enthusiasm that has, with me, been rather a doubtful asset. I have so much fun writing and producing any kind of a play that I often wake up suddenly to find myself amazed by my own activities. I have very little critical sense about my own work, and an absurd and rather childish love of the theatre. No matter how bad the play I am working on may be, and how sure I am in my heart that it can never be anything but bad, it still seems to me to be vastly better than no play at all. This is all wrong, of course, and I have suffered from it, but I have pulled some very bad plays out of the fire and tailored them into success, which in part has atoned for some of my sins.

For a little more than ten years, the Stair and Havlin Circuit consisted of what we called "A Wheel." Stair and Havlin owned, or controlled, thirty-five theatres, five of them in Greater New York and the others scattered about the country from Boston

to Kansas City. Some of these theatres, but as a matter of fact only a very few of them, sold their tickets for ten, twenty and thirty cents, the usual prices running from fifteen cents to seventy-five cents in the orchestra and often a few seats at one dollar. The plays presented were very like the "B" picture product of Hollywood, and the greatest mistake that was made, or could be made, about that type of product was to approach its manufacture with the idea that anything, no matter how bad, was good enough. As a matter of fact, there are good "B" pictures and bad ones, and some of them are as sure of making a profit as the others are of never making a dollar. The good, or perhaps it might be safer to say, the well made, sensational melodrama was, for ten years or more, by far the most sure-fire product in which show business has ever dealt. They never made enormous money but they could always be counted on for a very substantial profit on the small amount of money they cost us to produce. They had to be put together by someone who knew how but, as a matter of fact, good writing had very little to do with it as they had to be fashioned, as the old silent pictures were, for the eye rather than for the ear, and the tailor who cut them out had to know a lot about the theatre.

Only a handful of men ever really mastered this trick. Theodore Kramer, Hal Reid, Charles A. Blaney, Lincoln Carter, Charles Taylor and I wrote most of them. I devoted over ten years to this game and in that time I ground out well over a hundred of these plays and did most of the directing of them. As I look back I wonder how I could have done it until I look about me and become aware of the flood of mystery and tough detective novels that are pouring in a steady stream off the presses, and notice the constant recurrence of the names of the most popular authors, Erle Stanley Gardner, Agatha Christie and Raymond Chandler. I have no doubt but what the public is hungry for the stories of their favorite writers, just as our public used to be for the melodramas of a few of us who had managed to capture their fancy, but it isn't always a wise thing to count too much on that. I went to Al Woods one day and told him a touching story of my youth. My mother often made, for her houseful of children, a very fancy sort of apple pudding. My seven sisters and brothers were all of them fond of it, but with me it became a passion. One day Mother baked an enormous one and set it out to cool beside an open window, and I stole it and devoured it to the last crumb. It was a very good example of my mother's art, as I remember it, but from that day I have never tasted apple pudding again. Mr. Woods' kind heart was very much touched by this tragic story and he agreed with me that since my name was freshly pasted every week on every ash barrel and garbage can in all America, we might apply the moral of my story to ourselves.

As a result of that philosophic conference, from that day on, my plays came out under the names of five different authors. These five names were all invented by Mr. Woods, as I told him I was having a tough enough time in making up the stories. In the course of time, John Oliver, one of these names, became quite as infamous as my own.

The popular-priced theatres then held the place that the twenty-five cent movies later took away from them, when they slugged their way into the picture. It was not for them as glorious a victory as it would have been had they won it from a worthy rival. Our theatres were mostly awful old dumps, dirty and gloomy and uncomfortable, the picture houses were new and clean and very well managed. The leaders of the motion picture industry, from the first, kept their eyes wide open, while we of the theatre never seem to have opened ours until, too late, we wake up and say, "I'm sorry, but I didn't see that coming."

On our popular-priced circuit the theatres played an attraction for only one week, with the exception of a few "three-night stands" like Rochester, Syracuse, Columbus and Indianapolis. These towns changed their play twice weekly and were booked together as one of the spokes in the wheel. It was necessary that thirty-five shows should be made ready to fill the time, and as the theatres all opened their season on the same day, usually late in August, the thirty-five companies had to be at the starting line. One great advantage of this was that a manager would be given a complete list of the towns his company was to play, and of the dates on which it was to play them. He knew just where his company was to be for its entire season of thirty-five weeks and the actors' certainty of having a thirty-five weeks' season made it possible for us to cast our plays with experienced and responsible players. The amount of money that could be earned at that time, either by an actor or a playwright on the popular-priced circuit or on the Broadway stage, would be scornfully laughed at today, but although many changes have taken place, one thing remains the same, even we people of the theatre have to eat. Our services, like the services of everybody else, are for sale at the highest price we can get for them.

This was years before the picture business was even dreamed about and before the ever rising flood that was pouring in from Europe crowded our cities and filled our streets with strangers, not too familiar with our language or our customs, but as eager as any of the rest of us for any possible break in the monotony of life.

Before the birth of the automobile, the radio, the motion picture and the comic strip, you had to get your fun and your romance either from the theatre or from life itself, and that isn't always an easy thing to do. Nobody in the theatre made much money. Men like Bronson Howard and Augustus Thomas made far less than the



writer of "Soap Opera" for the radio is making today and no actor's salary, not even the salary of the greatest Frohman stars, came within a thousand miles of what is paid today to second string performers, either in Hollywood or on the radio. Since the Dramatists Guild has come into power we dramatists all get practically the same return, which is a percentage of the gross receipts which cannot be less than five percent and goes up to ten percent after the receipts get to be over a stated amount, which in my case always is seven thousand dollars, although on one or two occasions some generous, or excited, producers have paid me ten percent of the entire gross. I never sell my plays and never have turned over any of my copyrights, so that in due time all rights in them come back to me. I started out that way and I have no intention of making any change. My royalty on all the melodramas I wrote for the popular-priced theatres was always eight percent of the company's share, and when, as frequently happened, I was offered more I refused to take it, motivated neither by modesty nor by kindness of heart, but because I knew the manager couldn't afford to pay me any more and that the day his show started to lose money he would close it. All the money I have ever made in the theatre has been paid to me either by a Jewish or an Irish manager, and neither one of these groups is made up of gentlemen who are supposed to be very easy to get the best of, but I was born of generations of Yankee folks of Northern Maine and I have managed to get along.

I wrote sensational melodramas for a long time and finally I gave up writing them for two reasons: first, because by that time the motion picture business was well started and I knew that they would, before long, drive us out; and secondly, because the time came when it wasn't possible for me to write this sort of play any longer. To me the most interesting discovery I have ever made is that no man can successfully write any play that is below his own standard of taste or of intelligence. The crude and sensational plays I had been turning out had been written by a young man, who was a little crude himself, and possibly even a bit sensational. A man learns a lot by living, and the contacts made by any man who is even moderately successful do, or should do, a lot to develop both his sophistication and his taste. As a matter of fact, when I wrote these old plays I must have thought they were pretty good or I never could have held an audience with them, and when I began to find myself contemptuous of an over-melodramatic situation, I found the audience refused to believe it in exact proportion to my own disbelief. Any writer who tells you he can successfully write "down" to his public is either a liar or a fool, as every audience is always honest and I never saw a composite audience foolish enough to accept any situation that wasn't sincerely presented, no matter how mistaken that sincerity might

have been.

I used to quarrel about this with Theodore Kramer, who was at first my closest rival, and he always accused me of being too ready to laugh at my own plays. This he couldn't understand, and didn't like at all, and when, upon occasion, I dared to laugh at one of his, it put quite a strain upon our friendship. Kramer was rather a heavy-minded German who honestly thought that all of his melodramas were dramatic masterpieces, and his play, "The Fatal Wedding," although one could hardly label it as a masterpiece, was quite as successful, possibly a little more so, than any of my own. The thing he found it hard to forgive me for was that I kept on writing them. The last time I ever saw Mr. Kramer was in a bar one night on Fourteenth Street. It was late on a Monday night, on which I had three new plays running simultaneously in New York, one of them at the Grand Opera House, one at the Fourteenth Street Theatre and one at the old Star Theatre on Broadway. This, so Kramer informed me, was not "Kosher" and he didn't see how he could be expected to put up with it. In spite of heroic attempts to soothe his wounded spirits with many large glasses of the heavy German beer he loved, he bid me a tearful good-bye and the next day he sailed for Germany, and never returned.

The days weren't long enough at that time for me to do much besides my work, but I did take time enough to marry a young actress, Elizabeth Breyer, who had been playing in the company of E. H. Sothern, one of our leading actors. This was about the only wise thing I had ever done up to that moment, and very frequently since then, when I have found myself despondent and inclined to doubt my own wisdom and ability, I have remembered what good judgment I had at least once displayed and found great consolation.

The day after we were married we journeyed to Rochester, New York, where, still in search of experience, I had leased the Baker Theatre from the Shuberts, who were just starting out on their fabulous careers, and began an association that has lasted, off and on, for forty-five years.

In Rochester I was not only the proprietor and the manager of the Owen Davis Stock Company, but I was also the theatre manager, press agent, stage director, and I often filled in as an assistant treasurer and sold tickets in the box office. This would seem, as I look back, quite enough for one man to take care of, but as a matter of fact, I fell into the habit, when business started to fall off, of writing our next week's play to save paying any less energetic playwright a royalty. My wife was a member of the company and a very popular one and we had a lot of fun. Our twenty weeks' engagement was so successful that I devoted the next few summers to the same sort of thing and, in association with the Shuberts, we had stock companies in Rochester,

Syracuse, Utica, Brooklyn and Philadelphia.

When we returned to New York in the Fall of 1902, I signed a contract to write a melodrama for Sullivan, Harris and Woods, who were then the outstanding producers on the Stair and Havlin Circuit. Sullivan, never very active in the firm, was related to "Big Tim Sullivan" who I rather think had some interest in the business. Big Tim Sullivan was a big man in New York, he had great political power and was a man of very winning personality. I got to know him very well and never ceased to wonder at him. He was a good friend or a bad enemy, which usually depended on whether or not you voted right. Those really were the "good old days" and following "Big Tim Sullivan" about town I saw plenty of things that would make good stories, but they would have little or nothing to do with the theatre. Sam Harris, then really the head of the Sullivan, Harris and Woods firm, has always been, in my mind, one of the finest men I have ever known in show business, and I had a close association with him until his death, and have missed him ever since then. He was a fair man as well as a very able one. Al Woods, the other member of the firm, was then, and is now, a man of very remarkable personality, a great showman who climbed up from his beginning on the "East Side" to be one of the great theatrical figures of his day.

The firm of Sullivan, Harris and Woods split up soon after I started to work with them and as Theodore Kramer and I were writing all their plays it was decided that Kramer was to remain with Sam Harris and that I was to work with Al Woods. This decision, on my part at least, was influenced by the terms of a very remarkable contract Mr. Woods offered me. By that contract I was to write and Woods was to produce at least four new melodramas each year for five years, and at the same time he was to see that no less than four of my previously written plays should be running. That assured me the Stair and Havlin thirty-five weeks' season for at least eight plays of mine which added up to a guarantee of two hundred and eighty weeks' royalty each season. We kept that contract faithfully. As a matter of fact, Woods produced fifty-two plays of mine. Of all of these plays I think that only one of them lost money, and that one for rather an amusing reason. Woods and I, probably a trifle puffed up by our successes, made up our minds that it was our duty to do something to raise the standard of the popular-priced theatre, and to show to our public what a real drama ought to be. Woods' orders to me were to give it everything I had, and I did. To be absolutely truthful about it I gave it a little more, and the result was a very dismal failure. Mr. Woods and I comforted ourselves by saying, "The damned fools didn't know enough to appreciate it," but I rather think that the "damned fools" knew a bit more than Woods and I did.

The first two plays I produced with Mr. Woods were among the best of the

melodramas that were done in those days. "The Confessions of a Wife" and "The Gambler of the West" were really better than their titles would indicate them to be. I think that "The Gambler of the West" was one of the soundest plays I have written and by far the best of the sensational melodramas of the time. I followed these with "Chinatown Charlie" and "Convict 999," both of them being exactly what the doctor ordered. The next one was the famous "Nellie, the Beautiful Cloak Model," and need I say any more? "Nellie" was really a big show, with twenty-one scenes and a very large company; its business was sensational and both Mr. Woods and I were very proud of it, although the time came when it hung very heavily about my neck. Nowadays I am in receipt of many offers for its revival or for its inclusion in some publication of famous melodramas. Many inquiries have come from directors of "Little Theatres" who obviously want to put it under a microscope, much as I used to putter about in the laboratory with some relic of past civilization in one of my courses in paleontology. My answer to all these requests is that by some tragic accident the last existing copy of "Nellie, the Beautiful Cloak Model" was destroyed in a horrible fire in which there was great loss of life. I am a man who treasures the truth too highly to waste it upon the undeserving. Nobody is ever going to see "Nellie" again—I got away with it once and I see no reason in tempting providence. As a matter of fact, I don't allow any of the old melodramas to be played any more; the audiences of today couldn't enjoy them, the actors of today couldn't play them, and the stage directors of today would have no idea at all of how to put them on. Then, too, bloodthirsty as they are, I don't want to see the plays themselves murdered. And, granting that I wrote them with perhaps a little more sense of humor, and a little clearer realization of their exaggerated sentimentality and their artificially calculated thrills than my brother playwrights who wrote this type of play, the fact remains that I did not write them for a joke. They were very serious to me. The hundred and twenty-nine of these plays, of which I now have manuscripts, or to which I can find some reference in old scrap books, cost me ten years' work—years in which I worked from ten to twenty hours a day. I wrote them all in long-hand. At a guess, but a very conservative one, they total just about *two million words*.

Young people, when they are tough enough, don't need much sleep. Before Mrs. Davis and I were married and for twenty years after that, in her company, I saw practically every play that was produced in America and always, in the hasty trips we made to Europe, we tried to see all of the best of the plays being presented there. For some years my wife played in one of the plays, and in the summer stock companies I managed, but after the birth of our older son she gave it up, reluctantly I am afraid, but she found herself fully occupied trying to look out for me and for the

two boys, who soon rounded out our family. Good years, those first ten years, and they set me a pattern that has altered very little in the forty years since then.

*1907 to 1917*

**D**URING THE ten years from 1907 to 1917, I managed to climb a few rounds up the ladder. I was making plenty of money but, as the author of a landslide of sensational melodramas, I had, naturally enough, no standing at all as a dramatist. I was beginning to meet and to mingle a little with really important people of the theatre. Bronson Howard was gone, but Augustus Thomas was still a great figure and he was very kind to me. For some reason he got the idea that I had a good business sense and some skill for organization and executive direction, and he drafted me into many opportunities of exercising these great gifts that existed entirely in his own highly developed fancy.

Augustus Thomas was always the president, the chairman or the Grand Exalted Ruler of most of the organizations made up of people of the theatre and before long, as I am now very sure, thanks to his well-developed political skill, I found myself seated in every chair from which he had just retired. He was a hard man to follow, he was a big, handsome fellow with a real dignity and with very gracious charm, a really cultivated man with a wonderful speaking voice and true eloquence; a natural orator and one of our very best after-dinner speakers. Augustus Thomas was a very successful and really famous dramatist, and, following in his footsteps, I must have cut a sorry figure.

Through Mr. Thomas I met Booth Tarkington, Eugene Field, Mark Twain and Daniel Frohman. Although these meetings, at that time, were not of any importance at all to them, they meant a lot to me. Of all the writers I have ever known Booth Tarkington stands the highest in my eyes, not only because of the fine work he did, but because of the patiently heroic way he did it, and because of a spirit so generous that when, much later, he saw the first study of my own New England people that I wrote, he honored me with a letter of praise and appreciation that quite overwhelmed me. This play, not written for many years after 1907, also won the approval of Edith Wharton and was the reason why she entrusted me, at a still later date, with the dramatization (with the collaboration of my son Donald) of her "Ethan Frome." I still think that any study of the Northern New England peasant life that could win the warm praise of Booth Tarkington and Edith Wharton must have had some reflection of my own youth in it and some traces of the generations of my own people who had been living on the coast of Maine since the great Elizabeth was Queen of England, years before the Pilgrims ever landed at Plymouth Rock.

As a matter of fact, I was then, and for a long time after that, too hard at work to have any time at all for anything but the job I had to do, and my poor wife had to content herself by sharing in my labors, to the extent at least of sound advice, which I didn't always have sense enough to take, and ready sympathy in my many hours of discouragement and failure. Always, I am afraid our household god has been the theatre, and as our two boys grew up that god was never overthrown as the boys always were, and still are, quite as stage-struck as either their mother or I.

The Melting Pot days here in America were about over now; the melting was still going on, but restrictions were being put upon immigration. Thousands upon thousands of the distressed and persecuted people of Europe had come to us looking for a thing called freedom, and unfortunately they had brought some of their troubles with them. The fact that they also brought with them high courage and energy and a fierce desire to realize their dreams, did not prevent the change in our national picture. The unrest that I felt to be starting at that time has never subsided and won't subside until we find answers long overdue. These answers that I have always thought might easily be found would have saved us two wars and thousands of costly strikes and the world-wide flood of hatreds that have almost engulfed us.

In the theatre, as well as in the hearts and minds of all our people, North, East, West and South, we are trying to depend upon hate to do something hate never yet has done. Many things yet are very wrong. There are several pressing injustices to be dealt with, and great questions of racial and of religious intolerance that must and will be answered. Can these things be settled by pressure groups? By sincere but excited groups of crusaders? I don't think so. If, in the place of all these groups, and we have a number of them in the theatre, and hundreds of them all over our country, we could have just one group. What was said once in one of the critical times is as true now. "United We Stand, Divided We Fall." After all, the cure for all of our hates, of all of our conflicts between Capital and Labor, and of all of our outmoded methods of trying to end religious and racial intolerance, wouldn't be too difficult to find. The answers were given once by a man who spoke in very simple words—but He was crucified.

Back there in 1907 I think we expected less of life than we are searching for today and I well know that we had to work hard for anything we got out of it. The melodramas were not yet dead and Al Woods and I were still up to our eyes in them. Late in July of each year we plunged into the really tremendous task of rehearsing our companies to open on the Stair and Havlin wheel, with always from five to eight new plays and about the same number of the old ones that would be welcome to our audiences. There still stands on the northeast corner of Madison

Avenue and Fifty-ninth Street an old building on the upper floors of which there were Masonic Lodge rooms. Woods always rented these rooms and turned them over to me for our rehearsals. At nine o'clock every morning, with two bottles of milk and a paper bag of sandwiches, I would go up in the elevator to the top floor and by midnight, if I was lucky, I would have worked my way down to the street, staggering from exhaustion. Often I'd have to stop for a moment as I entered each rehearsal room until I found out just which of my plays I was about to assume the direction of, and what it was about.

After these plays were all ready to produce, it was necessary for Mr. Woods and me to take a look at them. But, owing to the difficulty of being in two places at the same time, and that the plays would all open on the same night, and at widely separated parts of the country, we only saw the bad ones together. We had complete confidence that the good ones would be able to take care of themselves. Of course, I had to spend a few days, when I could get them, with each one of these plays, as they all of them, like any other play I ever saw, needed a little work, and some of them had to be completely done over. That job started in August and by the first of November I had to be back at my desk working on the next year's batch.

By this time I was getting to be a bit fed up, the grind having been going on then for years and neither Woods nor I seemed to be getting as much fun out of it as we did at first. By way of variety, and as a step in the direction I wanted to go, I began writing comedies for well-known "road stars." These plays I knew would never play in New York, but in one night stands and in the cities of the South and West. As a rule I could count on at least two seasons for each of these plays, and in the case of a dramatization I made of a novel by the Reverend Dr. Cyrus Townsend Brady, played by a really fine actor, Tim Murphy, the play, "A Corner in Coffee," ran along for years. Dr. Cyrus Townsend Brady was quite a guy—big, loud and alarmingly filled with vitality. He had at that time a church in one of the large western cities and, as a compliment to him, Tim Murphy and I decided to give the very first performance of "A Corner in Coffee" in Dr. Brady's home town. At the opening the house was crowded by the members of his congregation and, as the play was really a rather amusing one, and as Tim Murphy had a great part and was as good in it as he was in Charles Hoyt's "The Texas Steer," our play met with the full approval of that opening night audience and the Reverend Dr. Brady was called upon for a speech. In those days all authors were supposed to make speeches on their first nights, a dreadful custom that I had a little to do with bringing to an end. For an author to sit in a box, as most of the old dramatists always did, and to know perfectly well that his play was going to be a failure, and then to be called upon for a



speech by his misguided friends, remains a horrible memory to me.

On this opening night, Dr. Brady complimented me very graciously on the play I had made from his novel but expressed deep sorrow in the fact that I had ended one of the acts with a rather strong blast of profanity. This criticism went better with the members of his congregation than it did with me, as the profanity in question was a direct quote from the good Doctor's own climactic chapter.

As you may see, I started from the first with better taste in the selection of the novelists I picked to collaborate with than I had shown in anything I had yet written by myself and, after Dr. Brady, I was fortunate enough to continue with Scott Fitzgerald, Pearl Buck and Edith Wharton and, quite recently, with Richard and Frances Lockridge whose really charming character "Mrs. North" had tempted me.

At about this time, Edward Sheldon came up from Harvard with the manuscript of "Salvation Nell" under his arm. He came at once to me, as almost all of Professor Baker's pupils have always done, since I was by that time more or less permanent in the theatre and, as I recall it, Winthrop Ames and I were the only two Harvard men then mixed up in such a doubtful business. Professor Baker, upon occasion, warned his pupils to keep away from me as he was not in full approval with what I was then doing, but in spite of that they came. I had known George Baker years before his Harvard Workshop had ever been dreamed of, and before, I think, there were any courses at all on the drama in any of our universities. Baker and I were good friends and later my son Owen broke a family tradition, to my horror, and followed Professor Baker to Yale. I had lunch with the professor once in Hollywood where he told me rather a characteristic story about this son of mine. Owen was very anxious to get started as an actor and not at all anxious to go all the way through Yale as his mother and I insisted that he should do. As Baker told it, Owen called on him one day and said that he wanted to ask a question, "Which do you think, Professor Baker, knows the most about the theatre, you or my father?" Then, as the professor made a very modest answer, Owen at once jumped on a train and came to me and what he said was, as I remember it, "Professor Baker says 'you ought to work with your father and take advantage of his great experience,'" and then, since I was not at all impressed by this, he went out and found a job for himself and opened in Chicago with Walter Huston in the fine juvenile part in "The Barker." But here I am getting a little ahead of my story, as it was years after Ned Sheldon came to New York before Professor Baker gave up his "Harvard Workshop" and settled down at Yale.

Now the time had arrived for me to say good-bye to the sensational melodrama and I was quite ready to do so. Our audiences had begun to drift away from us; in

our efforts to outdo one another we had piled sensation upon sensation and had let the improbable grow into the impossible and we were quite amazed when our audiences would no longer believe us, because there is no such thing as an audience who can get any kick at all out of a story, or even out of a situation, that they know could not possibly be true. Much of this we had ourselves to blame for, as we had seasoned what we had been feeding to the public so heavily that in the end their stomachs had turned. I had been looking for this to happen for some time, and when one of the New York papers began to feature a cartoon called "Desperate Desmond" I knew that our day was over. "Desperate Desmond" was a caricature of one of our stock characters, the absurdly theatrical "heavy man." Without him we would have no play at all. Our villain was always "a gentleman." We didn't have either to characterize or motivate, all you had to do was to tell the actor to be sure to wear a silk hat and to have his pants pressed, and the audiences knew he was capable of any villainy. Suddenly they began to laugh at him, and our time had really come! Mr. Woods finally and reluctantly agreed with me, further convinced by the constantly increasing popularity of the motion picture.

Sam Harris had already given up and had formed, with George Cohan, the Cohan and Harris firm that was to make history in the American theatre. I had known George Cohan well when he had, as one of "The Four Cohans," been acting in his own plays in the larger of the Stair and Havlin theatres. When I was on the road with one of my own companies George would frequently just be ending his week's engagement in the theatre I was about to play or would be about to open in the theatre from which we were just departing. We spent many Sundays together. He was very young then, a rather cocky sort of youth who always knew exactly what he wanted and had no intention at all of not getting it. He was a master showman, a competent playwright, a great dancer, a really fine stage director, an almost sure-fire "play doctor" and all the world knows the songs he wrote. If Mr. Cohan had never done anything but write "Over There," he would have done one man's share, but he did many fine things besides that. He was honest and he was kind and he was generous. He and Sam Harris fed more hungry actors and buried more of the unfortunates of the show business than any two men in our terribly uncertain profession.

I never actually did a play with Cohan, because he was one man who always wanted his own decision to be final, and as I was another of the same turn of mind, it seemed to be a good thing not to take any chances. We were good friends but he was ill for a long time before he died and very few of us saw much of him. I was one of the pallbearers at his funeral, a painful duty that has come to me too often of late

years. I think it's a lot of fun to grow old, but the duty of following one after another of your lifelong friends to their graves seems to be a part of it that takes a great deal of philosophy not to be saddened by. Not long ago I was one of the pallbearers at the funeral of Dennis O'Brien, who had been George Cohan's close friend since they were boys together and who had been my friend and my legal adviser for more than thirty years.

Al Woods and I separated after our long association with the best of good will and he went on to his great career while I was stumbling along on my own modest one. I was not worried about how I was going to make a living as Woods and I had done very well together and because, at that time, the by-product rights in the old melodrama were not to be despised. There were one hundred and fifty-odd stock companies, most of which ran for fifty-two weeks a year, and my old plays had with them a ready market. Besides these stock companies, there were many cheap repertory companies who were quite willing to pay for the sort of plays they wanted, and the motion picture companies were beginning to make offers for them. It was a long time before I was willing to turn over any of my plays to the "movies" as I thought it best to wait until the day they would be willing to pay a good price for them and before many years had passed that day arrived. I sold the "silent motion picture" rights to many of these old thrillers and a little later, after the talking pictures came in, I sold the "talking rights" to these same plays all over again. I am saving them up now, very carefully, for television.

I had no plans, after I split up with Woods, other than the old plan I had laid out so many years before, to keep on with my study of the theatre and to write a decent play. Between me and the realization of that dream, there were some dreadful hurdles. The very thought of Owen Davis, the author of "Nellie, the Beautiful Cloak Model," ever having the impudence to stick his neck out as a Broadway playwright was just a thing impossible as I was very frequently told before I proved that it could happen.

William A. Brady was the man who gave me my first chance and, for a time at least, he was bitterly to regret it! Brady was a great lover of melodrama and when he heard that I had decided not to write any more of them he sent for me and told me that I was a very foolish young man. The thing that was wrong with the melodramas I had been writing, he said, was that they were badly produced and badly acted. He said that if I would write him one, right away, he would produce it with great actors and a really fine production, and, as Mr. Brady is a man of enormous persuasive power, I fell for it. I wrote the play and Brady produced it on Broadway. The production wasn't anything to cheer about, but the cast was all that he had promised

me: Doris Keane and William Courtleigh and a well selected supporting company. This was shortly before Miss Keane made her tremendous hit in Edward Sheldon's "Romance" and what she was doing in this charade of mine is a thing I have never been able to figure out. To be absolutely honest about it, "Making Good" was terrible and I was the laughing stock of Broadway. Of course, it wasn't the first time I had been the laughing stock of Broadway and I am afraid that it wasn't quite the last, but this time it really was a very nasty laugh, and although I had been "down" before, this was the closest to being "out" that I ever have been. The result of all this was a sudden retreat of the Davis family to the wilds of Yonkers, where I purchased a modest country house in the hope that in the course of time I would dare to show my face in New York again. I had been at work for a long time now and this was a demand upon my courage that I found it very difficult to meet. As a matter of fact, it took me over a year to make another start and I had to keep my head down against many snubs and insults that really hurt. The first bits of returning good fortune that came my way were the production of two of my plays, not for regular runs but for single performances, but they were played by fine actors and well produced. Lee Shubert did one of these plays, "The Wishing Ring," at Daly's Theatre with Marguerite Clark. This was rather a nice little comedy and was done later on the road by Miss Clark and it became one of the most successful of the first full-length moving pictures.

The other play was called "Lola" and was produced by Daniel Frohman with Laurette Taylor. "Lola" was a strange sort of play and there was a lot of good material in it—so much good material and such an effective central idea that it was, a little later, stolen by one of our famous managers, changed about a little by rather a good dramatist and, with a famous woman star in the part, it had a long run. Daniel Frohman was always very bitter about this and he begged me to bring legal action that would have closed the play, but I did not care to do it. All I wanted at that time was to be let alone and to be allowed to go my way in peace. As a matter of fact, in all these years, in spite of the fact that I have always been in the hands of a famous and able firm of lawyers, I have never either started a lawsuit nor have I ever had to defend one. I made it a practice to work with a manager as long as we worked well together, and as soon as he did anything that seemed unfair to me, I walked away from him, and never went back again.

After these two "matinees" of mine things began to look a little better for me and in 1913 William A. Brady made a fine production of my first really serious play, "The Family Cupboard," and after that the wheels began to turn. I owe a lot to Mr. Brady, who had faith in me before anyone else did, and in the following years we did a lot of

plays together. Of all the men I have ever known Mr. Brady remains the most fabulous figure. We had a number of furious battles because one has either to fight with him or be engulfed, but it's been almost thirty-five years since "The Family Cupboard" was produced and we still remain firm friends. Brady is a good ten years older than I am, which is going some, and his health is not too good, but his mind is as clear and his knowledge of all that is going on in the world is as complete as it ever was. Mr. Brady is the last link between us and the "Old Romantic Theatre" and after he is gone there will be no one who can take his place. Neither Lee Shubert, nor John Golden nor I am qualified to do it, and that brings to my mind that John Golden and Lee Shubert may not care to have me state that they are as old as I am, so I am not making it as a statement; it's just a hint.

Both Shubert and Golden are strong and very successful men who have made very big places in the theatre, but Brady *is in a class by himself*. All around us then, in those years before the First World War, things in the theatre were boiling. We were all of us making money and, as a matter of fact, making money in the theatre in those days was not a very difficult thing to do. "The Good Old Days" were gone, but these were the theatre's "Golden Years." Big money is being made today, but only by the unusually successful show. In those years almost any fairly good play made money. The cheap theatres were being driven out by the "movies" and a little later the touring companies of even the New York successes had to give up and leave practically no theatres at all outside of the big cities, but that time was not quite yet; for a few years more a good road company could make a lot of money.

The real facts of the matter seem to me to be about like this: The popular-priced theatre, the dirty and tawdry burlesque shows, and the more worthy and better conducted Keith, Albee, Orpheum Circuit found it impossible to bring their big and expensive troupes into a distant town and meet the competition of the picture companies who could send their shows anywhere in the world in a tin can, and as the pictures got to be really well produced and played by very much better actors than any traveling company could possibly afford, it only became a question of time until they had the field all to themselves. There came a period, but it was some years later, when we actually feared that our then discouraged and faltering theatre would be quite blotted out by the enormous growth of the moving pictures. That time never came and never will come now, the reason being that in this period of which I am now writing Eugene O'Neill, Arthur Hopkins and the groups that developed into The Theatre Guild started something that it took a long time to develop, but which, in the end, at least pointed in the right direction. I like to see a good picture and I enjoyed the years when I was working in Hollywood, but the theatre at its best has something

that no picture can ever have and although the theatre today is a long way from being always at its best, the same thing may be said of the motion picture. I am probably always rather more than willing enough to pass judgment upon any disputed question concerning matters having to do with theatrical affairs, but if I were to be asked which was the worse, a bad play or a bad picture, I wouldn't be able to give an answer.

In the years between 1907 and 1917, however, there was much that was good. Charles Kline, Clyde Fitch, Ned Sheldon, James Forbes, Roi Cooper Megrue and Rachel Crothers were sound playwrights and the group of dramatists who later became famous were making their start. George Kelly, Marc Connelly, Hartley Manners, Philip Barry, Robert Sherwood, Maxwell Anderson, Elmer Rice and, above all, Sidney Howard, whose tragic death robbed us of a man who might well have been a really great dramatist, were already on their way, and others like Arthur Richmond, Margaret Mayo, Edward Childs Carpenter, George Middleton, Guy Bolton and Max Marein were well entered in the race.

Minnie Maddern had returned to us, now as Minnie Maddern Fiske, and Laurette Taylor's "Peg o' My Heart" had taken New York by storm. Laurette Taylor was always a very fine actress. I had known her since the days when, as the wife of Charlie Taylor, one of my close rivals in the writing of the sensational melodramas, she had played the soubrette parts in her husband's plays. She and Minnie Maddern and Lotta were the great soubrettes of my time but now, of course, the soubrette is like the "Dodo," quite extinct. Minnie Maddern developed into a great actress and when Laurette Taylor knocked the town off its feet by her fine performance in "The Glass Menagerie," she was also hailed as great, which, as I told her, was quite amusing to me—I had known it for a good many years. Sothorn and Marlowe were very popular, as was Richard Mansfield. Helen Hayes, still a very young girl, with William Gillette in "Dear Brutus" gave what still seems to me to be quite the loveliest performance I have ever seen. Helen Hayes, young as she was, knew as much about acting then as she knows now; she was one of those rare persons who never had to learn how to act; like "Topsy," she was "born growed." In some ways Alice Brady was like this, she was a born actress, and then, of course, she had the advantage of her father's careful training and he knows all there ever was to know of what really can make an actor great.

Mr. Brady, at about this time, was married to Grace George who became and still is one of the women who really knew how to play a comedy scene. Grace George, Mrs. Fiske, and Ada Rehan could bring more to comedy than any other women I have ever known. Henry Miller, a fine actor and great director, joined with

Margaret Anglin to play "The Great Divide" that came near to being a great play. Ruth Chatterton and Jane Cowl were coming into the picture now, as was Pauline Lord, who can be, given the right part, one of the really fine actresses; she has been that at times and very easily may be that again.

Toward the end of this period, Katharine Cornell made her first hit in "A Bill of Divorcement." Eva Le Gallienne began working with a devotion fully equal to my own to the theatre, but the theatre may well mean different things to different people, and the theatre of her dreams was a rather more austere temple than the one I pictured. Miss Le Gallienne and I both had to climb through a lot of brambles along the paths we had chosen and she made that climb with really gallant courage. She deserves a lot more credit than I do, but I think I had more fun.

Arthur Hopkins produced a rather absurd but wildly exciting charade called "The Jest" with Jack and Lionel Barrymore, soon to be followed by Jack's "Hamlet." Both Lionel and Jack Barrymore were real actors, as their father and mother had been before them, and as their sister Ethel was, and is.

John Golden and Winchell Smith, Winthrop Ames and George Tyler were giving the Frohmans a run for their money. Belasco, all by himself, was the ruler of a little world of his own, in which David Warfield was the greatest figure, although Blanche Bates and many another gifted and glamorous lady held her own.

Weber and Fields were a lot of fun and Ziegfeld and Billie Burke and Charles Dillingham were very important.

With such a list as the one I have just run over, incomplete and imperfect as it is, it may easily be seen that, although the theatre was beginning to sicken, there was life in the old dog yet. It is true that nothing we could have done could have prevented us from having to surrender a large percentage of our audiences to the moving pictures but there was no man among our leaders in the theatre with courage and vision enough to guide us. We have never had such a man. We could, even then, have been saved, I think, had we been led by a man with Lee Shubert's business sagacity, Abe Erlanger's dominant personality, and Arthur Hopkins' brain and heart, but we had no man like that, no leader who had wisdom and strength and honesty, plus the diversified talents of a "Yankee handyman." For a few more years we groped our way along, taking one step forward and two steps back, until we faced disaster that we were only saved from, not because we of the theatre had been learning anything at all, but because our public had. As a matter of fact, the stage that is supposed "to hold a mirror up to nature" has usually been satisfied to give back a distorted reflection.

After the production of "The Family Cupboard" the next play of mine done by

Mr. Brady was, even then in 1914, a rather stilted and old-fashioned comedy drama called "Sinners." The gentlemen of the press didn't seem to think very much of it, but the public loved it and for years it was playing all over the world. Mr. Brady had given it a wonderful cast and in it his daughter Alice justified her father's faith in her. In the "Sinners" cast we had Robert Edison, Charles Richman, Emma Dunn, John Cromwell and Florence Nash, and we ran at The Playhouse for an entire season. This was then, as it is now, the ambition of every playwright and it was the first play of mine that was able to draw good audiences for a fifty-two weeks' run. "Sinners" was neither a very good play nor a very well-written one but it was a big step ahead of "Nellie, the Beautiful Cloak Model." I think if I were to write "Sinners" today I could round it into something much better than it was, although the fact remains that words are not of so much importance in a play as they ought to be. Even today what an author has to say is vastly more important than the words he uses to say it. Audiences listen, of course, but what they really go to a theatre for is to laugh or to cry, or to shudder. What the dramatist has to say decides his fate, and not the words in which he says it.

There had been for many years scattered all over the country well-established local stock companies, but they began to retire before the relentless advance of the motion pictures even before the Stair and Havlin. Popular-priced houses were driven out, and when they went there remained no theatre at all for hundreds and thousands of devoted followers of the drama. There are today in many parts of the country many grown men and women who have never seen a living actor; they know the faces of their heroes of the screen and the voices of their favorites of the radio, but they have never been close enough to a living actor to get the full value of his personality, which is perhaps a greater loss than they are aware of. One result of this was the sudden interest in the number of "Little Theatres" and the development of courses in the drama in many of our colleges and the tremendous growth of amateur groups. Today there are many thousands of these groups listed by the brokers. All this had its effect upon the dramatist, as all of these groups not only must have plays but they must pay royalties for them. There always were amateur groups. The Samuel French Company began to publish plays of mine over forty years ago, and to collect payment for them whenever they were performed. I frequently get small checks for plays written as long as thirty-five years ago, but it was not until about this time that the amateur revenue became a very important part of an author's income. Today it is quite possible that the amateur rights of a certain type of very successful play might earn, by its amateur rights alone, as much as one hundred thousand dollars. Eugene O'Neill and Philip Barry seem to be the most in demand, but with



the release of “Life With Father” for amateur production, two old friends of mine will add a lot of money to what they are turning over in income taxes.

It was late in 1916 when I made my first big sale to the motion pictures, and by way of celebration Mrs. Davis and I took our two boys and sailed for Europe although, as I remember it, it wasn't a rest I was looking for. I was in search of new adventures. It was not that I had to go abroad to find adventure, but I wanted a chance to quiet myself down for once and “take stock.” It was time for me to think over just exactly what I had been doing with my life and just exactly what it was that I really wanted to do. I knew that now I had a chance to go places, and that it was time for me to decide where it was I really wanted to go. I had discovered it was easier for me to make money than I had ever thought it would be, but that it was much more difficult to write a real play. How much harm had I done to myself by the twenty years of turning out strictly commercial plays? I knew I had learned a lot about the theatre and that I had learned as much about play construction as anyone who was writing any form of drama, and that I probably knew far more about audience reactions—but it takes more than that to make a dramatist. I realized there were other things I might hope to learn—but would they be enough? I was far from sure of it because I also knew that after all it is only the song bird that sings.

*1917 to 1927*

OUR TRIP abroad was a very pleasant one, in spite of the fact it was cut short abruptly. This was before France had been torn to pieces by the First World War, and before London had suffered so dreadfully from the second. It was our first trip outside of North America, and we enjoyed it very much. I haven't been abroad since the last war ended and I don't think I want to go there again, but at that time it all seemed very wonderful to us. In London we had some very pleasant meetings with Guthrie McClintic and Katharine Cornell who had then been recently married. All the world knows now about Katharine Cornell as an actress but it wasn't until I grew to know her personally that I realized what Katharine Cornell the actress owes to Katharine Cornell the woman. I had known her casually, as one whose business it is to cast plays gets to know hundreds of players, and I had been attracted by the honest simplicity of her manner. I had often played her father's theatre in Buffalo and he had told me of his young daughter who was absolutely determined to be an actress. Jessie Bonsteel, at that time one of the very best stock company managers and directors, had told me that Katharine Cornell was the most promising young actress she had ever worked with, and she brought Miss Cornell in to see me. At that time I either had no part to offer her, or I had something that seemed to be more important on my mind, and I let that chance slip by. Twice later, and very likely many more times than that, I was to be guilty of such a blunder.

Eva Le Gallienne came to me for her first part and I let her get away, and Dorothy Stickney was offered to me to replace June Walker in one of my plays, and I was stupid enough, just because I had never seen her act, to refuse even to discuss the matter. My only defense is that I had too many plays to cast, and that until the last few years practically every actor and actress in America had been in one or another of them. I think I was often right, but in at least three cases I was surely wrong. In selecting a player for a part a director naturally looks for one with experience and proven ability, but very often the right personality is more important, as it would have been with Miss Cornell. The warm and gracious honesty she projects across the footlights is a part of her own personality and it's a rarer and a finer thing than any of the talents of an actress. I have often thought about this unconscious projection of an actor's own personality, which in Miss Cornell's case, as it was in the case of Maude Adams, is one of the reasons for the quick response an audience is so eager to grant to her, but there have been many cases when it

doesn't work that way. I could, but of course I won't, name to you a number of very talented actresses who have never been able to, in any part they played, convince an audience of sweetness, or warmth or graciousness, because they themselves were quite without them. It takes a truly great artist of the theatre to become, as I have seen Edwin Booth become, a really different man in every character he played. The old-time actors knew more about this than our actors of today. They had a longer and a harder training and were called upon to play a great variety of characters, and although there are many really fine actors in Hollywood they have learned that it is safer for them to set themselves with the public in a type that the public will welcome and remember.

Donald Meek, whose fussy, hesitant, timid little old man has been in countless different Hollywood pictures, long ago established himself in that type and never altered it. In other days, Donald Meek played any part I used to hand to him, and he made as real a character out of every one of them as he made out of this querulous little old man of his. In fact, many actors become so conscious of the part they happen to be playing that we frequently see a lady who is cast, for the moment, say, as a Russian adventuress, who looks and acts and talks and dresses when you meet her, in what one might lightly call her private life, so very Russian and so very dangerous that it is difficult to realize that she is the little girl from Brooklyn you used to know.

We saw all the plays in London and were in the theatre the first night Will Rogers ever faced a London audience. Long after that time I was to be very closely associated with him and we often laughed together over the very cold reception he faced that night. We did not see as much of the theatre in Paris as we had counted upon, as soon after our arrival there, while we were at the races one lovely afternoon, we heard of the shot that had been fired that was to plunge the whole world into war, into two wars of course, since always war breeds war and old hatreds have a way of blazing up again. In my lifetime I have seen our country in three wars and as far as I know we never won anything but an empty victory.

There I was in France with a wife and two children, and it wasn't long before I realized that it was about time for me to get them home. We managed to get passage on one of the good French boats and had a very pleasant trip back to New York. We knew that there was trouble in Europe but we didn't realize how soon it was to burst into flame. War was declared against Germany a few days after we landed and until the war was over that was the end of the long summer vacations Mrs. Davis and I had planned for ourselves and our two boys—as a matter of fact, we never had but another family tour of Europe. Two years after the war was over we did

manage one and enjoyed it very much. And again we returned on a French boat in very pleasant company—Walter Damrosch, Edna Ferber, Grantland Rice with Mrs. Rice and their daughter, Florence—but as we landed from that first trip we faced a future in which I found it very difficult to place myself. They didn't want me in the Army. I had not been able to fit myself into the Spanish War and now in 1917 I was a little too old and more than a little overweight. Twenty years of bending ten hours or more a day over a desk wasn't the best training for the life of a soldier. When it came to this last war, I at last became convinced for the first time that no matter what I thought about it there were people who really thought I was growing old. When the time came for all American citizens under sixty-five to register for possible service they wouldn't even let me in the room, and so, since it seemed the only thing I could do, I went back to work.

I had not solved to my own satisfaction, during this interrupted vacation, all of the problems that had been bothering me, and, as a matter of fact, I haven't solved them yet. I was not sure then, and I am not sure now, just how much a man may alter the pattern the fates have spun for him. I knew what I wanted to be, but I also knew what I was. Should I keep on, happily and contentedly, along the road I had been following for twenty years, or should I strike out boldly toward a higher plane where I was not sure, then, or now, that I could keep my footing? What I did, of course, was to compromise.

I had just been made president of The Society of American Dramatists and Composers, just why I never knew, as the Society of American Dramatists and Composers was in no sense a guild. It made no effort to secure better pay or better working conditions for its members, it was simply a social organization. It had very nice clubrooms where its members met, and from time to time it gave dignified receptions and about once a year a dinner in honor of some distinguished author or composer. Why I was ever selected to preside is still a mystery to me. As the years went on I presided over many other and often less dignified groups, as I seem to be more useful when there is going to be a fight.

This period, 1917 to 1927, gave me my big years. In these ten years I wrote fourteen successful plays, won the Pulitzer Prize, signed a fantastic "movie" contract, was the first president of the Dramatists Guild and later the president of the Authors League of America, and was elected a member of The National Institute of Arts and Letters and became a golf player. The comparative leisure of this period gave me the time for many things I had, for twenty years, denied myself.

In 1918 I wrote a rather decent mystery melodrama, "At 9:45," that had a good run in New York until all the theatres were closed down by the actors' strike. As a

matter of fact, Mr. Brady and I did not close this play; we kept it running in spite of every obstacle and it was the only play that did remain open. I had two other plays in New York, however, and both of them were forced to close. My sympathies were naturally with the actors and I wanted to see them win, but as I had no quarrel with actors and, at that time no open quarrel with the managers, it was difficult for me to see why their quarrel should be fought out in my front yard. Other dramatists felt just as I did about the matter and we decided to do something about it.

The story of the formation of the Dramatists Guild has often been told, but it has never been told quite as it really happened and, as I was in on every step of it, I'll set the facts down briefly. At once, when the strike was called, the actors walked off the stages and the theatres closed. A day or two after this Max Marcin called me up to tell me he was asking all the authors, who at that time had a play that was supposed to be running in New York, to meet at the Astor Hotel on the following day. This meeting was held and I was asked to preside over it, partly, I suppose, because I had three of the plays affected, and partly because I was the president of the Society of Authors and Composers, at that time the only organized group of dramatists in America. As a result of that meeting, Augustus Thomas, Rupert Hughes and I called upon the Council of the Authors League the next day and asked for help. It was decided that as many dramatists who desired to do so might join the Authors League and form a separate group, within the League, to be known as The Dramatists Guild of the Authors League of America. At the same time, the Society of American Dramatists and Composers should merge with the new guild but that, for various legal complications, it should retain its identity. At the first meeting I was elected president and I held that office for four years. At our first meeting I said a few words, meant then as a warning, but what may well become a prophecy if what is going on as I write this continues. I said, "I am very hopeful about the future of the Dramatists Guild and could only see one thing that could ever kill it. We have got to keep it out of politics, I said. The day we meet in these rooms as anything besides dramatists will mark the beginning of the end. Anywhere else we may be Democrats or Republicans, Liberals or Conservatives, but here we must be just dramatists!" That was quite all right then, but in these troubled days the sheep and the goats don't herd together as peacefully as they once did, and I am troubled about our future. Not that I really think much harm can come from any of these minority movements, no matter by whom they are inspired. The strength of the Guild has always been that we worked together for a common end, and that was for the good of the dramatist and of the theatre, and it never was for anything but that and it never should be.

Just after the strike ended, in a complete victory for the actor, I handed to Mr.

Brady late one afternoon, a copy of a play I had just finished and at two o'clock the next morning he woke me up by a telephone call, demanding my presence at his office at a very early hour to help him cast it. That has always been my idea of the way to place a play. If a manager takes a lot of time, for or against a play, the chances are that he will never produce it, but if he is completely bowled over by his first reading the author can count on something. Since the day of Boucicault's old bromide, "Plays aren't written, they are rewritten," managers have had those words framed and hung over their desks. Of course, changes in a play must be made, often many changes, and at times very radical ones, but I, who have been called in as a doctor on as many plays as any man alive, have come to the conclusion that more plays have died from being rewritten than have ever been saved by it.

The play I had given to Mr. Brady was called "Forever After," and it was the first play in which Alice Brady was the star. It was one of those lucky plays that always played to fine business whenever and wherever it was played. Alice, with Conrad Nagel, at that time a very young man, played it for a year in New York and a year on the road, and Alice revived it a year or so later. It became a favorite stock bill and made a good picture. I saw Alice Brady in many parts after that, but I never saw her do anything any better. She brought tenderness and honesty and something very like poetry to a part that no other woman who ever played it ever equaled.

In 1921, Lee Shubert produced my "The Detour" which, to me, is the best play I have ever written, and the next season I made for Mr. Brady the adaptation of "The Insect Comedy," calling it "The World We Live In." This very fine play was directed by John Cromwell and Mr. Brady and played by an enormous cast of very good actors among whom was Vinton Freedley, then a really promising young actor, and now one of our better theatrical producers. For this play we borrowed Lee Simonson from the Theatre Guild, and he designed for it a really beautiful production. At the same time, "The Detour" was running along, very well played by Effie Shannon and Augustin Duncan. Mr. Duncan had directed the play and directed it to absolute perfection. I have worked with most of the great directors in my time, but the job he did for me with "The Detour" put me very deeply in debt to him.

The next season I did a play called "Lazybones" with George Abbott, then an actor, in the leading part, and Sam Harris followed that with "Icebound." "Icebound," very much to my amazement, won the Pulitzer Prize, and I was made a member of The National Institute of Arts and Letters—quite a long step from the days of "Nellie, the Beautiful Cloak Model."

Although I thought "The Detour" a better play than "Icebound," I was quite willing to leave the matter up to the Pulitzer Prize Committee, especially as I had

now been asked to serve on it, and for several years I was one of the three dramatists who had the job of seeing every new play and the selection of the author to whom the prize should be given.

By that time I had stopped going to every play that was produced, and went only to see the ones I knew to be worth seeing, and now I had to begin all over again and see them all. My wife was a little alarmed by the thought of doing this, but she stuck around as she always *has*. To tell the truth about it, I rather enjoyed the work on this Pulitzer Prize Committee and only gave it up when, some years later, I went to California. The first two years we gave the prizes to plays about which there could be no doubt at all, "They Knew What They Wanted," by Sidney Howard, and "Craig's Wife," by George Kelly. In fact, we never did have the trouble the "Critics' Circle" seems to be confronted by, probably because it's easier for three men to arrive at a decision than it is for a committee of ten or twelve, and then, too, a dramatist looks at a play with different eyes and from a different point of view than that of a dramatic critic.

I have never been one of those who looked upon our critics of the drama as a natural enemy, as many playwrights and managers have always done. About once a year some angry writer bursts into one of our council meetings of The Dramatists Guild, to demand that we take some action to prevent the slaughter of our plays, sure in his own mind that the only possible reason for the recent slaughter of his own play was a combination of bribery, ignorance and a fierce desire on the part of the critics to kill the theatre. To me that has always seemed absurd, not only because I have rather more respect than that adds up to for these gentlemen, but because I have infinitely more respect than that for their editors! Critics, like judges, may render bad decisions, but either in a court or in the theatre, a bad decision may be reversed, and if, as sometimes happens, too many bad decisions are handed down, the judge, or the critic, is looking for another job. I doubt if any dramatic critic has ever hated the theatre or has ever gone to the opening of a play without the hope that he is about to see something worth his writing about. In any case, his power is by no means as great as most people, including some of the critics, think it is. It is true that today no play that gets bad notices has much of a chance of success, but it is also true that if it wasn't a bad play it wouldn't have had those bad notices. A play, like a woman, may be beautiful to some of us and make no impression at all upon others, but a really beautiful woman is always beautiful, and so is a really beautiful play. There are very few of us who can't tell a bad egg from a good one, only unfortunately of late there seem to be more bad plays around than there are bad eggs.

Of course the critic doesn't hate the theatre and he doesn't want to kill it; it's from the theatre he makes his living. As a matter of fact, most of the critics I have ever known have been stage-struck. Ward Morehouse, an amazingly young man when I first knew him, ran up and down Broadway big-eyed, and eager, as mad to find out all that he could about the theatre as a hound pup is for its mother's milk. Robert Garland, when he was a young man in Baltimore, was mixed up in all the "Little Theatre" projects in town. Burns Mantle, long ago, when I knew him in Chicago, had the same sane and honest devotion to the decent things that the drama has to offer as he had in later life and it would have been as impossible to bribe or to fool him then as it was later. And as for Walter Winchell, the theatre has always been food and drink to him, and the god of his idolatry. He still has as much grease paint behind his ears as I have.

But this is quite enough, I think, for me to write about dramatic critics. They haven't always been too nice to me, although the only protest I have ever made to any of them was to tell them I was going to hang around long enough to go to their funerals and it's only too often turned out that way. I will content myself by saying that the writing of a good review is more difficult today than it used to be. For many years our theatre belonged almost entirely to the actor, but it is now dominated by the dramatist, and it's much easier to pass judgment upon an actor than it is upon a play.

Eugene O'Neill, at that time, was growing into what he has been ever since, and still is, to my mind at least, the only really great dramatist America has ever produced, and the whole type of playwriting was changing for the better. O'Neill, Arthur Hopkins and The Theatre Guild had planted the seed and it began to grow. Maxwell Anderson, Sidney Howard and Elmer Rice were modern playwrights, as were Robert Sherwood, George Kelly and Philip Barry. Arthur Richman wrote at least one fine play, "Ambush," and my old friends, Eugene Walter and Bayard Veiller, although trained, as I was, in the old school, always knew what the score was.

Bayard Veiller's "The Thirteenth Chair" was much the best "mystery" play that has been written, and I am not at all sure that Eugene Walter's "The Easiest Way" wasn't the best American drama ever to be produced.

The acting in this period was splendid. Hollywood had, as yet, not robbed us of most of our good actors, nor had they been guilty of their greatest crime, which is to grab up every good-looking boy or girl who has made a hit in just one part, and rush them out to California where there is very little chance of their ever learning how to play another.

Sothorn and Marlowe were at the height of their fame and Otis Skinner, whom I



had known when he was with Booth, Barrett and Modjeska, was now one of our best actors and there were many others. Alfred Lunt, and Lynn Fontanne, whom I had seen first in Laurette Taylor's company, Arthur Byron always a sound actor, Miss Cornell, Pauline Lord and Jane Cowl went on from one good performance to another and although the really big days of the theatre were over, at least for a time, a good play could still draw an audience.

The year after "Icebound" was produced I wrote "The Nervous Wreck" which made more money than any two plays of mine have ever made. "The Nervous Wreck" came out of a golf game I was playing with Bob Davis, then, and until his death, my favorite golf associate and my dearest friend. As everyone who knew Bob Davis must remember, and almost everybody in the world knew him, he always kept up a steady flow of conversation. Bob was, with the possible exception of Irvin Cobb, the world's best story teller, and like Irvin Cobb he was a brilliant and very witty "after-dinner speaker." These talents naturally endeared him to me, but there were times when his flow, a mixture of profanity, wit and wisdom, got a little in my hair. One of those times was just as I was at the top of my swing on the golf course, or when I was about to make a critical putt on the green.

On this particular day he kept on telling me about a story called "The Wreck" he had recently published and at length to keep him quiet, I told him if he would stop talking I would make a play out of the damned thing. The next day he sent me the story and I glanced over it. As a matter of fact, I never actually read it. Bob was the master of all story editors; he could take a story apart and put it back together again quicker and better than anyone I have ever known. This story "The Wreck" was written by Pearly Sheehan and in it, as I had caught from Bob's chatter that day on the St. Andrews' golf course, there was a really great character. Now a great character is all that is needed, by a man who knows his business, on which to build a good farce, and no man, no matter how well he knows his trade, can write a good farce without one. This guy, in "The Nervous Wreck," was really good, and I boiled him down to this—a very brave young man who thought he was a coward. A perfectly healthy and robust youth who thought he had every sickness that flesh is heir to, and a man who fully expected to fail in everything he ever tried to do, but always came out triumphant. I tied up to this the fact that he was very much in love with a girl, without the slightest knowledge that he loved her until she told him so. It's been twenty-odd years since I wrote that play and I am still trying to meet up with another man like that.

I took the manuscript of "The Nervous Wreck" to Sam Harris who told me that it was, by all odds, the very worst play ever written, but as we were very old friends

and as I was the author of "Icebound," with which we had just won the Pulitzer Prize, he decided to go ahead with it. After several tryouts, during which I had rewritten it completely seven times, he reluctantly opened with it in New York. We sold out the second night and every other night for a solid year. We had at one time three companies playing it in the United States and one in London and, in one form or another, it has been on the screen ever since. Mr. Harris put a good cast into it: Otto Kruger, June Walker, Edwin Arnold, Albert Hackett and other fine actors—all of whom later took big places in the theatre.

It had been the same with "Icebound"; when the play opened no actor in the cast was very well known, but after that Robert Ames, Phyllis Povar and Edna May Oliver were firmly established. Among the tiresome old bromides, the one that says "Good parts make good actors" is nearest to the truth. Every fine play, and every outstanding picture to be produced, marks the birth of a star. Fortunately for us, failure has very much less influence upon one's future than success—one success can often make an actor, or a dramatist, but there is no good reason why one failure should ruin him. Shakespeare wrote some very bad plays, and so has O'Neill. Personally, I think very well of the man who has never written a good play, and it's a good thing to remember that no matter how low a playwright stands in the eyes of the public just before the curtain goes up on his new play, he may stand "aces" with them by the time the curtain falls. As a matter of fact, a playwright can learn more from a failure than a success can teach him—just as a man can learn more from sorrow than he can ever learn from joy.

All had been going very well with the Dramatists Guild and slowly, but very surely, our contracts with the managers began to approach a fair and reasonable division of the profits of our plays. Naturally this did not come about all at once; nor did it come without years of hard work and hundreds of hours of the valuable time of the writers, men and women, who really made great sacrifices for the common cause. We were putting up a battle for a contract that is now given to every member of the Guild, the terms of which were less favorable than the contracts a few of us had long ago won for ourselves. But we did away forever with some of the really shocking agreements that had previously been forced upon young and inexperienced writers. The Authors League, our parent organization, was now separating into different groups: the writers of published fiction, the playwrights, and the screen writers of Hollywood. The present Radio Writers Guild came along much later.

After two terms as president of the Dramatists Guild it was decided that I was to retire from that office to become president of The Authors League. I had, up to this time, been in contact mostly with my fellow dramatists, but as president of the

League I was associated with almost every author who was prominent during those years. It was a pleasant sort of a job but it took a lot of time and energy. One thing always insisted upon is that a man must be chosen as president who can't possibly afford to devote to it the necessary hours of his time. As a matter of fact, it is a clerical, administrative and political job of real importance, and a tremendous task for a poor writer who cannot possibly know very much of any of those things.

There are a good many hours in a day, however, and in spite of this new job, and my duties as a member of The Pulitzer Prize Committee, I managed to keep on turning out plays. I made for Mr. Brady a dramatization of Scott Fitzgerald's splendid novel, "The Great Gatsby," and it was one of the best jobs I have ever done. Percy Hammond of the New York *Tribune* called it "The best dramatization I have ever seen." It called for an enormous cast and a very heavy production, and it was about as hard to handle as a three-ringed circus. It was very well directed by George Cukor and played by a well-chosen company in which James Rennie and Florence Eldridge gave splendid accounts of themselves.

After "The Great Gatsby," I wrote a crazy sort of a comedy called "The Haunted House" for Wallace Eddinger, a really fine actor who knew perhaps more about how to put over, and to time, a comedy line than anyone since the day of Nat Goodwin. "The Haunted House" was really a burlesque mystery melodrama, and it was years ahead of its time. Today I think it might be an outstanding success, but in those days the public wanted their mystery served up hot and, although the play did well enough, there was more or less resentment at my having the nerve to kid the firmly established methods of the mystery writers, which I suppose was all out of order for me, since I had written so many of these things myself. As an apology for my sin I wrote "The Donovan Affair," a play that could hardly be accused of not being mysterious enough, and one that actually dripped with blood and missed no trick at all of the tried and true tricks of mystery story writing from Gaboriau through Poe and Doyle and Anna Katherine Green and Mrs. Rinehart, even taking in the tricks of the present, and very skillful, crop of hard-boiled detective story writers who were at that time printing their first compositions on a slate in some primary school. "The Donovan Affair" was, naturally, a success, although I am, I think, the only one who knows that it was as deliberate a burlesque as "The Haunted House" had been. The bitter disappointment of the audiences who saw "The Haunted House" when, in the last act, it was discovered that the victim of the shocking murder had been a cow had been a warning to me; so there were four murders in "The Donovan Affair." The play was produced by two of my favorite producers, Lewis and Gordon, and as I remember it, Sam Harris owned a part of the show. It

isn't always easy for a playwright to be sure just who does own the play he has written, although there is always a good chance that somewhere in the background lurks the figure of Lee Shubert who, I am sure, could not possibly make a list of all the plays in which he has had an interest.

Al Lewis and Max Gordon had owned part of both "Icebound" and "The Nervous Wreck" and before the Lewis and Gordon firm dissolved, they did several more of my plays. I had known Max Gordon since he was a boy and after Al Lewis went to California, Max and I continued to produce plays together. I, like many other men of my type and generation, am very apt to think that old friends are the best friends and I have little doubt but that, in these next fifty years, I am planning many of my plays will be produced by Mr. Gordon.

"The Donovan Affair" came along in 1927 and at that time I was far from being the only one to be active in the theatre. When I started on this yarn I was anxious to keep the note of autobiography out of it and to tell more of what I had seen in the theatre than of what I had done in it, but I had been so mixed up in so many activities, and had written so many of the plays, that my modesty, never one of my leading virtues, has, I am afraid, not prevented a too frequent use of the personal pronoun.

At lunch one day at the Lotus Club, to which I used to retire at noon to escape for an hour from the atmosphere of the shop, during the times when I was rehearsing a play, William LeBarron, a dramatist and an old friend, came over to my table to speak to me. Bill LeBarron had been a successful playwright and the editor of one of the popular magazines. At that time he was at the head of the Paramount Studio in Astoria with Adolph Zukor, Jesse Lasky and Walter Wanger. They were turning out all of the Paramount pictures made this side of Hollywood, which at that time meant a lot of pictures. LeBarron told me that Adolph Zukor and Mr. Lasky wanted to see me on a matter of business, but I was tired and nervous and in the middle of the rehearsals of a new play and I told Mr. LeBarron that I had plenty of better ways of spending my time. After a word or two of friendly remonstrances he confessed that they were planning to lure me into the Paramount Company. I had, as Bill said, recently won a Pulitzer Prize and I was president of the Authors League and was in contact with the sort of writers they were anxious to get into pictures and that whether or not I wanted to go with them they had made up their minds to have me. I only laughed at all this and went back to my rehearsal.

Good plays were being produced and it was one of my duties to see them all. "Coquette," "Broadway," "What Price Glory," and "Rain," were all of them outstanding successes and so was "The First Year," "Lightning," and "The Show

Off,” and the very idea of my leaving the theatre and going out to California never entered my mind. In a few days, however, a contract was sent to me, by Paramount, that seemed to me so absurd that I sent it down to Dennis O’Brien, my lawyer. The result of this was that I signed a two years’ contract with The Paramount Company that left me freedom to write and produce one play a year and was so fair and liberal in all its clauses that the only thing I could do was to sign it. I was to be “resident in New York” and only go to Hollywood for short trips; I was to work only on stories that I wanted to work on and was never to work with any other writer or under the orders of any of their directors. This, at that time, was the most liberal contract ever given to any writer; and even today it would be considered a very favorable one. I was appalled at the thought of just where this new step of mine might take me and anxious not to break a record that is in no great danger of ever being broken. For just thirty years I had, each year, been the author of at least one play that was produced in New York City.

*1927 to 1937*

THE PICTURE business was all new to me; even today it is a truly fabulous thing, and in those days, just twenty years ago, it seemed to be, when one first came in contact with it, a madhouse; but as I studied it I began to realize that under that madness there was a method and that, slowly but surely, they were learning a wonderful new form of entertainment.

That they learned it the hard way there would be no use in denying, but that they did learn it all the world now knows. Adolph Zukor, who was now my boss, had more to do with what pictures have now become than any one other man—because he had more faith than any one of them, and had the great gift of being able to dream a beautiful dream, and it's the ones who dream beautiful dreams who have a better chance than the rest of the world of seeing them come true. It was an uncharted sea these picture pioneers set out on and they faced unexpected dangers and unknown perils. The reason that in the end they landed safely was due to one thing—they were selling something the public wanted to buy. At first the motion pictures were very crude, but so were their audiences, and as the audiences grew larger and a more cultivated and intelligent class of people began to mingle with them—they began to demand an advance in the quality of the product; as they have always done, the picture people did their best to keep up with their audiences, a thing we of the theatre never had brains enough to do. In that is, I think, the history of the picture business and of the theatre. The theatre, even now, continues to produce plays, either a long way ahead of the public's taste or a hundred miles behind it. That means, of course, that before we can count on a wiser selection of plays some way must be found to do something about a wiser selection of managers. No manager could possibly know anything about any play other than the play he likes himself, and he has no business to produce any other sort. Naturally enough, no man can write, or direct, or produce any play that is either above, or below, his own standard of taste and intelligence, since to do so is to rob the play of the sincerity and enthusiasm, without which no play can possibly be successfully produced. Of course the picture people had the advantage of unlimited capital, as it didn't take the New York banks long to see the profits that could be made, so the banks not only put in their millions but they began to insist upon a better type of business management. Naturally it took time to get things running smoothly and even now there are some amazing things that are still looked upon as necessary, and almost sacred, in the

customs of Hollywood.

Now the quaint customs of Hollywood came about from purely natural causes, the same sort of causes that have made the streets of Boston so crooked. Someone desired, at some time, to get from somewhere to somewhere else. Many of these established Hollywood customs never seemed to me to be any more necessary than they were sacred. To me they seemed just footprints in the sand, left by some departed big shot who probably never had the slightest idea of what he was talking about. These sacred old relics of a past stupidity will soon fade away as the picture business really comes of age and, after all, the theatre was suffering from hardening of the arteries before this new rival was born. Many of the writers who have gone to Hollywood have come back to rage at the incompetence and absurdities out there, and since in all cases these authors have been very well paid, it's hard to excuse many of the bitter wisecracks in which they have delighted. As a matter of fact, the reason for the failure of so many writers out there has not been because it is "a crazy business"; it's because it's a very different business, and not at all an easy one to master. The successful playwright, or novelist, has been, although he has always been a very lonely man, a comparatively free one. He wrote what he wanted to write and whenever success or failure came to him he alone was responsible. In Hollywood no one man can be responsible for either the success or the failure of a picture, and it isn't possible that he ever can be unless the author is also the director, the supervisor and the producer of the picture; and as each one of these jobs calls for different talents and different training and experience, that is not likely to happen very often.

I spent a lot more time in Hollywood than I had dreamed of doing when I signed my contract, and I came away from it without any trace of bitterness on my part or on theirs. I was always treated with kindness and consideration. If I had been a younger man I have little doubt but what I would still be out there, which may account for the fact that I look upon old age as a period of peace and contentment. It isn't only that it's hard to teach an old dog new tricks—I think it is more because it's hard to teach an old dog to love new masters. My chief quarrel with Hollywood is not a personal one. Its customs, from necessity, must be firmly set, and they have an enormous number of stories to prepare. I am quite willing to grant that their average of success is high, but they have to pay a price for it. They develop stories out there much better than they develop story writers. It develops an author's bank balance but it smothers his originality.

They still owe a lot more to the theatre than they have ever given back to us. We sent them many of the writers, directors, and actors who built up their success for

them, but Hollywood has never developed by itself one single writer, actor, poet, or director who has, outside of pictures, done anything worth while.

From the first, I now think that Paramount intended to use me as some sort of executive and as a contact with a type of writer, both American and English, that up to this time it had been difficult for them to secure. My first job, however, was to find, or to write, a story for one of their most popular stars, Thomas Meighan, not only a good actor, but a man of extraordinary charm and lovable personality.

I was given an office in the Astoria Studio, later taken over by the army. To me the Astoria Studio was a preposterous and amazing place, and I have always been convinced that it had never been created by mortal hands. Somebody must have dreamed it. It is an enormous building, an absolute labyrinth, and I never did learn how to find my way about in it. Each morning I would start out with high hopes, but very often they would have to send out a searching party to bring me back. There were many old friends among the actors there: Alice Brady, Tallulah Bankhead, Claudette Colbert, Charles Ruggles, and a lot of others. All of them from the theatre. After I had been given ample time to, at least, glance over all the many departments, and to get a rather dim notion of what they were there for, Thomas Meighan and I got together to lay out a story for his next picture. A Tommy Meighan picture was a very important thing and the budget on any picture of his was a very liberal one—partly on account of the fact that any picture in which he was to be seen was always sold to the trade long before it had been started.

From the first I had been bewildered, and my Yankee prudence appalled, by the absolute disregard of money that was, and still is, so characteristic of the motion picture business. I was greatly shocked by this but later I began to understand it. The company knew that a Meighan picture, even before they put any of their money into it, was sure to gross a certain definite amount, and they put a budget on it that assured them of a substantial profit. Should the picture turn out to be unusually successful their profit would go up, but it was impossible for them to lose. That is never true with any play no matter what star is playing it.

Tommy Meighan and I got on very well together and became good friends. Anyone who became associated with him without growing to love him would probably, if they looked honestly enough into their own hearts, have found the reason there. I told him the rough outline of a yarn I had been concocting, one of those things about "The Canadian Mounted Police," and he said that he thought it was swell. His only objection was that he rather wanted to play a little golf, and that he thought that he and I really ought to go together to study the background of the picture, and that in January golf was much better in Palm Beach than it was in



Canada. Inexperienced as I was I could see the virtue in this, and so Mr. Meighan and I started out for The Breakers Hotel at Palm Beach, Florida, where Paramount had to pay fifty dollars a day for my accommodations, and heaven only knows how much for Tommy Meighan's—he had two rooms.

Our story came along all right, although there were a few changes that troubled me at the time, but later I grew to think nothing of them.

The story now wasn't about Canada—the scene was laid in Florida. The Mounted Police had vanished and Mr. Meighan had become a “rum runner.” My pet character, a French Canadian girl with a cute French Canadian dialect, was no longer with us—in her place was the daughter of a Spanish bootlegger. Some of the gags remained as I had first written them—but they were later changed.

George Ade, one of Tommy Meighan's pals, was spending the winter at Miami and Tom left me at Palm Beach to work on the story and went down to visit him. In a day or two he telephoned me that Saturday was George Ade's birthday and that he was asking a party of Mr. Ade's friends to a dinner in honor of that event, and that I must be there—an invitation I was glad to accept as I had long been a great admirer of Mr. Ade's. I took a train to Miami and arrived just in time to dress and drive to the hotel where Mr. Meighan's dinner was to be given. It was a very gay party, and the dinner was above reproach, but unfortunately, due to the fact that Mr. Ade and Mr. Meighan had started the festivities in the middle of the afternoon, neither the host nor the guest of honor ever showed up.

After returning to New York I took time out, as my contract allowed me to do, to produce a musical play, “Spring Is Here,” which was done by Aarons and Freedley at the Alvin Theatre. I wrote the book and the music was by Richard Rogers, and the lyrics by Larry Hart. The book didn't amount to anything, and the cast was not right. The leading woman had a lovely voice but she couldn't dance; and the leading man could act but he couldn't sing a note or dance a step. Rogers and Hart did their part of it as they always did. Everybody knows by now what sort of music Dick Rogers writes and, to me, Larry Hart was the best writer of lyrics since Gilbert, although after Larry's death Dick Rogers teamed up with another writer of lyrics that gave me my first doubt of this. Larry Hart was a real wit, brittle and highly sophisticated, while Oscar Hammerstein, Jr., is a true poet with an uncanny choice for always using the right word, and a very real understanding of character. There was some fine music in “Spring Is Here” and “Yours Sincerely,” and “The Song of My Heart” lived long after my part in it all had been forgotten. One thing, however, that I greatly value came to me out of it—the friendship of Dick Rogers and of Larry Hart, who from the first treated me, in spite of the fact that they

were young enough to have been my sons, with a warm kindness and consideration that is one of my many happy memories.

At this time labor troubles forced the closing of the Astoria Studio and it was decided to transfer all of the picture-making activities to the West Coast. I was protected by the clause in my contract that read "resident in New York," and it was decided that I should have an office in the Paramount Building on Broadway and assume various new duties that had to do with finding plays and stories and contacting authors who might be valuable to us in Hollywood. I was also to make trips to the Coast to work on special material whenever it seemed necessary. To follow out this new arrangement I was given a very impressive office, two pleasant rooms, several telephones, some of which I never did find out just exactly what to do with, all sorts of furniture and filing cabinets, a very efficient secretary, and a blond stenographer, luxuries up to that time unknown to me. As an example of the high standards of The Paramount Building, at that time newly opened, I might drop in here a little hint of its magnificence. A short distance from my office there was a door on which was painted the word "Gentlemen"; entering there I found myself in a splendor of glass and marble and silver—for I observed that all the fixtures were silver-plated. Stepping out of that room one day I met in the hall one of the directors of the company who looked at me sternly and demanded to know what I had been doing in there. That being a question that I rather hesitated to answer I was about to continue my way down the hall, when he said: "My dear boy! You don't belong in there. You are now one of the executives of the company; come with me."

He led me along the hall to a door on which there was no lettering at all—this room, although somewhat smaller than the other, was even more exquisite, and here all of the fixtures were of gold!

All went along pleasantly enough, with the exception of one thing. I, for the first time in many years, was not writing a play. From early in 1895 until today, there never has been an hour, with the exception of the three years I spent in the motion picture business, when there has not been some part at least of a new comedy, farce, drama or melodrama on which I was working. To be sure, even during those three years I insisted on having time off to allow me to get one or two plays in, but there were times when I felt like a traitor.

During this first winter, Sam Harris and I made a contract with Florenz Ziegfeld for the production of "Whoopee" which was a musical show made from my "The Nervous Wreck" with Eddie Cantor in the part that Bob Davis had outlined to me on the St. Andrews' golf course so long before. Mr. Cantor was very funny in the part, just as Otto Kruger, Edward Everett Horton, Taylor Holmes, Charlie Ruggles,

and many other fine comedians had been, and as Danny Kaye was to be years after this when it was produced for the fourth time as a picture, the last time to be called "Up in Arms." Ziegfeld gave the old farce to William Anthony McGuire to be fashioned into a musical show, and produced it with the same disregard of money shown in the construction of the toilets in the Paramount Building. Money meant absolutely nothing to Florenz Ziegfeld. There is one man who should have been in "pictures."

Sam Harris and I were to draw royalty, of course, on "Whoopee," but I was not supposed to devote any of my time to it. Bill McGuire was ill at the time the show was to open in Pittsburgh, and it was discovered that he had furnished no last act at all. The result of this was that Ziegfeld promptly borrowed me from Paramount and I stayed with the show until it opened at the New Amsterdam Theatre. No matter what form this farce was ever played in or under what name it was played, it has always done fine business. As "Whoopee" it ran for a year in New York, then for another year on the road, and then, with Eddie Cantor still in the part, it was produced by Samuel Goldwyn as a picture.

"Whoopee" was the best picture Eddie Cantor ever made, and he and Mr. Goldwyn have often expressed the same desire I have already confessed to; they also want me to find another character like that.

As soon as "Whoopee" was well established at the New Amsterdam I made my first trip to Hollywood, where I was graciously received and handsomely entertained. Even then, in 1928, Hollywood was crawling with deserters from the theatre, ungrateful wretches like myself, who wanted to accumulate a little real money for a change, and provide themselves and their families with some security, which is a word we of the theatre knew absolutely nothing about. Here I found, among the actors I had often worked with, Edward Arnold, Kenneth McKenna, Donald Meek, Edna May Oliver, Robert Ames, Humphrey Bogart, Otto Kruger, Alice Brady, and a hundred others; and they were soon to be joined by many more, by far too many more for the good of the theatre.

After a month at the Hollywood Studio I returned to New York where Sam Harris produced a play of mine called "Dread" for a spring "tryout" on the road. The leading part in "Dread" was played by Spencer Tracy, one of the last parts he played before he, too, joined the picture colony.

Times were bad and the theatre was not the only business to suffer. Even before the stock market's crash it was not too difficult to figure out that although it is better to win a war than it is to lose one it might have been even better if we'd had no war at all. We are finding that out again, and this time we may remember it—or we may

forget. In spite of all our troubles, or perhaps because of them, the theatre kept on going, and during this ten-year period good plays were produced and new dramatists came into view. Before the ten years were over I had to retire from the Pulitzer Prize Committee on account of frequent trips to Hollywood, but sooner or later I managed to see all of the plays worth while. Of course, I saw "The Green Pastures," "Men in White," "Journey's End," "The Front Page," and all that was written by O'Neill, Robert Sherwood, Max Anderson, Sam Behrman, and Elmer Rice, who with "Street Scene" took his place as a really important dramatist. George Kaufman, Howard Lindsay and Sidney Kingsley were starting their long climb up the hill and Arthur Hopkins and The Theatre Guild were beating out a trail well worth following. Sensational melodrama was dead and its place was taken by the mystery plays, of which, after "The Thirteenth Chair," "The Bat" had seemed to me the most fun. The trouble with mystery plays has always been that no one has ever been able to write a very satisfactory last act for any of them. The same thing has always been true of the mystery novel. By the time it comes to write the last chapter not even the author is sure of just who committed the murder. All plays that allow themselves to fall into a definite type, as most plays do, must follow the established pattern of that type, whether or not their authors are aware of it, just as simple a little play as "Journey's End" was forced to do. When "Journey's End" was first produced we all thought it to be a much better play than it seemed to be when, some years later, we saw a revival of it. It was the same play but we were different. "Journey's End" came along, as all the good war plays have always seemed to do, not during the wars, but at some distance after them. After our Civil War all of the war plays were rubbish until Shenendor's "The Girl I Left Behind Me" and "Secret Service" came, and all of these plays were produced in my time, twenty-five years or more after the war was over. It was the same with the First World War; the best plays to come out of it were "What Price Glory" and "Journey's End," both inspired by the war, of course, but written long enough after the smoke had settled to allow of a clear view of the field of battle. As yet no good play has come out of the Second World War but before long now we may begin to look for them.

When my two years' contract with Paramount expired, I decided not to renew it. I had enjoyed the work but my wife and my doctor thought it was about time for me to slow down a little, and my two boys by now were old enough to join in with their mother and the doctor and give me orders. As I was outnumbered, four to one, I surrendered. I decided that, in the future, I would only go to Hollywood to do one picture, or that I would write an occasional screen story in New York. Like many of my firm decisions, I haven't always stuck to it, but on the whole it has worked out

well enough.

At this time my younger son Owen was the juvenile man of the famous old Lakewood Stock Company at Lakewood, Maine, and Mrs. Davis and I decided to drive down and visit him. I was born in Portland and brought up in Bangor, but I had not been back to my native state but once since I had left to go to Harvard many years before. All that I knew about Skowhegan was a dim memory of going there with a Republican Club and wearing a white cotton uniform and carrying a leaky torch in a parade during the very hot campaign for the election of James G. Blaine, and that was so long ago that I shudder even to think about it. My only other visit to Maine and to Skowhegan had been for one night in 1926 when I went there with Jed Harris and Sam Behrman to see Sam Behrman's first play tried out by the Lakewood Stock Company. This Lakewood Stock Company is the oldest theatrical organization in America and it was founded and conducted by Herbert Swett who had been at school with me when we were boys in Bangor. I was charmed by what little I saw of Lakewood in that brief visit and I had promised my old friend Herbert to return there as soon as it was possible for me to do so. Mrs. Davis and I arrived there in the early summer of 1927 and we have spent every summer there, with the exception of the war years, ever since. There has always been a well-established actors' colony there, and the Arthur Byrons, Jack Deveraux and his wife, Bea Drew, who was John Drew's daughter, Albert Hackett and his wife, Wallis Clark, John Hymer, Sam Shipman and a number of other old friends of ours owned camps or cottages about the lake. One afternoon, a day or two after our arrival, Arthur Byron took Mrs. Davis to look at a cottage next to his, at the other end of the lake from the theatre, and without saying anything to me she bought it. It was a quaint old-fashioned place, with a big red barn and out-houses, but it is in quite the loveliest grove of giant silver birch in all of Maine. By the next Spring, after she and Herbert Swett had torn the cottage to pieces and had it put back together again, it was both comfortable and attractive. By now we have spent a good many happy summers there and we, who have lived so long in hotels and New York apartments, find ourselves thinking of it as our home.

Returning to New York I rather reluctantly agreed to go back to Hollywood to write one picture for Will Rogers. Up to that time I had worked only for Paramount out there, but Will Rogers was one of the Fox Film Company stars and my contract was with them.

Just as I arrived Hollywood was struck by lightning. The "talking picture" had just come in and from the very first it became clear that the day of the silent picture was over. This was a dreadful blow to all of the big companies, especially to Fox—

who had contracts with a number of popular stars that they had valued in the millions. That these great box office names should fail them had never seemed possible, but unfortunately you can't very well make a good talking picture with an actor who can't talk. Suddenly these glamorous ladies, with whom all the world was in love, began coming out on the screen to make noises rather like the pitiful squeaks of a frightened mouse. They tried everything, even importing a famous engineer from the General Electric laboratory in Schenectady, who attempted to paint with a camel's hair brush, on the sound track, something that would resemble the human voice, but that did not sound so good. Next they tried sending their stars to school, but going to school is something that gives its best results when started at an early age, and they hadn't started soon enough. Hollywood lost many of its stars before all this settled down, but it was some time before the talking picture was anywhere as near to being an art as the best of the silent pictures had grown to be.

Will Rogers was a little upset over all this fuss. He was really a modest fellow and the shyness that so endeared him to his audiences in the days when he was twirling his rope in his vaudeville act was a perfectly natural expression of his character. Mrs. Davis and I had met him in New York and in London, but it wasn't until I worked with him in Hollywood that I really began to know him.

I would say that above anything else, Will was a wise man, if wisdom means what I have always thought it does. To me wisdom isn't something to be learned from books, it comes from contacts with life, contacts made by one who has the gift of observation and the good sense of being able to separate the wheat from the chaff. I think, for example, that a wise man never sits down but once on a hot stove, while the fool keeps on trying it. I have heard Will described as shrewd, but that is another word that often needs defining—shrewd is often used in the place of mean, and Will Rogers was never that. We decided that the first Will Rogers talking picture was to be "They Had to See Paris," based on a very amusing novel by Homer Croy. The fate of this picture was very important to all of us and I asked the Fox people to call in Sonia Lavine to assure us of a perfect "shooting serip." Sonia Lavine knew more about what a camera could do than I ever have found out, and with her help I wrote what turned out to be much the best of all the Will Rogers pictures. The Homer Croy novel was really good, and Will's part was absolutely right. He was a very simple and honest actor and gave a really fine performance. Frank Borzage's direction was splendid and "They Had to See Paris" was much the best picture I have ever written.

Mrs. Davis had grown to be very fond of Will Rogers and of his wife and their daughter Mary, and at her suggestion it was decided that, as the Lakewood Theatre

season was about to open, Mary should go down there as a member of the company. A good stock company is by far the best school for any young actor and Mary Rogers was very popular with the Lakewood audiences. At first, no doubt, on her father's account, but later on her own.

After the great success of "They Had to See Paris," Will Rogers calmly refused to do another picture until I could get back out there and write it for him, which I, being equally obstinate, refused to do until my summer at Lakewood was over. I was growing very fond of the lazy, comfortable life, and there I was, the unpaid and unofficial adviser of Herbert Smith and of Melville Burke, who, during all my time down there, has been the director. Before Mr. Burke came there Howard Lindsay had directed, and, before his day, there had been other good stage directors. I had myself been, years before, a stock company director and during the years when stock companies were scattered all over the country, I had known almost all of the men who had been in charge of them, but at this difficult job, Melville Burke, was, I think, a better man than any of us. The directing, with five rehearsals, of a play for a stock company, is a different thing from the directing of a new play for New York production. It requires a man who knows exactly what he can get out of his actors in the absurdly short time allowed to him, and never asks any more or takes any less.

The Lakewood Company has always been good; very many of our best actors have been members of it: Vincent Price, Humphrey Bogart, Charles Coburn, Mary Phillips, Jean Dixon, Owen Davis, Jr., and at times Arthur Byron, Florence Reed and Wallis Clark were in the company when Mary Rogers arrived. During the three seasons she was there, she and Owen played opposite one another in about forty different plays.

In the late fall, I went back to Hollywood and wrote another screen play for Rogers. This time I founded it on one of the old plays that George Cohan had worked on, "So This Is London," and although I never liked it as well as I had liked the first one, it was quite all right.

Rogers again demanded that I remain out there and work on another yarn for him, but in my heart I never did care very much for the job of a Hollywood screen writer, and again I seemed to hear the theatre calling to me.

That winter, my son Donald and I made a dramatization of Pearl Buck's "The Good Earth" and it was produced by the Theatre Guild with Alla Nazimova, Claud Rains, Henry Travis and Sydney Greenstreet. Mrs. Buck's novel was packed with drama but it was not easy, and looking back on it, I doubt if it was possible to make a good play out of it. The theatre doesn't fit itself to that sort of thing as successfully as it can be done in Hollywood. We never really got the atmosphere of "The Good

Earth” of China, that was not only the background of the story, but was the story itself.

Later, Donald Davis and I sold the picture rights to M.G.M. and, as they did it, it became part of the history of the moving pictures.

During that winter, I joined the Dutch Treat Club and the Artists and Writers Golf Club, a group of Dutch Treat members who are golf players, or who think they are, and whose happy custom it is to descend upon Palm Beach each winter in a body for golf and—well—for whatever else a kind fate may send to them. They are, or at least they were until the war came along and hardened the hearts of men, made welcome by The Florida East Coast Railroad, and by the best hotels and Golf and Bathing Clubs, at terms that even artists and writers could afford. This welcome made warmer no doubt by the publicity that always follows the arrival and the departure of this famous, if somewhat uninhibited group. Our arrival in Florida is always hailed with cordial deference, and our departure with almost hysterical approval.

Our theatre, in these years just before the great war, had fallen into a condition of decay. The only activity at all was in a few of our largest cities and there was practically no business on the road. Even in New York things were in a bad way, and one after another the great playhouses were being taken over by the banks. I never yet have seen a time when a really fine play could not draw an audience, but the theatre, like any other business, cannot get along when only its very choicest products can be sold. Also, I am sorry to say, I have never yet seen a time when “really fine plays” were plentiful. The good actor is almost always good, but there never has been and never will be a dramatist who never writes a failure, and the confused and troubled condition of the public’s mind, and their surrender of their old standards of morality and religion, made it very difficult to write a play with which any composite audience could agree. I am more than willing to admit that many of these changes had been long overdue, that our social structure needed plenty of alteration, and that many of our old idols had feet of clay, but the first duty of a dramatist is to force his audience into full agreement with what he has to say, and that’s no easy job just now. Grant me that “Right is more than might,” that “Virtue is its own reward,” that “The wages of sin is death” and that “True love is always waiting for us,” and that “They lived happily ever after” and I have little doubt but what I could cash in.

There was a day when any audience would be eager to grant these things—but they won’t do it any longer. About all an audience used to demand was an emotional reaction; now they want a little common sense. Romance still is welcome in the



theatre, but when your audience demands truth with its romance it isn't so easy to deliver it.

New times demand new playwrights and here in 1934, the theatre found one in Lillian Hellman's "The Children's Hour." A very definite new note was struck. What seemed to me to be the best scene in modern drama was in this play. Two young women who had been slandered by an older one called on her and demanded to be told her reasons for her saying what she had said. These three women were beautifully drawn and every word they spoke, in a long harrowing scene, was exactly what these three women under the same circumstances would have said. That, of course, should be true of every scene in every play, but it isn't.

I had been working very hard on a new play and when it was completed I took it to Katharine Cornell. It was a romantic drama of the old South and I had done a lot of research on it. Miss Cornell liked the play very much and wanted to play the part and this naturally delighted me. It had long been an ambition of mine to do a play for her, and at last I saw that ambition about to be realized. Miss Cornell's husband, Guthrie McClintic, was then in Paris and when she wanted to have a contract drawn to do this play "Jezebel," I told her it might be better to wait until Mr. McClintic had read it. Miss Cornell, however, insisted, and the contract was drawn and signed. In the meanwhile, McClintic had gone ahead with very ambitious plans for the production of "Romeo and Juliet" and fully committed himself to it. He sent for me when he returned and told me that, and I offered at once to cancel the "Jezebel" contract, but Miss Cornell was reluctant to do this. Although, by the contract, she had agreed to play the part herself she suggested that she and Mr. McClintic should produce the play with Tallulah Bankhead as "Jezebel." We finally decided to do this as Miss Bankhead was an ideal selection for the part and as soon as she read the play she knew that she could do wonders with it. The play was a rather wooden, old-fashioned Southern melodrama, but it had some strong meat in it and the part of Jezebel had everything that any actress could ask for. Guthrie McClintic directed it and Joseph Mielziner designed a wonderful production. We had only been in rehearsal for a few days before we knew that Miss Bankhead was going to give a sensational performance, and then the blow fell. I have usually been a very lucky man, but for once I drew a blank. The very day of the dress rehearsal, at a time when we, all of us, were confident of a great success, Miss Bankhead was taken to a hospital and we were told that it would be months before she could possibly act again. That really put us on a spot; there had been a fortune spent on the production, our full rehearsal period was over, and the large company were on full salary. The only thing we could do was to go ahead without Miss Bankhead. We had

a lot of trouble and no time at all to get things right. I was forced to rip my poor play apart and change the character of Jezebel from a sort of female “Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde” to a sweet little Southern belle, and the audiences hated the resultant mess almost as much as I did. Later, when Warner Brothers produced it as a picture with Bette Davis as Jezebel, and the play as I first wrote it, she won the Academy Award.

That summer in Lakewood, Mary Rogers and her aunt and her mother had taken a cottage and Will Rogers came there on a visit. From the first, Will was greatly attracted by the place. He was attracted, as I had been, by the queer blending of theatre and of the wilderness, and the informal, simple way of life that existed there. Will, as all the world knows, never met a man he didn't like, but he liked them better when they wore a flannel shirt. Neither he nor I ever cared anything about big parties or formal social gatherings. I know that anyone who has been a part of the Hollywood Colony is supposed to live in the atmosphere of a Roman banquet of the time of Nero, and to keep on fiddling feverishly while Rome burns, but I don't think Will Rogers could play a fiddle, and I am sure that I never could.

I have spent considerable time in Hollywood. Very often my wife was with me and frequently we dined with friends, exactly as we had done in any other part of the world where we happened to be. Douglas Fairbanks and Mary Pickford quite naturally entertained us, as we had known Mary Pickford since she was a little girl and Douglas had been in several of my plays, and was a member of the old stock company I had in Syracuse so many years ago. We had, naturally, many other old friends out there and we made many new ones. From time to time we dined with them, and in return they dined with us at our hotel.

They have beautiful homes out there and they make money enough to allow of considerable luxury, but they have a lot of work to do and their luxury doesn't continue very long if they neglect their jobs. As a matter of fact, I have always thought Hollywood to be rather a dull place, but there are all sorts of people out there, and I would be as likely to bore the very gay ones as much as they would bore me.

When Will Rogers left Lakewood, after a short visit, he promised to return soon but he never did. At the last minute he changed his mind about paying that visit to us and went on another of those boyish adventures that were so dear to him, and he and Wiley Post were killed when the old plane that Post had tacked together crashed, way up in the wilds of Northern Canada. Word of this came to us by telephone from the press rooms in Portland and it had to be broken to Mrs. Rogers and to Mary. A number of times in my life I have had to be the bearer of news like this and I had often wondered if there wasn't some better way of doing it than the

awkward phrases I used, but I know by now there isn't; it's just one of those things that no one has ever mastered.

Herbert Swett, who was the supreme authority down there, was away on a business trip, and there was a lot to do. I did what I could, but Mrs. Byron and Mrs. Davis did a lot more. When I got the news down to my camp, Mrs. Rogers was on the veranda of the Byron cottage next door. Mrs. Davis and the Byrons took charge of things, and Mrs. Davis went to the theatre where Mary was rehearsing the next week's play, and broke the news to her. Mary had been trained, as we of the theatre all have been, that "the show must go on," and she got herself composed enough to say that rather than have the theatre closed she would play her part that night in a play that, by some chance, had to do with a plane crash and death. I was strongly against this and Melville Burke, the director, flatly refused to allow it, much to the relief of Humphrey Bogart who was playing the leading part, and who said that even if Mary could muster up courage enough to get through her part at such a time he doubted very much if he could control himself enough to go through it with her.

An hour or two after we got the news of Will's death all the reporters that could get to us by plane or rail or car were on their way, and by late afternoon the little place was crowded. Among at least a hundred telephone calls I answered, one was from Colonel Charles Lindbergh, a great friend of Will's, who offered to fly up and bring Will's body back to California. As it turned out, the people on the West Coast had attended to that. The crowd about the cottage where the Rogers were living was growing all the time, and as Mrs. Rogers desired to join her sons, who were in New York, I took advantage of the fact that it was night by now and I smuggled Mary and Mrs. Rogers out of their back door and drove them across country to a distant railroad station.

Will Rogers' death was absolutely useless and absolutely unnecessary. Had he come down to Maine, as he had fully intended to do, he would probably be alive today, and today we have need of straight-thinking, straight-talking men. Will had the public's ear as very few men have ever had it. He talked in plain words that everyone could understand and what he said was always true and always kind, and it was often wise and it always made sense. It's been a long time since all that could be said about the words of any of our public men.

*1937 to Today*

BY THIS time Lakewood was getting to be very popular with the people of the theatre and many of my friends came down there to spend the season. Cottages were taken by William A. Brady and Grace George, by Groucho Marx, Max Gordon, Ed Wynn and his son Keenan, now so popular as a comedian in the pictures. The war was soon to close the old place down, but as yet there was no sign of that. Jed Harris called me one day, on the telephone, and asked me if I had ever read Edith Wharton's "Ethan Frome," as, of course, I had. He asked me what I thought of it, to which I replied that I thought, as everyone else did, that it was "the best short novel in the English language." He then wanted to know if I could see a play in it and my reply to that was that it had been so many years since I had read it that I'd have to get a copy of the novel before I could say either yes or no.

Mr. Harris offered to have a copy sent to me but I told him that wouldn't be necessary because even as small a town as Skowhegan had a public library and every library in the United States would have a copy of "Ethan Frome." Jed Harris doubted that but I didn't, as I knew "Ethan Frome" was, or at least that it had been, "required reading" in the high schools. In an hour I had a copy and the next morning I called Jed Harris and my son Donald and told them to "come on down." Mr. Harris worked with us for three or four days and then went back to New York while Donald and I started to lay out the story line. The story line was clear enough, and the characters were all drawn and were so real that they seemed actually to be alive, but as Miss Wharton wrote the story, it was all told to a stranger who had seen poor old Ethan, crippled and broken, dragging himself along the village street. It was the story of something that happened twenty years before and none of the characters, either of the book or of the play, told any of it. What they had done was clear enough but what they had said, it was up to us to write.

Ethan Frome, his wife Zenobia, and little Mattie were glowing with life upon Mrs. Wharton's canvas, but she had given them no voices at all. It was a story of a very tender love, and of a hate so bitter that it could end only in a dreadful tragedy, but nowhere in the book was there a record of one single angry word. What Zenobia had said, and what Ethan had said, was sometimes briefly written down, but always in the words of some neighbor who was repeating it, but Mattie was only told about; what she had said and how she expressed herself Donald Davis and I had to work out ourselves.

Good dramatizations are not made by cutting pages out of a novel and sticking them into a play manuscript, but always before I had chosen some speeches, some sentences, and upon occasion some whole scenes, but not this time. Here were three characters, among the most eloquent I have ever known, yet we had to put into their mouths almost every word they were to say. We worked on this play all summer and after I had done all I could, Donald kept on working.

I have always been rather a lone wolf; I have never in my life written with any other author except this son of mine, and then only on a couple of dramatizations. In the theatre I had refused any collaboration, and in Hollywood I had my lawyer draw a contract that protected me from taking part in the dreadful custom that often forces as many as six really experienced authors to sit down together and write the same story at the same time. Of course, six authors can't write a good story together any more than six cooks can make a good soup; the only real difference is that nobody would have to eat the soup. I have always worked alone because I can begin working when I please, at any hour of the day or night, and work for ten minutes, or for ten hours without a break, as I have often done.

There are some authors who actually hate to write; I know one famous playwright who always must yield to an actual nausea as he is confronted by the keyboard of his typewriter, but the really happy hours of my life have been spent at an old wooden desk, the first article of furniture that Mrs. Davis and I ever owned. I have carried this desire to be the master of my own fate so far that I have always been reluctant even to making the dramatization of a novel, which has worked out rather well for me, as that reluctance made me very careful about whose novel I would attempt to dramatize.

Donald has more patience and more moderation than I could ever claim and he kept on with "Ethan Frome" for almost a year, and the really fine play that it finally became was due to his patience and his sensitive appreciation of Edith Wharton's grim, but beautiful story.

Among the scattered relics of all these years—the one I prize the most is a letter Mrs. Wharton wrote to us from France, just after she had read our play. In part her letter reads . . .

"Few novelists have had the good fortune to see the characters they had imagined in fiction transported to the stage without loss or alteration of any sort, without even that grimacing enlargement of gesture and language supposed to be necessary to 'carry' over the footlights.

"Through your great skill and exquisite sensitiveness my poor little group of hungry New England villagers will live again."

Mrs. Wharton never saw the play on the stage. She died shortly after its production, but Ned Sheldon, who was one of her closest friends, showed me several letters from her, after the New York opening, expressing her pride and gratitude.

Donald and I returned to New York in September and turned the first draft of the play over to Jed Harris and he was greatly pleased with it but, as Donald still wanted to keep on working on it, Mr. Harris offered to work with him. This was all right with me as Mr. Harris is really a great editor, and of course I knew that any changes made would, in the end, have to meet with my approval. They worked for several weeks. In the meantime, I had made a contract by which Donald and I bound ourselves to write, for the radio, a one-hour musical comedy every week for 39 weeks, to be sponsored by Procter and Gamble. Donald and I were to write the book and Arthur Swartz and Howard Dietz were to do the music and lyrics. This was my first experience in radio and as it looked like a tough job, I told Donald I would go ahead with it alone and leave him to iron anything like a kink out of the manuscript of "Ethan Frome"; but almost from the first I had to call on him for help—a one-hour musical play every week for thirty-nine weeks! A plot, a story line of about eleven thousand words and the introduction and blending in of from five to eight musical numbers, time out for the necessary conferences with Arthur Swartz and Howard Dietz and with the agent, the sponsors and the director! Time out also for three rehearsals every week. In my time I've taken a crack at every form of writing ever heard of in the show business.

I wrote vaudeville acts and gags for minstrel shows. I wrote what we used to call "black face acts," and "afterpieces" for burlesque shows, and melodramas and comedy dramas, farces, comedies and musical comedies and real dramas, dramatized novels and wrote and edited motion pictures. I have written miles of press notices and dramatic criticism, but this writing "Soap Opera" for radio is the all-time low. I am sure it shouldn't be, and even more sure it is. The only reason on earth why a good writer can't write a good play, or lay out an honest story line for the radio, is that there are too many road blocks, land mines, barbed wire mazes and sand traps set up ahead of him. Necessary censorship, unnecessary censorship, arbitrary decisions, obsolete customs, unprovable facts and questionable deductions! The author bows humbly before the censorship rules of the network, of the agency, and of the sponsor.

The big radio networks have trained officials with whom it isn't always possible for a writer to be in agreement, but they know their business. Many of the agency directors, however, know very little and most of the sponsors, although they know a

lot about their product, know less about a story than a Hollywood script girl. Some writers seem rather to like all this assistance and advice, but in the theatre, and in Hollywood, and during my thirty-nine weeks in radio, I always laughed at any man who tried to tell me what I was to write, or what I was not to write, although at times I was forced to yield reluctantly to the censor.

Donald and I put in a whole winter on this job and it almost drove me crazy. Our deadline for our story was Monday, and when late Sunday night I could write my favorite words, "The End," we could not sink back with a scream of joy—the scream would be there all right—but it was a scream of horror, as it flashed into our minds that before we could go to bed we must lay out the story line for the next one.

The old melodramas never had affected me like that. I often sat calmly at my desk knowing that by a date, not many months ahead, anywhere from four to six of these twenty-five-thousand-word dramas must be written and cast and in rehearsal, and for some strange reason I was quite gleeful about the fun I was going to have.

That summer Howard Lindsay, Russel Crouse and Oscar Serlin came down to Lakewood and made the first production of "Life With Father." Howard Lindsay, years before, had been the director there and had also played many parts, even to taking a crack at Hamlet when it was done there in a very fancy manner by Norman Bel Geddes and the Lakewood Company. Howard's wife, Dorothy Stickney, had been probably the outstanding favorite of all the actors who had ever played there, and now, when she returned to play in "Life With Father" there was great excitement.

The play went very well and there was no doubt at all about its being a success, although I am not sure that any of us realized how tremendous that success was to be.

In the Lakewood Colony that year was Clifford Odets. At that time I had never met him and he often came down to sit on my veranda, that in its day has sheltered many young dramatists. He was a writer of unusual talent and I knew he was going to be heard from.

It was time now for the production of "Ethan Frome," but Jed Harris had let his first enthusiasm burn itself out and he told me he had found it impossible to cast it. To me this seemed absurd, as such a statement always has seemed to me to be. During our last war we needed a great general, and, as George Washington was not around to take the job, we cast General Eisenhower in the part. There are always good men at hand for any job. It is not because, in all this great country, there is no man with brains and courage that we have been drifting about, of late, like a rudderless ship in a stormy sea. It is because we, who are supposed to call the plays, are the ones who

are lacking.

Donald was a great admirer of Jed Harris, but all my life I have refused to sit around and wait for any man, and the day the "Ethan Frome" production contract expired I took a copy of the play to Max Gordon. Max Gordon read it in two hours and cast it in two days. He sent a cable to Raymond Massey to London, telegraphed to Pauline Lord and telephoned to Ruth Gordon. I had often worked with Pauline Lord and Ruth Gordon and I knew that Raymond Massey was a fine actor. Mr. Gordon called Guthrie McClintic in to stage the play and Joseph Mielziner to design the scenery. It never takes Max Gordon long to find out what he wants to do, and it takes him even less time to do it. In a month "Ethan Frome" was in rehearsal.

During that month I caught up with the plays I had not seen and from that time on I have been following them. Business was not too good. A keen ear could catch the rumblings of war in the distance, and I never doubted that we must be in it. I was as conscious of impending danger as one is at times in Florida when the ocean is calm, but a bit too calm, and there is no wind at all, and a queer, breathless hush over everything; the old-timers down there know what that means, and begin to prepare for trouble. I had seen one war come on and I was quite sure that another was about to come, but we kept on fiddling.

The Group Theatre was doing good work and Clifford Odets was justifying my faith in him. Noel Coward was quite the man of the hour and to me he has always seemed to be a very great showman. He is, just as George Cohan was, a man who had all the talents of the theatre in his hands. He, like George Cohan, could write plays and songs and music and act and sing a song, and direct a play. I have known four men, Coward and Cohan, Winchell Smith and George Kaufman, whose very presence around a play was almost an assurance of success.

"Ethan Frome" opened in Philadelphia and won from the start wonderful notices from the dramatic critics, as it did two weeks later in New York. "Ethan Frome" is strong meat for a mixed audience, and it was too expensive to make much money. Business was very good and we were all proud of it as we are of the Bette Davis picture. I am sorry that Edith Wharton didn't see it, as once more her "Poor little group of hungry New England villagers will be reborn."

"Ethan Frome" was still running in New York while my "Jezebel" picture was being photographed on the Warner Brothers' lot in Hollywood. Because we had made such a mess of the play when it was at first produced I thought it wise to take a run out to California and be ready to see that the play was played as I first wrote it: that the character of Jezebel should be what I had intended it to be, not softened



down into a coy, and simpering virgin. That had happened to me before as it had happened a thousand times to a thousand different playwrights. At times a whole play will be ruined by one faulty bit of direction, or by some one actor's misunderstanding of a character. Often, during early rehearsals, I have seen a play allowed to get just one step out of line, and when it does, unless some keen ear is there to catch the note of discord, the poor author is lucky if he ever sees the play he thought he had written.

As a matter of fact, plays and picture stories ought to be directed by the one who wrote them if, and in that is the trouble, the author has the eye and the ear and the firmness of a real director, plus the very necessary experience. James A. Herne, Charles Hoyt, Edward Harrigan, George Cohan, James Forbes, and George Kelly always staged their own plays, and staged them, I think, better than anyone else could have done. I was a good director when I first started out, but as time went on I developed my power of invention to such an absurd degree that I found myself quite unable to stick to what was written in the manuscript from which I was directing, and calling upon the actors to rehearse what was practically a new play at each rehearsal.

Out in Hollywood, on the Warner Brothers lot, everything seemed to be in fine shape. Bette Davis was getting every value out of the part of Jezebel. Bette Davis was a good actress before she ever saw Hollywood; there have been other really fine actresses out there, but hers is, I think, the finest true dramatic talent. I knew her when she was a young actress with my old friend, Richard Bennett, and it has been no surprise to me to see her climbing to the very top of the Hollywood tree. There was one other reason for this visit at that time to the West Coast; that was to discuss, with one of the largest picture companies, another long-term contract they had offered me. The contract was to be for fifty-two weeks a year and for four years. It would have put into my hands something of the power of "Aladdin's lamp" and I was tempted. Fortunately for me, my wife insisted that the work would surely kill me before the four years were up, and that in any case we didn't have four years left to throw away. Even at that time I knew she was very sensible and later, when the present scale of income tax went into effect, I knew she had been inspired. I doubt very much now my ever going back to California for any reason other than to visit my son Donald who, with his wife, has settled down out there. They have bought a home and, although I am sure he will write plays from time to time, he will, at least for the present, continue as a contract writer.

Just before we left for New York I said good-bye to my old friend Thomas Meighan; he had been very ill and Mrs. Meighan was taking him to the Florida he

had always loved. I went with them to their car and, as we shook hands, we both of us knew we were never to meet again. None of us really knows what happens to us after death comes. I may have some vague notions about that, but I know both too little and too much to dare to write them down. I can only say that if such a thing as a reservation can be made in that other sphere I am going to ask that I be sent wherever Tommy Meighan is—he always was swell company.

Back in New York my agent, Richard Madden, handed me a mystery novel by Frances and Richard Lockridge, and asked me if I cared to dramatize it. I told him I did not want to write either another melodrama or mystery play, but that there was one condition under which I would do it. I had been charmed by the Lockridge stories about “Mr. and Mrs. North” that had been running in *The New Yorker* and that if I could use all they had written about these characters, and blend that material with the plot of their murder mystery, I would take on the job.

Out of the novel and some twenty-odd sketches I made an effective comedy and we called it “Mr. and Mrs. North.” I went down to Skowhegan to do the work and Frances and Richard Lockridge came down when it was played for a tryout week by the Lakewood Company. I saw then that my hunch about the Mrs. North character had been right, as the audiences loved her, so I did the play all over again, rather kidding the mystery part of it and putting all the bets on the rather screwy but very lovable Mrs. North and her bewildered husband. The play was produced in New York by Alfred De Liagre, and he staged it with much of the skill and good taste we were to see later when he did the Van Druten comedy, “The Voice of the Turtle.”

Peggy Conklin was “Mrs. North” and Albert Hackett played “Jerry.” Although not a “smash hit” the play always made money and later became very popular with the summer stock companies and has been playing ever since all over the country by the amateur groups and Little Theatres. Radio also has been good to “Mr. and Mrs. North” as it is now in its third year as a weekly program, and as I own the dramatic rights that is all right with me, especially as I have never been called on to do any work at all on it. This is, I think, the only easy money I have ever earned, and although it isn’t much money, it has restored my faith in human nature.

“Arsenic and Old Lace” was produced just at this time and it was no help at all to “Mr. and Mrs. North” as it was, in some ways, very much the same mixture of horror and comedy as I had made of the Lockridge stories, but it was a better play, for which I severely blame Howard Lindsay and Russel Crouse, for surely one “Life With Father” ought to be enough for anybody. Soon after this Gertrude Lawrence came along with “Lady in the Dark” and although it was a hit I thought it a far finer

play than Moss Hart had been given credit for. When he wrote this play he had his fingers on something that might easily have been the great drama that I have always thought he would some day write. He is well used to success by now, and he has made a lot of money, but I think it is in him to capture something that inflation and income taxes can't take away.

It was at about this time that I began to be asked to pay for the errors of my youth and the impossible demands I had been making on my vitality during these fifty years. Far too many million words written in long-hand, too many hours of work, and too many days and nights of fierce excitement. For the first part of these fifty years I did nothing at all but work; then, when I was remonstrated with, and told that I must devote some of my time to play I played with the same exaggerated fury of effort I had devoted to my writing. Now I was in about the same shape as the "One Horse Shay"; each morning when I woke up I found that another part was missing. Then the war came and the next four years are years I don't care to think about. Few people do, of course.

Both of my boys enlisted at once, and Donald was in an ensign's uniform. A week or so later Owen called on me, while I was in the New York Hospital, and he was in Army uniform. Both of the boys were in active service and I was very anxious about them. Lakewood was closed down and about all I had to do during the next years was to keep on worrying about the boys between visits to the hospital, where I came to be looked upon as practically a steady boarder.

All things, however, come to an end, and the war did, but I was in bad shape until Lakewood opened up in June and a long summer in the open air brought back my old faith and confidence and got me into fine condition to face the next fifty years.

In New York, before I left for Maine, I saw "There Shall Be No Night," "I Remember Mama," "Dear Ruth," and "Born Yesterday," all good plays, especially "I Remember Mama," which seemed to me to be about as human and as tender a comedy as I had seen in a very long time. I also saw "Oklahoma" and I put it in a class almost by itself. It has everything; the music, the lyrics, the production, the cast and the direction were quite perfect and it was such a splendid example of the value of good taste in the theatre that already its effect upon other managers is showing. "Oklahoma" is one of the three best musical shows I have ever seen; the other two are: the opening night of "Pinafore" at The Boston Theatre, when I was a boy, and Winthrop Ames' lovely production of "Iolanthe."

The writing of this rambling narrative has brought back to me a flood of memories and has bridged the years so successfully that I seem to be living those old days again and almost forgotten faces are again in focus. What a gallery they make!

Many of them are still living, too many have gone on ahead, but as I sit here at my battered old desk tonight, they are all here with me. Most of them, in framed photographs, are looking down at me and smiling, probably because I, too, am smiling as I look up at them—I like old friends! I see many here that I haven't mentioned in this article, some of them the great names of the theatre, some of them stars for whom I have written plays or leading actors in their support. There is a group of the important writers of music, old friends and men I greatly admired: Irving Berlin, Victor Herbert, and George Gershwin. Among the actors I see John Mason, Victor Moore, Tim Murphy, three of the very best, and there I can see Ernest Truex and Sylvia Field, Tom Ross and Florence Nash, Willard Robertson, Bobbie North and Cliff Gordon, Spring Byington, Elizabeth Patterson, Vincent Price, William Harrigan, Lou Calhern, John C. Rice and Sally Cohan, Annie and Jenny Yeamans, Marguerite Clark, Gene Buck, Walter Hampden, Otto Harbach and many others.

And now, out of this panorama of the fifty years, I am going to make out a list of the actors and the authors and the plays that seem to me to have been the high spots in my experience. Of course I know that no one will agree with this list of mine, and that isn't going to trouble me at all. It won't be the first time that what I have written has met with stern rejection. I will be accused, no doubt, of giving more credit to actors of long ago than to the players of today. If that is true it is not because I think lightly of the actors of today, but the actors of years ago had some great advantages. They had a very much better training and they had more effective parts to play. How can a modern actor in a play of today hope to scale to the heights on which Edwin Booth stood, when in his robes of office he "Launched the Curse of Rome"? Too often the colloquial dialogue of the plays we dramatists must write today results in a sort of dead pan underplaying that is just as "ham" as any old style ranting ever was. I have seen in the last few years a number of young girls of very limited experience, who gave really charming performances of leading parts, and whose talents might well cause their names to be written down in a list such as the one I am making, but unfortunately there are only two paths open to them. Either they are promptly swallowed up by Hollywood, or they are given the next fat part that comes along, before they are sure enough of what they are doing to be able to play it.

Here is my list:

*The Best of the Last Fifty Years*

The best dramatist—Eugene O'Neill

The best play—"The Easiest Way"

The best actor—Edwin Booth

The best actress—Sarah Bernhardt

The most lovable personality—Maude Adams  
The best comedian—Joseph Jefferson  
The best character comedians—James Lewis, Sol Smith Russell, William Sampson  
Best writer of light music—Jerome Kern  
Best lyric writer—Oscar Hammerstein II or Larry Hart  
Best all around man of the theatre—George Cohan  
Most thrilling first nights:  
    Booth as Hamlet  
    “The Easiest Way”  
    Jean Eagles in “Rain”  
    “What Price Glory”  
Best box office draws today:  
    Miss Cornell, Lunt and Fontanne, Helen Hayes, Gertrude Lawrence

My next autobiography to be published in the winter of 1997 will be called “My First Hundred Years in the Theatre” and I am not sure as yet of all that I shall have to say in it. I know that the theatre will still be here; it can’t die as long as little girls like to play with dolls, or little boys dress up as soldiers. In any case, how could the theatre die. Didn’t one of the old philosophers, I think it was the elder Pliny, once say, “Nothing in this universe ever perishes, things merely vary and change their form”? So if the theatre wants to change its form a little why should it bother me? I have been through so many changes in the theatre that nothing could surprise me.

One of the changes will, I think, be brought about by television, the youngest of the theatre’s arts, but a combination of all of them. It is the radio, the talking motion picture and the theatre, all in one, and you don’t have to go out in the rain and hunt for a cab to see what you want to see. Turn the dial of your own television set and there it is. It hasn’t quite grown up yet, but it is growing very fast. It is going to make a lot of jobs for actors, and for writers—hundreds, even thousands of jobs, and it is going to bring about changes in radio and in the pictures. I think television is going places, but television and the radio, and the motion picture are just changing forms of the theatre, the Mother that gave them birth.

Of course it may be that, with my usual optimism, I have counted too much upon my own vitality. It is even possible that this 1997 article of mine will never be written, but if that is to be the way of it, it won’t matter very much. I will find some other thing to do and I have no fear of being lonely. I was taught a lesson about that some years ago, and I am not going to forget it. At the St. Andrews’ Golf Club there was a veteran golfer, a good player, a great editor, and a man we loved and admired. As time went on this man grew old, then something went very wrong and he was taken to a hospital. In time he came back to us and played a few rounds of golf, but death’s hand was closing on him and he went back to the hospital again. When

visitors were allowed to see him the president of the club went there and said, "Listen, George, the boys were talking in the locker room today and we have decided that one of us will come here to the hospital every night at about eight o'clock and spend the evening. We don't want you to be lonely."

The old man looked up at him and smiled and said: "You don't have to do anything like that, Bill. I have lived a long, full life, and I've had a bully time. I don't need anybody to sit with me. There is no danger of my ever being lonely. I have too many happy memories."

I, too, have lived a long, full life and I have my share, and more, of happy memories. I think the reason why I have enjoyed these years is because I have never been afraid of life, and now when I am old enough to know that life holds more terrors than death can ever do I have no fear at all.

THE END



## TRANSCRIBER NOTES

Misspelled words and printer errors have been corrected.

Inconsistencies in punctuation have been maintained.

A cover was created for this eBook.

[The end of *My First Fifty Years in the Theatre* by Owen Davis]