

ON THE PERIODICAL DEVELOPMENT OF AMERICAN ONE-ACT PLAYS

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One of the most important factors of drama and theatre is not the playwright or manager or even the actor, but the audience.

If we accept the concept of drama as a highly socialized art, as an art of social thinking and activity, we have to consider that within drama in general, one-act play is extremely important, being the art of immediate and indirect thought and act, being the art of experimentalism in theatre. The explanation is, that because of its compressed nature and its concentration on a single problem, the one-act tends to depict the extremes of experience, the moments of social, theatrical crisis. The former can be seen in its social consciousness, the latter is expressed by the experimental character of the form.

Because of its social sensitivity, immediacy, brevity and easy access, in periods of intense social activities and theatrical experimentalism one-act plays grow in number and are more influential for particular layers of society. But when demands for a more or less radical change, for community feeling and experimentalism seem to disappear from the social and theatrical background — the one-act form seems to be abandoned.

Consequently, one-act plays have a periodical development and a periodical growth of importance. So, the one-act play in general, favoured by theatrical movements, little theatre groups, drama schools, experimenting amateurs, is more dependent on its social and theatrical background than a full-length play, favoured by the traditional, commercial theatre, by the professionals.

The appearance and development of the one-act play as an independent literary form and a considerable component of theatrical life can be taken as a typical contribution to the idea of its periodicity.

Both, the theory and the history of the form constitute a relatively neglected field of drama theory and criticism today — the related literature in the general field of one-act plays goes back to the first half of the century. However, the recent growth in popularity of the genre, the large number of recently written and performed one-act plays, and the movement-like character of its development seem to contradict this lack of criticism.

The justification for the independence of the form has often been discussed by its critics, as it is one of the „newest“ and, at the same time, one of the „oldest“ literary genres.

It is old because the one-act form was cultivated in ancient Greece (Sophocles); the Noh plays in medieval Japan were short dramatic forms, resembling recent one-act plays in several aspects; the medieval miracle plays and mysteries can be considered one-act plays in their original form, and, what is more, similar to recent one-act play bills, they were grouped and performed in cycles. In Italy and France the *commedia dell' arte* was popular, and constituted a short, abbreviated dramatic form.

In the anti-theatrical atmosphere of Puritan America similar short dramatic forms appeared only at a later period; they were necessarily connected with other forms of popular entertainment: vaudeville-show, variety, or circus. The after-piece, popular in the 18th century, and the curtain-raiser or the intermezzo, popular in the early 19th century U. S. can be considered to be the precursors of the independent American one-act play. But at this time their function was still subsidiary, namely to complete the performance, and to entertain the audience till the latecomers arrived, or till the scenery was changed.

We have seen that the one-act play was not a new invention, but as an independent dramatic form, it was born at the end of the 19th century.

The first programmatic attempt to define the one-act play was made by A. Strindberg, in an essay entitled „On Modern Drama and Modern Theatre“, later retitled the „One-Act Play“. (1889) It was timed to appear simultaneously with his experimental theatre in Copenhagen. In this article it was stated that the taste of the period was moving toward the brief, the short, and the expressive, and he saw the future of drama in the one-act form.² He himself was to write 11 one-acters by 1892.

It can be taken almost symbolically that the oldest play in the collection of „modern“ one-act plays, ed. by Helen L. Cohen in 1937, was written in 1889 by A. Chekhov. (The Proposal)³

The definition of the one-act play is important so as to differentiate it from the other dramatic forms. When analyzing its criticism, our attention is attracted by various definitions⁴, focusing on various points, but all of them have one point in common: a special emphasis is laid on its unity.

According to Percival Wilde, one of the major theoreticians of the genre, who wrote more than 100 one-act plays: „Unity is its inspiration, unity its aim; unity is its soul... its motive power and its limitation.“⁵

The shorter literary forms — the short story and the one-act play have much in common: because of their economy of means and material they provide a single effect. The usual one-act piece is to the play as the short story is to the novel: it can stress one aspect: character, action background, emotion. This gives it great flexibility and variety.

The major components of the one-act form may vary from play to play; unity is the feature that matters. The average playing time is 15—40 minutes, but we know a lot of one-acters not fitting this model: a play is called a one-acter both when it takes a few minutes to perform (Beckett: *Come and Go*) and when it takes a whole hour. (C. Odets: *Waiting for Lefty*)

So, the length of the play depends largely upon the nature of the dramatic situation with which it deals.

A play is called a one-acter both if it consists of one single scene (Tom Cole: *The Medal of Honor Rag*) and if it consists of a series of scenes. (E. O'Neill: *Emperor Jones*)

A one-acter can be ended by a single fall of the curtain (Susan Glaspell: *Trifles*), by a series of curtains (Henry Zeigler: *Five Days*), or there is no curtain at all. (Irwin Shaw: *Bury the Dead*).

So, instead of quantitative criteria, qualitative characteristics have to be emphasized.

Accordingly, the qualifications for one-act plays are:

- 1) singleness of theme, aimed at making a single impression
- 2) singleness of situation aimed at sustaining a single atmosphere

- 3) singleness of character, or of group character
- 4) relative economy of narrative materials.

The problem of definition was approached by Percival Wilde from a psychological point of view; he emphasized the homogenous effect of one-act plays upon the audience; and that a one-acter is intended to be assimilated by the audience at one sitting, as one whole, without the aid of intermissions.

The intermissions, used in full-length plays are not only physical but psychological necessities. The term „one-act” was interpreted by him in an interesting way: „act” is not only a theatrical term meaning a section of drama, but it can mean an „exertion of power” „something done”, „a deed”. So, a one-acter is a play, in which one can find a single exertion of power, a single thing done, a single deed.⁶

The history of the one-act play in the United States is a history of

- 1) the decline of the professional theatre
- 2) the rise of the amateur, the Little Theatre Movement.

1) The commercialism of the professional theatre was extremely intense around 1870, this year meant the „opening of the road”, when travelling companies mushroomed throughout the country with cheap performances. Consequently, the number of permanent companies decreased.⁷

	Permanent companies	Touring companies
1870	50	
1878	20	
1880	8	
1887	4	282
1900		392

At the turn of the century the Theatrical Syndicate dominated the American theatre. They controlled 500 theatres, nearly all in the U. S. with the exception of 2—3 in New York, 1 in Chicago and 1 in Philadelphia.⁸ (1904)

We have already seen that one-act plays were not favoured by this commercial system. During the 1912—13 season 150 plays were performed in the Broadway theatres, 34 of them ran more than 100 evenings: 8 comedies, 8 musicals, 1 fairy play, 16 dramas and only 1 one-act play bill. (!)⁹

2) The social tensions of the period and the commercialism of the professional theatre, which contradicted and tried to hide the problems, inspired a social and artistic rebellion that we call the Little Theatre Movement.

I. The Little Theatre is a controversial term, as sometimes the same phenomenon is called in turn, free theatre, experimental theatre, community theatre, or intimate theatre. One thing is certain concerning its terminology: „little“ does not mean size. The little theatres differ as to size: their seating capacity may vary from 40—300. Here the word „little“ rather calls to mind psychology: an intimate stage and auditorium, where players and audience can be brought into a close relationship. This way Percival Wilde’s psychologically justified concept of the true theatre and the one-act play seems to come true.

The little theatres may vary from the point of view of their amateurism as well, they represent different stages between entire amateurism through semi-professionalism to professionalism. In this latter case, if the little theatre retains its artistic ideal and does not become a profit-seeking institution, it is termed a „guild“.

(E.g.: The Washington Square Players were reorganized as the Theatre Guild.)¹⁰

The Little Theatre Movement was not simply an outgrowth of the old-time amateur show. These shows were connected with some other activity: their core was not merely theatrical: charity, — club, — or school-activity. The Little Theatre Movement is more complex, it reflects aesthetic, social and economic changes of American reality, namely:

- the new problems of the period, called to be „the awakening of social conscience“.
- the development of the dramatic taste in the country
- the decay of the professional theatre
- the new intellectual efforts in acting, playwriting, design and theatre organization.

Although the movement was deeply rooted in a changing American society and culture, it was not a mere American invention, it was influenced by a similar movement in Europe.

1887 — Free Theatre by André Antoine in Paris.

1889 — Freie Bühne in Berlin

1891 — The Independent Theatre in London

1898 — The Moscow Art Theatre¹¹

The years 1904—1913 witnessed a rapid expansion of the little theatre movement in Europe, including some Scandinavian and Eastern European countries as well. The Irish dramatic movement was the most influential of these European little theatres for the American movement.

Though there had been several brief experiments with little theatre productions in the United States during the first decade of the twentieth century (Esp. the season 1905/1912 was important).

In 1911—12 the Irish Literary Theatre, later called Abbey Theatre, spent 5 months in the States, almost twice as long as their original contract had called for. They visited 30 cities and 8 states and what is more important — with their original one-act play bills.

The years 1915/16 were of special importance. It was the time when the Provincetown Players and the Washington Square Players, the most prominent American little theatre groups, were brought about.

The next ten years (1915—1925) are referred to in American criticism as the most decisive decade in the history of the theatre in the U. S.

„As in Europe thirty years earlier, many... forces were part of the little theatre movement, a series of small theatres dedicated to the performance of plays that the established commercial theatre could not or would not produce. These forces employed new, often experimental methods of production.“¹²

Although by the late 20-ies the Little Theatres ceased to exist (The Provincetown Players), or turned professional (The Washington Square Players), they were extremely important from both a social and an artistic point of view. On the one hand, they activated new forces, they brought drama to new audiences, to thousands who might never have seen it, and, on the other hand, they raised the American one-act play to a high level and developed and gave America E. O'Neill, Susan Glaspell, Paul Green and T. Wilder.

As for the number of little theatres and groups, America led the world numerically. By about 1916 there were more than 50 little theatres in the United States. Two years later there were 60, and a catalogue of 1922, by Oliver M. Saylor, entitled „Little

Experimental and Community Theatres in the U. S.” revealed the names of 459 organizations.

The very beginning of the twentieth century created new problems in American society, which had to be faced by the artists, by the playwrights. The most immediate and intense artistic expressions of these social problems and tendencies were the one-acters of the period.

The rootlessness of the new immigrants, the lack of a sense of belonging, the problem of the urbanized cities, alcoholism, and the growing expansionism of the U. S. are reflected in E. O’Neill’s early one-acters, esp. in those which were grouped under the title „S. S. Glencairn“, with the 1st World War in the background.¹³

All these plays are dominated by the unity of atmosphere, a tragic mood being sustained. (The Moon of the Carribbees, 1916, In the Zone, 1917, The Long Voyage Home, 1918, Bound East for Cardiff, 1919.)

Susan Glaspell’s „Trifles“ (1915)¹⁴ centres around the problems of women, witnesses the initial phase of their social consciousness, partly reflecting, partly anticipating the growth of women’s movements for their rights, culminating in 1920, when suffrage was given to them.

II. After the decline of the Little Theatre Movement a new, socially conscious period of American one-act plays began, called the Workers’ Theatre Movement.

The thirties mark a social and theatrical upheaval that Harold Clurman calls „The Fervent Years“.¹⁵

This movement (1925—1936), similar to the previous one, was of special artistic importance. Its dominant dramatic form was the one-act play, being of an experimental character. Ideologically and socially it was rooted partly in European traditions and partly in American reality.

The basic difference between the two movements is that the previous dramatic period, connected with the initial growth of one-act plays and with the Little Theatre Movement, reflected the growing social awareness of the more sensitive and perceptive members of society, esp. the intellectuals and artists, while in the second period, in the decade of the Depression there was a growing radicalism: as the Depression was a severe shock to the American people in general, practically everyone became involved. So, the theatrical movement was on a larger scale, it was more radical and less sophisticated. 250 Workers’ Theatre Groups existed by about 1933, all of them having faith in the one-act form.¹⁶

The Movement culminated in the publication of the “New Theatre” magazine. This periodical stimulated the composition of distinguished one-acters, and offered prizes for the best one-act plays. The annual contests made such discoveries as Clifford Odets (Waiting for Lefty, 1935), Irwin Shaw (Bury the Dead, 1936) and Paul Green. (Hymn to the Rising Sun, 1937). These outstanding short plays of the period, as in the previous one, were the reflections of the world of social conflicts. “Waiting for Lefty” centres around the problem of trade-unionism, the 1934 taxi-drivers’ strike. Militarism and war were the subjects of Shaw’s “Bury the Dead”, the best anti-war one-acter of the American theatre; the social problems of the Negro found expression in Paul Green’s “Hymn to the Rising Sun”.

Beside the similarities, the one-act plays of the 30-ies show some differences when compared to the short plays of the Little Theatre Movement.

An extension in form and in scope is recognizable, the plays became longer, the dramatists favoured many scenes and large casts.

“Waiting for Lefty”: 15 characters, 6 episodes.

“Bury the Dead”: 28 characters, a chain of episodes, separated by light effects.

The film-technique was often used by these playwrights (black-outs, flashbacks). The writers tended to be "inclusive", the one-acters became kaleidoscopic in character. These characteristics may result in the loss of the "sacred" unity of the play, the loss of its intimacy and immediacy.

III. A temporary relief from the burdens of the depression in the late 30-ies meant an increasing number of regular playgoers and the growth of the forms of light entertainment. This period is less outstanding, less important for the development of the one-act form. The one-acters of the 40-ies lack the movement-like characteristics of the former decades. During and after World War II nearly all the motifs of the 20th c. theatre were reintroduced to the American stage. Dramas in general, including one-act plays as well, were predominantly realistic and traditional, based on the reminiscences of past events (depression, war, social problems). A. Miller and T. Williams began their career in this transitional period with one-act plays: T. Williams: *American Blues*, *27 Wagons Full of Cotton* (1944), A. Miller: *A Memory of Two Mondays*, *A View From the Bridge* (one-act version, 1955).

IV. As we have seen, the growth of one-act plays was always associated with some social and theatrical movement in America. (Little Theatre Movement, Workers' Theatre Movement). The stronger the movement was, the more dominant the one-act play became. After the transitional period of the War and the postwar decade the one-act plays became once again extremely important in the American theatre of the 60-ies and 70-ies. This is a period, which Robert Brustein, the theatre critic for "The New Republic" has called the "seasons of discontent".¹⁷

The activities of the Off-Broadway and Off-Off-Broadway groups center around recent social problems, as reflected by one-act plays.

These movements have some similarities as well as some differences when compared to the Little Theatre Movement and to the Workers' Theatre Movement.

The Off-Broadway Movement — which later developed into the Off-Off-Broadway Movement — was theoretically more diverse, being the consequence of the freedom artists found there. The way in which the theatres began their career and their fates have been various. While the Little Theatres and the Workers' Theatres mushroomed throughout the whole country, the Off-Broadway and Off-Off-Broadway theatres were geographically more concentrated. A recent count shows at least 90 active Off-Off-Broadway producing units. But it is a very fluid world. New groups are always in formation and some disappear each season.¹⁸

As with previous movements and tendencies, the Off-Broadway and the Off-Off-Broadway meant a sort of protest against Broadway production. There was an involvement of a larger audience; the groups emphasized the communal character of the socially conscious theatre. Another similarity is that these groups are also devoted to experimentalism. The Off-Off-Broadway performing units vary from the amateur to the trained and skilled professional.

Similar to the earlier movements, some playwrights are closely attached to the movement. The Off-Broadway Movement discovered Albee; the best one-acters by Murray Schisgal, Arthur Kopit, Kenneth H. Brown, Isreal Horovitz were premiered by different Off-Off-Broadway theatres.

The representative one-acters of the 60-ies and 70-ies show the playwrights' involvement in the actual problems of American society. Albee's "The Death of Bessie Smith" (1960) and "The Indian Wants the Bronx" by I. Horovitz (1968) show alienation, cruelty, racism as natural entities of modern life and society, while Tom Cole's "Medal of Honor Rag" (1975) deals with the lessons of the Vietnam war, including social, emotional and generation questions.

The Off-Off-Broadway performances are socially, politically conscious, movement-like activities. This commitment was emphasized by Chaikin, the organizer of the Open Theatre:

“I think, the whole Off-Off-Broadway movement is very political even when it’s not dealing with political subjects.”¹⁹

There are several open problems to be investigated concerning the role, the function and the characteristics of one-act plays. But the growing importance of the form in the Off-Off-Broadway theatres is beyond any doubt, especially when having a close look at the statistics of the “Best Plays...” series.

The number of one-act play performances in the New York theatres is as follows:²⁰

	Broadway	Off-Broadway	Off-Off-Broadway
1975/76	1	4	39
1976/77	1	4	36
1977/78	1	1	45
1978/79	0	5	32
1979/80	1	2	79
1980/81	1	2	26
1981/82	0	5	57
1982/83	1	8	62
1983/84	0	6	84

Notes

1. Based on a lecture, held on Dec 3, 1986 at the J. F. Kennedy Institute in Berlin.
2. In: *Modern Drama*. Vol. XXVIII. No. 1. March 1985. GAIL FINNEY: *Theater of Impotence. The One-Act Tragedy at the Turn of the Century*. p. 20.
3. *One-Act Plays by Modern Authors*, ed. by HELEN LOUISE COHEN. Harcourt, Brace and Co. New York—Chicago 1937.
4. See: J. A. CUDDON: *A Dictionary of Literary Terms*. Penguin Books Ltd. Harmondsworth, Middlesex England. 1977. *Current Literary Terms* by A. F. SCOTT. Macmillan, London — Melbourne—Toronto 1965. *A Handbook to Literature* by C. HUGH Holman. Odyssey Press, New York 1972.
5. PERCIVAL WILDE: *The Craftsmanship of the One-Act Play*. Crown Publishers. New York. 1951. p. 34.
6. *Ibid.* pp. 40—41.
7. *Dictionary of Literary Biography*. Vol. 7. Ed. by JOHN MACNICHOLAS. A Brucoli-Clark Book. Gale Research Company. Detroit—Michigan 1981. pp. 377—378.
8. *Ibid.* p. 378.
9. *The Best Plays of 1912/13* ed. by BURNST MANTLE. Dodd, Mead and Co. New York 1952.
10. Further details in: *The Theatre Guild. The First Ten Years*, by WALTER PRICHARD EATON. New York, Brentano’s 1929.
11. In: *The Business of the Theatre. An Economic History of the American Theatre 1750—1932*, by ALFRED L. BERNHEIM. BENJAMIN BLOM, New York, 1932. Chapter XXI.
12. *Dictionary of Literary Biography*. Vol. 7. Ed. BY JOHN MACNICHOLAS. A Brucoli Clark Book. Gale Reserach Co. Detroit — Michigan 1981. p. 377.
13. O’NEILL: *Seven Plays of the Sea*. Vintage Books. A Division of Random House, New York 1972.
14. *Fifty Contemporary One-Act Plays*. Selected and edited by FRANK SHAY and PIERRE LOVING Cincinnati Stewart Kidd Co. Publishers, 1920.
15. HAROLD CLURMAN: *The Fervent Years: The Story of the Group Theatre and the Thirties*. New York, Knopf, 1945.
16. In: *History Workshop Series: Theatres of the Left 1880—1935. Workers’ Theatre Movements in Britain and America* by RAPHAEL SAMUEL, EWAN MACCOLL and STUART COSGROVE. Routledge and Kegan Paul, London, 1985.
17. ROBERT BRUSTEIN: *Seasons of Discontent. Dramatic Opinion 1959—1965*. Simon and Schuster, New York 1959.

16. Dictionary of Literary Biography. Vol 7. Ed. by JOHN MACNICHOLAS. A Brucoli Clark Book. Gale Research Co. Detroit—Michigan 1981. p. 398.
19. Playwright at Work: Off-Off-Broadway by JEAN-CLAUDE VAN ITALLIE. TDR Vol. 10. No. 1. p. 169.
20. The Best Plays of ... Series. 1899—1984. Ed. by BURNS MANTLE, Garrison P. Sherwood and Henry Hewes. Dodd, Mead and Co.

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18. Gail Finney: Theatre of Impotence: The One-Act Tragedy at the Turn of the Century. In: Modern Drama, Vol. XXVIII. No. 1. March 1985.
19. History Workshop Series: Theatres of the Left. 1880—1935. Workers' Theatre Movements in Britain and America by Raphael Samuel, Ewan MacColl and Stuart Cosgrove. Routledge and Kegan Paul, London, 1985.
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AZ AMERIKAI EGYFELVONÁSOS DRÁMÁK PERIODIKUS FEJLŐDÉSÉRŐL

SZABÓ KLÁRA

Az egyfelvonásos dráma, mint önálló műfaj a XIX. század 80-as éveiben, Európában született meg.

Részben az európai hatással, részben az amerikai társadalom, s színházi élet jellegzetességeivel magyarázható a műfaj amerikai fejlődéstörténete.

Az egyfelvonásos forma koncentráltabb, egységesebb a hagyományos drámánál, közvetlenebb kapcsolatban van társadalmi- kulturális környezetével, gyorsan és rendkívül érzékenyen reagál ennek változásaira.

Fejlődéstörténete ezért periodikus jellegű, az amerikai irodalomban négy szakaszra osztható:

1. „kis színházak” mozgalma (1915—1925)
2. munkásszínházak mozgalma (30-as évek)
3. átmeneti korszak (40-es évek)
4. Off-Broadway és Off-Off-Broadway színházi mozgalmak.

Az egyfelvonásos dráma periodikus fejlődését elősegítő tényezők közül a professzionális színház hanyatlása, a színházi mozgalmak kísérletező jellege, s a műfaj nagyfokú társadalmisága emelhető ki.

О ПЕРИОДИЧЕСКОМ РАЗВИТИИ АМЕРИКАНСКИХ ОДНОАКТНЫХ ПЬЕС

КЛАРА САБО

Одноактная пьеса, как самостоятельный жанр родилась в Европе, в 80-ые годы 19-ого века.

История развития жанра в Америке объясняется с одной стороны влиянием европейской литературы, с другой стороны особенностями общества и театральной жизни США.

Одноактная форма представляет собой более концентрированную, более единую форму чем традиционная драма, она имеет более непосредственную связь со своей общественно-культурной средой, быстро и сверхчувствительно реагирует на изменения этой среды.

Именно поэтому история развития одноактной пьесы имеет периодический характер, в американской литературе разделяется на 4 периода.

1. движение «маленьких театров» (1915—1925)
2. театральное движение рабочего класса (30-ые годы)
3. переходный период (40-ые годы)
4. театральные движения „Off Broadway”,

Из факторов, способствующих периодическому развитию одноактных пьес важностью выделяются: падение профессионального театра, экспериментальный характер театральных движений и высокая общественность жанра.