

THE AMERICAN PAST PRESENTED:
THE LIMITS OF HISTORICAL DRAMA

William J. McGill
National Endowment for the Humanities

In the preface to In White America, Martin Duberman states: "I chose to tell this story on stage and through historical documents, because I wanted to combine the evocative power of the spoken word with the confirming power of historical fact . . .," to write something that would be "both good history and good theater." But he quickly adds, "This best of all possible worlds can only be approximated."¹ The writing of history, even in the more traditional form of the prose narrative, is at best only an approximation of the past: by definition history-writing is interpretation. Thus Duberman's caveat in itself is not inhibiting, but his words do raise the question whether drama is an efficacious vehicle for conveying historical truths, a question of particular relevance because most Americans learn their history from sources other than the works of professional historians.

Conventionally, the writers of historical drama (indeed, of historical fiction generally) make two claims: that the creative artist is free from the strictures of "mere fact" and that he possesses an ability to present higher historical truths more effectively than a scholar whose obligation to "mere fact" restricts his creative insight. Thus, for example, Arthur Miller prefaces The Crucible with this remark:

This play is not history in the sense in which the word is used by the academic historian. Dramatic purposes have sometimes required . . . [changes of specific facts]. However, I believe the reader will discover here the essential nature of one of the strangest and most awful chapters in human history.²

To judge the value of drama for telling the truth about the past we must first examine these conventional claims and consider whether the medium itself imposes any limits upon the ability of the dramatist to speak historically.

The two principal commentaries on historical drama are George Lukacs, The Historical Novel (London, 1962), chapter two, and Herbert Lindenberger, Historical Drama (Chicago, 1975).³ Lukacs, the pre-eminent Marxist literary critic, concerns himself primarily with the novel, discussing drama as a means of providing insights into the historical novel by contrast and comparison. Lindenberger thoroughly discusses the problems implicit in the playwrights' conventional claims. As his sub-title, "The Relation of Literature and Reality," suggests, he begins from a concern for the particular pretense of historical dramatists that they have a special engagement with reality. Like Lukacs, however, Lindenberger draws his illustrations almost exclusively from European dramatic literature. In part for that reason I have chosen to focus on plays about American history written by American playwrights, but I hope thereby to contribute specifically to the discussion of the uses of drama in the teaching of American history. I have selected the particular examples I use because they are plays which were both popular and critical successes and therefore are likely to continue to serve as shapers of popular historical consciousness either through productions or through inclusion in anthologies, and because they are often cited as "good" history.

In considering the claim for dramatic license in reference to the "facts of history," we encounter varying attitudes among the playwrights themselves. First is the attitude that dramatists often ascribe to historians, insisting on not only absolute fidelity to the known facts, but also an avoidance of any assumptions about that which is not known. Most playwrights would argue

that so rigid a principle makes the writing of drama impossible--they do not always recognize that it makes the writing of history impossible as well. Because some playwrights accept the validity of this principle, however, we have the phenomenon of plays "suggested by" historical events, but deliberately fictionalized. Thus the Scopes trial of 1925 suggested the idea for Inherit the Wind, but Jerome Lawrence and Robert Lee use fictional names and setting and are intentionally vague about the chronology. They use the same technique in The Gang's All Here, "suggested by" the presidency of Warren G. Harding. Lawrence and Lee declare that their plays are neither history nor journalism, but theatre. They also maintain, however, that they affirm some higher historical truth.⁴

Somewhat less restrictive is the principle John Dryden articulates in the preface to Don Sebastian: "Where the event of a great action is left doubtful, there the Poet is left Master."⁵ While respecting the inviolability of known facts, this principle provides opportunity for the playwrights to imagine specific actions and characteristics, thus to enliven and dramatize events and so give force to the essential truths they purvey. In one sense this places playwrights more truly in the company of historians who are not, after all, mindless fact-grubbers, but who, through interpretation of and extrapolation and interpolation from the evidence, endeavor to describe what "must have happened" given what we do know. The strictures of reason limit historians--and playwrights too. Though masters in the realm of the unknown, playwrights cannot imagine anything inconsistent with the known and expect an audience to accept their vision as truthful. Yet the playwright is freer than the historian even in obedience to this principle because the playwright writes for a theatre audience: to gain their acceptance he needs to adhere not to the specialist's knowledge of the past, but to the more limited and general--even at times inaccurate--popular knowledge. As Herbert Lindenberger remarks, "In publicly known matters, reality or plausibility exists essentially within the consciousness of the audience."⁶ Robert Sherwood's Abe Lincoln in Illinois provides an apt example. When Sherwood wrote the play (1938), the public still accepted, indeed treasured, a romanticized version of Lincoln's involvement with Ann Rutledge, and Sherwood used that story as an episode in his script (Act I, Scenes II-III), although historians, including Carl Sandburg, Sherwood's principal source, had already raised questions about its authenticity. Arthur Miller's alteration of facts in The Crucible does no violence to the popular knowledge of the Salem witch trials. Indeed, most of the critics who chide Miller for such alterations would not have known he had done so except for his specific admissions.

Miller's own position is more extreme: that in the interest of presenting a higher truth, the playwright is free to alter any facts for dramatic purposes. George Lukacs argues that, for drama, historical authenticity means "the inner historical truth" of the dramatic collision portrayed, not the concrete accuracy of detail. For that reason, drama allows, even requires, a greater freedom for "necessary anachronisms" than does the novel, and certainly than does historiography.⁸ The playwright has no intent to deceive, as Miller's ready admissions illustrate, and, in fact, historical dramatists often display the zeal of scholars in examining their sources. While preparing to write The Crucible, Miller pored over the court records of the witch trials. Robert Sherwood's decision to write a play about Lincoln developed out of a lifelong interest in the subject and a broad acquaintance with the relevant biographical literature. John Mason Brown observes, "Sherwood was always a painstaking researcher when, as a writer, he dealt with history. Before taking the license to which he was entitled as a dramatist, he had to know the facts from which he was departing."⁹ Sherwood's discussion of sources in the appendix to the printed text of his Lincoln play illustrates Brown's point.¹⁰

The most radical attitude that a playwright might adopt toward the "facts of history" proceeds from the assumption that sure knowledge of the past is impossible and that, therefore, the dramatist is free to alter any "facts" because they have no greater authenticity than anything else in the imagination of his own heart. Rather than denying the existence of higher truths, however, playwrights who proceed from this assumption tend to affirm most strongly the validity of their individual truth. Playwrights are hardly idiosyncratic in this: historians themselves have so argued. Increasingly skeptical of the claims of "scientific history" and impelled by the reformist or revolutionary impulses of the 1960s and 1970s, some historians have asserted that we are free to interpret the past in light of the future we wish to create.¹¹ This premise finds dramatic expression in such theatrical pieces as Arthur Kopit's Indians or Duberman's In White America. Lawrence and Lee quote approvingly from Herbert Muller's The Uses of the Past: "Our task is to create a 'usable past' for our own living purposes."¹² They neglect to note that Muller balances this affirmation with an equally firm emphasis on the need to strive always for literal truth. The paragraph that follows the one they quote so approvingly begins, "Yet this admission of relativity does not permit us to create whatever we have a mind to, to make over the past to suit ourselves."¹³

Whatever attitude playwrights take toward the "facts of history," few regard factual accuracy as a primary responsibility. That audiences may accept as true specifics that the playwright has altered or invented is an unfortunate by-product, but is more the fault of the audience than the author, since no playwright would try to write a drama painstakingly accurate in detail--at least no writer with any dramatic sense would do so since the result would be dreadfully dull. Rather playwrights invariably avow their special responsibility to some higher historical truth. Indeed, the responsibility justifies the license they claim as dramatists. Playwrights serve the truth by writing effective dramas. In effect, "Dramatic license" derives from the obvious necessity to make their work more accessible and more appealing to audiences.

If we consider a play as a theatrical event rather than as a literary document, we must understand the role of the audience in shaping the result. While a commonplace assertion in the literature about theatre, this observation bears repetition because, although it seems obvious as a generalization, it is often ignored in discussions of individual plays. As Allardyce Nicoll points out, the audience gives theatre an immediacy that other arts lack and makes it an especially fluid art because the responses of specific audiences affect a drama each time it is presented.¹⁴ He also emphasizes that in certain ways, most importantly in a lowered intellectual awareness and a heightened emotional sensitivity, an audience resembles a mob. Michael Goldman recognizes both these characteristics and stresses the immediacy of the art when he declares, "The forms of drama all flow from the confrontation between an actor and his audience; plays are best understood as ways of intensifying the confrontation and charging it with meaning."¹⁵ Thus, almost by definition, theatre is "an extremely political, because pre-eminently social form of art."¹⁶

Immediate recognition rather than considered reflection characterizes audience response and, therefore, the playwright must establish an idea or a mood with which the audience can quickly identify through its own experience. Elizabeth Burns remarks that a spectator cannot accept truth or authenticity in drama unless it can be related to his own experience of theatricality in ordinary life: "By being acted out here and now it [dramatic representation] claims to belong to the present rather than the past."¹⁷ That is true whether the matter of the play is historical or entirely fictional. The play must relate directly to the here and now if it is to have dramatic

appeal. Thus George Lukacs observes, "Historical drama must bring out those features in men and their destinies which will make a spectator . . . feel a direct participant in them."¹⁸

This present-mindedness manifests itself almost as strongly in the attitudes of playwrights as of audiences. Playwrights seldom--I am almost willing to say never--write about historical subjects because of any intrinsic interest in the past. Most frequently particular historical characters or events attract dramatists because they see in them illustrations of or analogies to a present concern that they imagine as a general or higher truth. Thomas Grant argues that the principal function of historical drama in America has been to serve the "commemorative tradition," that is to glorify the past to serve a present need.¹⁹

Though Robert Sherwood had long had an interest in Lincoln, the situation of the 1930s and his own reactions to it induced him to write Abe Lincoln in Illinois. Lincoln assumed a special relevance for Sherwood at that time because he was "a man of peace who had to face the issue of appeasement or war"--and he had chosen war.²⁰ Sherwood himself was moving away from pacifism in response to the European crisis. An episode that occurred before the New York opening points the moral even more clearly. While the play was in rehearsal, the Munich Crisis unfolded. With the encouragement of his Lincoln, Raymond Massey, Sherwood inserted into the scene portraying the Lincoln-Douglas debates (Act III, Scene IX) a passage from Lincoln's Peoria Speech of 1854 in which he condemned "the complacent policy of indifference to evil," a condemnation readily understood in 1938-1939 as applying to the policy of appeasement--just as Sherwood intended.²¹ Similarly, Arthur Miller had long considered writing a play about the Salem witch trials, but the atmosphere of the early 1950s coalesced his thoughts and gave him his theme, the terror that violates human conscience, a terror radically at odds with basic American values.²²

The examples are legion. The point is that dramatists who use historical materials nonetheless write from their own experience just as audiences view these plays in the context of their own experiences. In this doubly ahistorical world whatever universal significance the "higher truths" may claim or realize, dramatists conceive them in terms of immediate issues and understand them in relation to present realities. Despite the diligence of some, playwrights generally approach the past not to learn about it, but to locate proof texts. Thus the present-mindedness that the audience requires finds resonance in the mind of the dramatist. To the extent that playwrights have a developed view of history, it is that which Herbert Butterfield labels the Whig interpretation:

It studies the past with reference to the present, and though there may be a sense in which this is unobjectionable if its implications are carefully considered, and there may be a sense in which it is inescapable, it has often been an obstruction to historical understanding because it has been taken to mean the study of the past with direct and perpetual reference to the present.²³

The "Whig interpretation" has powerfully influenced the American historical consciousness and historiography from their beginnings. If it is a fault to which historians are liable, how much more easily will dramatists succumb to it since the very nature of their art and the determinative role of the audience requires them to emphasize in their material the "direct and perpetual reference to the present" and to ignore, if not deny, the pastness of the past.

In addition to its over-bearing present-mindedness, the Whig interpretation has other elements: the tendencies to distinguish too simplistically between the forces of right and the forces of wrong, and to stress particular principles of progress. Historical dramatists do not necessarily share these attributes, but in the American theatre the drama that has maintained the "commemorative tradition" (which is to say most American historical drama written prior to 1960) is as thoroughly Whiggish in these tendencies as in its present-mindedness.

Various commentators have claimed to discern a significant shift in recent American historical drama. Thomas Grant, for example, suggests that in the last several decades some American playwrights have attempted "to demythify the past by returning to historical sources, making history as both fact and meaning speak truthfully and persuasively to the present."²⁴ The plays Grant cites approvingly to illustrate this shift do represent a revision of the commemorative tradition, yet as his comment makes clear they too are insistently present-minded.

Thus, Grant and others have enthusiastically cited Robert Lowell's The Old Glory as an example of the new historical drama. Robert Brustein remarks,

The Old Glory, certainly, is the first American play to utilize historical materials in a compelling theatrical manner . . . , perhaps because it is the first such play to assume a mature intellect on the part of the audience.²⁵

Ironically, Lowell's trilogy does not directly use historical materials at all: He bases the plays on fictions by Hawthorne and Melville. And while one can suggest a variety of historical themes to which the plays speak, Lowell's real reference is not to any known past but to the present, America in the early 1960s--and to the future. The changes that he makes in his sources, rather than enhancing their historical authenticity, sharpen their contemporaneity. Lowell himself remarks, "My theme might be summed up in this paradox: we Americans might save the world or blow it up; perhaps we should do neither."²⁶

Arthur Kopit's Indians, another work often cited as manifesting the new spirit in historical drama, is not really a history play at all, though it does employ certain myths about America's past. It owes its inspiration purely and simply to current politics. Describing the play's genesis, Kopit comments:

For a long time . . . I had wanted to do a play dealing with the subject. I knew it would have to be epical in scope. But I didn't know how to do it. And then, one day, I was reading a newspaper in which General Westmoreland expressed regret for the accidental killing and wounding of innocent people in Vietnam. These, he said, were the inevitable consequences of war. At the same time I was listening to [Charles Ives's Fourth Symphony]. . . . In it two orchestras play against each other. One plays chamber music, the other distorted marching band music. The idea and the form for the play seemed to come to me in a flash I knew almost instantly that I would write a play that would explore what happens when a social and political power imposes itself on a lesser power and creates a mythology to justify it, as we did with the Indians, as we have tried to do in Vietnam.²⁷

Kopit's "creative moment" is similar to those of Robert Sherwood and Arthur Miller: long interest in an historical subject finds its focus through the

lens of a contemporary event about which the playwright feels strongly. Carol Weiher suggests that Kopit does not concern himself with history, but with the process of history-making, the way in which Americans create myths about their past and present--that is almost by definition an exercise in current politics, not a striving for historical understanding.²⁸ Kopit's own words seem to substantiate that, but in so doing he says nothing specifically true about the past and, even if he did, the exaggerations and eccentricities of the play would make it difficult for an audience to accept it as true--unless it came already sharing Kopit's own attitudes about the present. While lively theatre, Indians is neither good history nor even good propaganda, for as John Lahr observes, if propaganda is to have influence on our understanding it must convince the audience of the certainty of its argument.²⁹

Finally we return to Duberman's In White America. Duberman is an historian who chose the dramatic form to make an historical statement rather than a dramatist who chose to use historical materials. He is conscious of the inherent tensions between history and drama; he also recognizes that a playwright, no matter what his background, can only imperfectly realize the ideal of writing both good history and good drama.³⁰ But he argues that since he is not trying to reshape history for dramatic purposes, but is using the dramatic form to enliven an historical interpretation, he has more closely achieved the ideal than have most dramatists. As an historian, however, Duberman represents (in one of its best expressions to be sure) the "radical history movement" of the 1960s and 1970s. He aspires not merely to develop understanding, but to provoke action against perceived injustice. To him past history ought to be a weapon of present politics and the dramatic form attracts him because it is a fundamentally political art. Indeed it is an art the appeal of which grew as he became increasingly skeptical that the study of the past itself could provide a clear guide to changing the present.³¹

Advocacy of a personal conviction is a legitimate enterprise, no less for a creative writer than for anyone else, but such advocacy does not entail any special license--nor does creative ability guarantee any greater depth of wisdom or reader access to higher truth. The conventional claims of historical dramatists are as much self-deceiving as they are self-justifying. And they mask the fact that by its very nature theatre deals not in truth, whether higher or lower, but in illusion. As Aurélien Weiss observes, "The principal aim of drama is to give the impression of truth by means of illusion."³² When a playwright invokes these claims, almost invariably he is generalizing his own reactions to present issues or situations. The art of the dramatist, even when he chooses to use materials drawn from the past, remains essentially present politics. He usually makes the choice to use historical materials because he finds in them a ready analogy to the present. And dramatic necessity, the need to appeal to the audience, induces him to select, shape, or change the materials to make the analogy more telling.

It follows then that drama is an exceedingly imperfect vehicle for conveying truths about the past whether of detail or of general principle. Yet historical dramas have a particular value in the study of history: as vivid statements of the historical consciousness of the societies that produce them. In that sense they tell us more about the periods in which they are written than about the periods of which they are written. Historical dramas tell us more than other arts because of the political nature of theatre; they tell us more than other dramas because, as Herbert Lindenberger notes, they "make a greater pretense at engaging with reality than do writings whose fictiveness we accept from the start."³³

Perhaps the best argument is example. For several years I taught a course that involved the intensive study of The Crucible, arguably the

greatest American historical drama because it is both better history and better drama than most.³⁴ The course had a bifocal structure, dealing with America in the late seventeenth century and in the mid-twentieth century. Invariably, in discussions of colonial Massachusetts, The Crucible served best as a distorted image, a picture to be corrected by reference to the documentary evidence and modern critical studies. The students received some satisfaction and reinforcement through the experience of correcting Miller--or verifying his insights. However, when they approached the play as document, as a particular expression of mid-twentieth century American society, it came alive and generated discussions not only about the validity of the historical analogy, but about the whole range of attitudes and values that Miller unabashedly proclaimed.

Lindenberger concludes, "Historical drama . . . can be considered a branch of historical thought, though one which projects hypotheses and individual theories about history more than it does fully worked out philosophies."³⁵ But, if not fully developed, the interpretive tendency of historical drama is consistent. Therefore, it represents not merely a branch, but a school of historical thought. The usefulness of historical drama lies precisely in its limits. The intrinsic present-mindedness of drama means that the theatre serves as a particularly graphic medium manifesting the way in which a society, or individuals in a society, attempt to create a justifying mythology, to make over the present to suit a present need.

NOTES

¹Martin Duberman, In White America (New York, 1964), 5-6.

²Gerald Weales, ed., The Crucible: Text and Criticism (Baltimore, 1978), 2.

³The interested reader can also find valuable insights into historical drama in the numerous studies about the greatest historical dramatist, William Shakespeare. See especially, Tom F. Driver, The Sense of History in Greek and Shakespearean Drama (New York, 1967), and David Scott Kastan, Shakespeare and the Shapes of Time (Hanover, New Hampshire, 1982).

⁴"Authors' Note," Inherit the Wind in Stanley Richards, ed., America on Stage (Garden City, New York, 1976), 698. See also Lawrence and Lee, "The Genesis and Exodus of the Play," Theatre Arts, XLI (August, 1957), 33, 94; and "The Remarkable Past," Theatre Arts, XLIII (October, 1959), 56-59. They ignored their own advice in The Night Thoreau Spent in Jail (New York, 1971).

⁵Quoted in Lindenberger, Historical Drama, 2.

⁶Ibid.

⁷See Carl Sandburg, Abraham Lincoln: The Prairie Years (New York, 1926), I, 140-141, 181-190; and Albert J. Beveridge, Abraham Lincoln (Boston, 1928), I, 149-151.

⁸Lukacs, Historical Novel, 150-152.

⁹John Mason Brown, The Worlds of Robert E. Sherwood: Mirror to His Times, 1896-1939 (New York, 1965), 369.

- ¹⁰ Robert E. Sherwood, Abe Lincoln in Illinois (New York, 1939), 189-250.
- ¹¹ See Barton Bernstein, ed., Towards a New Past (New York, 1968); Howard Zinn, The Politics of History (Boston, 1970); and Martin Duberman, The Uncompleted Past (New York, 1971).
- ¹² Lawrence and Lee, "The Remarkable Past," Theatre Arts, 57.
- ¹³ Herbert Muller, The Uses of the Past (New York, 1952), 333, see generally, 30-34.
- ¹⁴ Allardyce Nicoll, The Theatre and Dramatic Theory (Westport, Connecticut, 1978), 15-27.
- ¹⁵ Michael Goldman, The Actor's Freedom: Toward a Theory of Drama (New York, 1975), 3.
- ¹⁶ Martin Esslin, An Anatomy of Drama (New York, 1977), 29.
- ¹⁷ Elizabeth Burns, Theatricality: A Study of Convention in the Theatre and in Social Life (New York, 1972).
- ¹⁸ Lukacs, Historical Novel, 152.
- ¹⁹ Thomas Grant, "American History of Stage: The Commemorative Tradition and Some Recent Revisions," Modern Drama, XIX (December, 1976), 327-339.
- ²⁰ Brown, Worlds of Sherwood, 367. Alfred H. Jones has commented extensively on the political purposes of Sherwood's Lincoln play in Roosevelt's Image Brokers: Poets, Playwrights and the Use of the Lincoln Symbol (Port Washington, New York, 1974). See also my "Railsplitter on the Boards: The Lincoln of Drama," Lincoln Herald [to be published, Spring, 1985].
- ²¹ Sherwood, "Preface," There Shall Be No Night, in John Mason Brown, The Ordeal of a Playwright: Robert E. Sherwood and the Challenge of War (New York, 1970), 141-142.
- ²² Arthur Miller, "Introduction," Collected Works (New York, 1957), 38-40.
- ²³ Herbert Butterfield, The Whig Interpretation of History (New York, 1951), 11.
- ²⁴ Grant, "American History in Drama," Modern Drama, 329. See also Carol Weiher, "American History on Stage in the 1960's: Something Old, Something New," Quarterly Journal of Speech, 63 (December, 1977), 405-412.
- ²⁵ "Introduction," Robert Lowell, The Old Glory (New York, 1968). See also Baruch Hochman, "Robert Lowell's The Old Glory," Tulane Drama Review, xi (Summer, 1967), 127-138; and Gerald Weales, The Jumping-Off Place. American Drama in the 1960's (New York, 1969), 158-173.
- ²⁶ Stanley Kunitz, "Talk with Robert Lowell," New York Times Book Review (October 4, 1964), 39.
- ²⁷ New York Times, October 15, 1969, 37. For further comment on the play see Catharine Hughes, Plays, Politics and Polemics (New York, 1973), 61-65; and John Lehr, Up Against the Fourth Wall: Essays on Modern Theater (New York, 1968), 137-157.

28. Weiher, "American History on Stage," Quarterly Journal of Speech, 409-411.
29. Lahr, Up Against the Fourth Wall, 252.
30. Duberman, In White America, 5-6. See also Weiher, "American History on Stage," Quarterly Journal of Speech, 406-408.
31. Martin Duberman, "On Becoming an Historian," The Uncompleted Past (New York, 1969), 336-356.
32. "Truth and Theatre," Comparative Drama, IV (Spring, 1970), 67.
33. Lindenberger, Historical Drama, x.
34. Despite Lindenberger's slighting reference to it, Ibid., 49. See my "The Crucible of History: Arthur Miller's John Proctor," New England Quarterly (Summer, 1981), 258-264.
35. Lindenberger, Historical Drama, 131.