

JEFFERY KENNEDY  
*STAGING AMERICA: THE  
ARTISTIC LEGACY OF THE  
PROVINCETOWN PLAYERS*

*Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama  
Press, 2023*  
626 pp. ISBN: 978-0-8173-2140-6

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Reviewed by Drew Eisenhauer

The arrival of Jeffery Kennedy's *Staging America* is an event long awaited. O'Neill scholars will benefit from the updated context it provides for O'Neill's early work with the Provincetown Players; students of the little theater movement will welcome it as an invaluable addition to their libraries. For scholars of the Provincetown Players, Kennedy's book will be essential: oft-consulted, much discussed, and heartily celebrated.

The study supersedes two previous histories: Robert Karoly Sarlós's *Theatre in Ferment: Jig Cook and the Provincetown Players* (1982) and the lengthy first section of Helen Deutsch and Stella Hanau's *The Provincetown: A Story of the Theatre* (1931). Additionally, it expands the corpus of pertinent historical and critical studies that have appeared in recent years, notably Cheryl Black's *The Women of Provincetown, 1915–1922* (2002); Travis Bogard and Jackson R. Bryer's edition of Edna Kenton's *The Provincetown Players and the Playwrights' Theatre, 1915–1922* (2004); and Brenda Murphy's *The Provincetown Players and the Culture of Modernity* (2005).

Kennedy offers three objectives for his hefty study: to provide an expanded biography of George Cram Cook and thus to argue “no one but Cook could have initiated the Provincetown Players and then maintained their experiment as long as he did with the resulting vital contributions to American theatre”; to integrate an abundance of new research that “modifies, refutes, enhances, and expands many aspects of previous studies of the Players”; and, finally, “to accurately and thoroughly assess the Players’

importance to American drama as they attempted to usher it into the modern era” (6). Any one of these goals alone could have produced a scholarly study. Yet Kennedy’s ambition largely pays off: he makes numerous factual discoveries and contributions to the field, and he melds methodologies in a unique and useful way. *Staging America* is not simply theater history: it is a kind of transdisciplinary bio-historiography of the many creative artists who worked together to bring the Provincetown Players—to apply a phrase that Bryer offered in conversation—“out of the shadows.” Availing himself of an instinct for sleuthing, years of archival work in the United States and Europe, and a harvest of digital resources not previously accessible to scholars, Kennedy creates not just a history but a panorama of the lives that created the modern American theater.

In prosecuting his first objective, Kennedy follows what one might call a “Cook-centric” path. Cook’s wife, Susan Glaspell, published *The Road to the Temple* in 1926—part autobiography, part biography, part history, and part novel and Greek tragedy—in an attempt to affirm her husband’s contributions to modern American drama and thereby to establish his legacy. Kennedy not only confirms Cook’s importance but also confronts his detractors, even disputing Cook’s own misgivings about his creative career.

Yet Cook’s vision always emphasized collaboration and, in his extensive passages on the members of the group, Kennedy realizes his second and third objectives. By telling the story of nearly everyone associated with the Provincetown Players—artists and nonartists alike—Kennedy explores a vast creativity in the culinary and decorative arts, design, painting, film, prose fiction, journalism, philosophy, philanthropy, poetry, and politics during the early days of modernism. *Staging America* attends exhaustively to a variety of people whose stories are inseparable from the Provincetown Players, for example Edna Kenton, Glaspell and Cook’s friend from the Midwest, who served in various essential roles in the theater’s administration; Eleanor M. Fitzgerald (“Fitzi”), the Players’ secretary; actors Ida Rauh and Charles Ellis; directors Nina Moise and James Light; and many, many others.

Kennedy’s introduction and first chapters supply background on the US theater of the day and historical contexts, personalities, and geographies of Greenwich Village and Provincetown. The core group of Players at the time of the group’s founding in 1915 was dominated by Progressive-era New York intellectuals like labor journalists Mary Heaton Vorse and Joe O’Brien; anarchist/essayist Hutchins Hapgood; journalist/playwright Neith Boyce; short-story writer Wilbur Daniel Steele and his first wife, Margaret, an amateur painter; post-impressionist artist Bror Nordfeldt and his wife, Margaret Doolittle, the group’s first secretary; and, of course, Cook and Glaspell. These

Village-based writers heard about Provincetown from Vorse, a leader among writers on the Left, whose activism began in the labor marches of the 1890s and extended to the early Vietnam War protests.

Even in recounting the familiar story of the “discovery” of Provincetown, Kennedy illuminates new details. Provincetown is an LGBTQ+ metropolis today and might not seem to resemble the village these vacationing intellectuals and heterosexual power couples visited in the 1910s. Yet Kennedy points out that Vorse had followed her older brother, a painter named Fred Marvin, to Provincetown. Marvin (spoofed as the character Marvin Marmaduke Jr. in Cook’s 1915 play *Change Your Style*) studied with painter Charles Hawthorne, whose Cape Cod School of Art dates from 1899. By 1903 Fred Marvin was spending most of the year in Provincetown with Francesco Ronga, nominally his valet but in fact his life-partner. They eventually opened a restaurant together in town. Kennedy thus manages to give thoroughly contemporary coverage to the classic Provincetown Players myth, revealing that history, as it so often does, had gotten the story a bit too straight.

In an extended flashback, Kennedy pivots to Davenport, Iowa, where, in a sense, the Provincetown Players really began. Kennedy reexamines the midwestern roots of Cook, Glaspell, Floyd Dell, and Lucy Huffaker. Although arguably digressive and longer on genealogical research than some readers might like, these seventy-five pages allow Kennedy firmly to establish the background and biographies of his principal players. This, for example, enables him to illuminate a young Susan Glaspell, who was sociable, outgoing, and actively engaged in the life of the town—a welcome contrast to previous accounts in which Glaspell comes off as a pariah because of her independent views. Equally remarkable for Glaspell scholars is Kennedy’s discovery that Glaspell was acting in a drama society in Davenport, and, according to the newspaper accounts that Kennedy found, had written at least one play (a libretto for a musical, currently lost).

Kennedy’s biographical chapter on Cook is also full of new information and some surprises. We learn that Cook was the scion of a powerful family of lawyers from the upper echelons of Davenport society that included a state senator and a US congressman. We hear of Cook’s religious experience at the age of sixteen, which he described as the union of his soul with the cosmos as he was reading Plotinus in the Iowa City library. Kennedy deepens our understanding of how Cook’s early encounter with literature and Greek culture in his mother’s salon (the family’s rustic log cabin) inspired his spiritual and intellectual journey. Further, he uncovers Cook’s relationship with two key figures at Harvard: Greek historian John Henry Wright and pioneering art historian Charles Eliot Norton, both of whom helped shape

the future Grecophile. Later, in 1895, Cook, as a young bohemian English professor at the State University of Iowa, would lobby the university to teach “imaginative” literature, that is, creative writing. The website of the famed Iowa Writers’ Workshop, whose students have won many Pulitzer Prizes, still traces its lineage from Cook’s class. Kennedy cites this as evidence that from his early days Cook saw his art as a service and an inspiration to others rather than to himself.

Cook’s work with the Players was his greatest achievement. Accordingly, *Staging America* transitions from the midwestern chapters to a chronological history of the group’s summer 1915 and 1916 seasons in Provincetown, its relocation to MacDougal Street in fall 1916, and eventually to its demise in 1922. Kennedy melds established facts about each bill with new gleanings. His work in the archives enables him to cross-reference correspondence, memoirs, and even *romans à clefs* of the players and their many associates. Consequently, he is often able to identify participants heretofore unidentified or misidentified and both to solidify and advance our knowledge of the Players’ staging and design practices. Regrettably, Kennedy does not provide appendices, charts, or lists of the production elements that he documents at length. This information needs to be tabulated in order to be maximally useful to scholars.

Kennedy is especially adept at bringing the Provincetown Players to life as individuals. In one instance, he digs up an interview with Michael Gold, who recounts a rehearsal of his play *Down the Airshaft* at which visionary director Cook tells the cast that the sound of a flute “is the first cry of a rebel, it is the poetry of revolt” (260). Cook’s decision to take a sabbatical during the 1919–20 season facilitates another of Kennedy’s flesh-and-blood accounts. By this point in the collective’s existence, younger members, led by James Light, were agitating for better organization, more formally experimental modernism, and more opportunities to direct. But interpersonal conflicts concerned more than artistic vision. Using a range of sources, Kennedy strengthens the case for Glaspell’s recalling of Cook from New York as a response to his affair with Ida Rauh. Filling in other biographies of individual Players the author notes Nina Moise’s later career at Paramount studios and in theater in California, and reports that designer/actor Charles Ellis continued acting professionally originating the role of Steve in *Show Boat*, appearing in Eva La Gallienne’s *Alice in Wonderland*, and acting in six plays by Maxwell Anderson.

About Pendleton King, author of a single play, *Cocaine*, Kennedy remarks that “recent research reveals much more about King’s life than we have known thus far” (224). In fact, virtually all that is known about King comes from

Kennedy's fascinating biographical sketch. King was a complex and talented figure whose career was truncated by an early death. Kennedy discovered that King, known to the Provincetown Players as a penniless bohemian, was in fact the scion of a wealthy family from Georgia and the grandson of a US senator. Young King's flamboyant life included schooling at Oxford with one of Rasputin's alleged assassins; a period in college as a celebrated actor, noted for playing women's roles; a journalist and short-story writer; and, in his early days in the Village, the real-life model for "the boy from Georgia," a character in Susan Glaspell's play *The People*.

Kennedy's narrative trajectory leads ineluctably to his last two chapters: the earlier relating the drama and acrimony surrounding O'Neill's break from Glaspell and Cook, and the later assessing the artistic legacy of Cook and his company. Kennedy recounts the now well-known story of O'Neill's growing power within the Provincetown Players because of his tremendous success, on Broadway with his Pulitzer Prize-winning *Beyond the Horizon* and in Greenwich Village with *The Emperor Jones*. O'Neill read *The Hairy Ape* to the Provincetown Players in January 1922, and Cook greeted it with enthusiasm. However, O'Neill had already chosen professionals to work with—something the Players had not previously done—and it remains unclear when, or if, O'Neill meant to break this news to Cook. O'Neill apparently relented and gave the play to Cook to direct, closely supervising rehearsals. Dissatisfied with Cook's amateurism, but having lost his professional director to another commitment, O'Neill dismissed Cook and assigned the direction to James Light, Cook's archrival within the organization. Cook and Glaspell departed for Greece before the play's opening.

In recounting the sad end of the company, one finds Kennedy's unremitting defense of George Cram Cook refreshing: "Regardless of whether Cook was up to the task, O'Neill's response constituted a lack of respect for the leader and creator of the group that had given him his first theatrical home, seen him through alcoholic binges and affairs, and always defended his right as a playwright to experiment" (495). Cook valued loyalty to the group ideal and to his leadership; O'Neill, increasingly, was loyal only to his own artistic vision. O'Neill may have been justified in his internal logic, but Kennedy reminds us of the rude manner in which O'Neill wrested the stage from Cook.

Kennedy adds another poignant reason for Cook's departure: there were no more writers for him to mentor. The success of the group's star playwrights, Glaspell and O'Neill, and the turn from one-act to full-length plays that reduced the number of plays per bill, left Cook without his favored role as an inspirer and encourager of new talent. Suddenly, he had nothing to do.

Kennedy's final chapter assesses the artistic legacy of the Provincetown Players with a long list of accomplishments: the production of ninety-three new American plays by forty-seven writers; the transformation of a fish house, a parlor apartment, and a horse stable into viable theatrical spaces; the building of innovative lighting systems and the first dome cyclorama in America; the advancement of female playwrights, directors, and managers; the staging of controversial subject matter in experimental ways; the development of a ticket subscription base; and emergence as the leader of the little theater movement across the country. "Despite his behavior at the end," Kennedy concludes, "O'Neill ultimately knew that there would have been no Provincetown Players without the 'Poet of Life, Priest of the Ideal,' George Cram Cook" (526). Cook's labor and sacrifice made the true birthplace of the American drama possible.

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