THE DRAMATURGY OF OWEN DAVIS

DISSERTATION

Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for
the Degree Doctor of Philosophy in the Graduate
School of The Ohio State University

By

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* * * * * * *

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VITA

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

On March 24, 1906 an obscure American playwright named Owen Davis testified in a New York courtroom that his annual income was $3,000, and that his personal possessions consisted of one suit, one tuxedo, and a desk worth approximately $35. Summoned by Judge Delahanty to show cause why he should not pay the actor William Bramwell $224.72, Davis responded that he was not liable under the terms of Bramwell's contract, nor did he have the money to meet such a demand.¹ Twenty-eight years later, on October 7, 1934, the New York Times reported that from his playwriting endeavors Owen Davis already had made $2,000,000.²

Such an accomplishment was not entirely unique, of course, even in the relatively infant American theatre. Others had done it, as Ward Morehouse pointed out, including Winchell Smith, Avery Hopwood, and Eugene O'Neill.³ What was unique, was the way in which Owen Davis had risen to such a lofty position among American playwrights.

When he appeared before Judge Delahanty in the spring of 1906, Davis was already concentrating his dramatic efforts on a

³New York Sun, February 6, 1933.
popular-priced melodrama affectionately referred to as the "ten-twenty-third" play. Relying heavily on scenic display and peopled with stock characters, the "ten-twenty-third" derived its name from the admission prices at the Bowery theatres where it was the main attraction. By 1909 Davis had become the acknowledged master of this form, and plays like *Nellie, the Beautiful Cloak Model* and *Tony, the Bootblack, or Tracking the Blackhand Band* were playing to full capacity in the playhouses of New York's lower east side. Clerks, laborers, and shopgirls streamed to see the latest Davis spectacular at the American, Metropolis, and Fourteenth Street theatres. Writing under as many as four different pseudonyms, he subjected a seemingly endless parade of distressed heroines to impending disaster and eleventh hour reprieves. In *A Race Across the Continent* (1907) Sylvia Crane was kidnapped three times: onto a dog sled, into a giant balloon, and off the Jersey Ferry.

The popular-priced theatre of the Bowery melodrama, however, was far removed from the legitimate theatre of Broadway. Uptown in the world of David Belasco, Clyde Fitch, Edward Sheldon, and William Vaughn Moody, Owen Davis was still an obscure playwright. The Broadway dramatists regarded the "ten-twenty-third" as popular amusement similar to baseball, burlesque, and the Dime Museum. And proficiency in the creation of "cheap" melodrama was a definite liability to anyone who expected to be a serious playwright. Perhaps nothing illustrates more vividly the immense gulf between the Bowery and Broadway theatres than a statement that Davis made concerning his own work during the first decade of the century. At a time when the serious theatre was experiencing a renewed interest in poetic drama through the works of William
Vaughn Moody, Percy MacKaye, and Josephine Marks, Owen Davis concluded, "I write plays for those who cannot read."4

Sixteen years later, in the late summer of 1926, Owen Davis was offered a Chair in Dramatic Literature at the University of Michigan.5 This offer climaxed a series of events which had provided him with not only a substantial income, but an abundance of critical acclaim. He had been nominated for the Pulitzer Prize and had won the award in 1923. He had been elected to the National Institute of Arts and Letters, and he had been a unanimous choice for the presidency of both the Authors League of America and the Dramatists Guild. In addition, every Broadway season for fifteen years had witnessed at least one play, and often more, by Owen Davis. (The string would eventually run for twenty-six consecutive seasons.) In 1913 Davis had submitted The Family Cupboard anonymously to a Broadway producer fearing that his reputation in melodrama would automatically disqualify him from consideration. By 1923 he could read in the October issue of The Bookman, "There is certainly no other living American playwright to rank with him except Eugene O'Neill."6

Before his death in October of 1956, Davis had written 186 plays for the American stage. Both his prolificacy and versatility were astounding. His successes included somber realistic studies: Icebound,
Ethan Frome; drawing room comedies: Mr. and Mrs. North; farce comedies: The Nervous Wreck, The Haunted House; mystery melodramas: The Donovan Affair, At 9:45; and foreign adaptations: The World We Live In from The Insect Comedy. Moreover, Davis had been a leader in establishing copyright protection for dramatists, and he had played a prominent part in the struggle against government censorship of the theatre during the twenties. He had been instrumental in founding the National Theatre in Washington and the short-lived Cambridge School of the Drama at Harvard. Owen Davis had not only made the difficult transition to the Broadway theatre; he had become popularly known as the "Dean of American Playwrights."

In spite of his achievements, Owen Davis remains today a relatively obscure figure. No major biographical or critical study has been devoted to him. His autobiography, I'd Like To Do It Again, was published thirteen years prior to his final Broadway production, and along with a series of reminiscences, My First Fifty Years in the Theatre, is still the best source of information about the playwright. While both books are highly entertaining, their casual organization and inconsistencies limit their value to students of the drama. And the numerous factual errors make it extremely difficult to form a coherent chronology of the author's career. For instance, on page twelve of I'd Like To Do It Again, Davis says that in 1903 he was working as a mining engineer in Kentucky--a position that he actually held ten years earlier. The strength of both books is not so much what they reveal about Davis, but the picture that emerges of the directors, producers, and actors with whom he worked. The only other published work devoted exclusively to
Davis is an eight-page memorial pamphlet written by George Middleton and published by the Dramatists Guild as a tribute to their first president.

Critics and historians of the American theatre have tended to treat Davis hastily, if at all. Barnard Hewitt's excellent *Theatre U.S.A.* does not even mention his name. Quinn discusses two of the plays in some detail and provides a representative list of the works in his *History of the American Drama*, as does Margaret Mayorga in her *Short History of the American Drama*. Montrose Moses devotes attention to the sensational melodramas in *The American Dramatist*, and Frank Rahill's recent *The World of Melodrama* also discusses Davis briefly in terms of his early work. Short, but perceptive, essays on individual plays are included in Thomas Dickinson's *Playwrights of the New American Theatre*, Alan Downer's *Fifty Years of American Drama*, Frank O'Hara's *Today in American Drama*, and W. David Sievers' *Freud on Broadway*. The most comprehensive source outside of Davis' own writings is the eight page chapter in Burns Mantle's *Contemporary American Playwrights*. Mantle discusses some of the lesser known plays and gives a brief account of Davis' theatrical career.

The periodical literature is also disappointingly meager. Professor Lewin Goff of Cornell University has published a paper on Davis' association with the producer, Al Woods; and Johnson Briscoe has made a reasonably accurate handlist of the Davis plays. But with the exception of these, and two articles on the "mellers" by Montrose Moses and Alexander Woollcott, the published material tends to repeat well known incidents and anecdotes without shedding much light on Davis or the
plays. Newspaper articles are limited largely to reviews, interviews, and "human interest" stories about the playwright.

The purpose of the present study is to formulate a critical assessment of Davis' contributions to the American drama through an examination of selected plays. While considerable biographical and historical material has been included, it is not my intention to write either a professional biography of Mr. Davis, or an historical account of the American drama. Rather, this material is intended to serve as a framework and a point of reference for a discussion of the plays. In order to formulate such an assessment, two major questions will be considered. First, what were the factors that accounted for Davis' great success during the first three decades of the century? And second, why has he been subsequently disregarded, even though he continued to write for the theatre until 1944? The answers to these questions, and ultimately to the question of the nature of Davis' contribution to the American drama, depends on an understanding of the plays that he wrote and the theatre for which he wrote them.

Davis' playwriting career can be divided into four major periods. While there is a certain amount of arbitrary selection involved in any such division, in Davis' case the boundary lines are fairly distinct. From 1898 to 1909 he wrote almost exclusively sensational melodrama. From 1910 to 1920 he experimented with a number of forms seeking to establish himself in the legitimate theatre. Between 1921 and 1926 he reached the height of his popular and critical acclaim by displaying a talent for both farce comedy and realistic character studies. Finally,
from 1927 to 1944 he returned to a variety of efforts striving to write what he called his "great play."

Each of the succeeding chapters is devoted to a discussion of the plays of these periods. Chapter II considers Davis' initial playwriting endeavors in the "ten-twenty-third" drama. Since he was so successful in this form, and since its influence permeates his later efforts, it is important to understand the exact nature of the sensational "meller" in order to view his subsequent work in proper perspective. In addition to the plays, attention is given to Davis' association with Al Woods, and the operation of the Stair-Havlin "wheel" of theatrical houses which the "mellers" eventually dominated. Chapter III focuses on the plays following Davis' departure from the popular-priced theatre. These transitional dramas include The Family Cupboard, Sinners, Driftwood, and Forever After. Consideration is also given to methods by which Davis struggled to establish himself as a legitimate dramatist, such as the matinee performance. Chapter IV deals with the plays of Davis' most successful years and includes discussions of The Detour, Icebound, The Haunted House, and The Nervous Wreck as they illustrate his success in farce comedy and somber, realistic character studies. This chapter also examines the rise of the post-war realistic movement in playwriting and the reasons behind Davis' sudden shift to the "new realism." Attention is also devoted to the critical controversy surrounding the 1923 Pulitzer Prize award to Icebound. Chapter V surveys the plays of the last period from 1927 to 1944. Particular stress is given to the wide variety of efforts during this time such as Jezebel, an "optimistic" drama; Mr. and Mrs. North, a drawing room
comedy; and No Way Out, an ironic reversion to melodrama. Finally, the conclusion is concerned with summarizing the material and formulating answers to the questions posed at the outset.

In addition to this general overview, each of the chapters is focused on a detailed discussion of a specific play as it is representative of the particular period. This method is employed in the belief that a closer examination of an individual work can illustrate Davis' accomplishments more fully than a limited survey of a great many plays. Again, there is a certain amount of arbitrary selection involved, but the basic rationale is to consider a good play that is representative, instead of what might be the most typical play of any given period. Thus, The Haunted House has been selected instead of The Nervous Wreck, which was one of Davis' biggest commercial successes, because The Haunted House is a better play and deserves to be treated as an example of some of the author's best writing in the field of farce comedy. Chapter II features a discussion of a 1907 Davis "meller," At the World's Mercy, which illustrates the basic characteristics of the sensational melodrama. Chapter III contains an analysis of Forever After, the play which firmly established Davis as a respected Broadway dramatist. Chapter IV focuses on Icebound as an example of the realistic play, and Chapter V concentrates on what is possibly the most well known Davis play: his 1936 adaptation of Edith Wharton's Ethan Frome.

The actual analysis of these selected works is primarily concerned with such basic elements as plot, character, and theme, both in terms of Davis' individual growth as a dramatist, and with respect to the current trends in the theatre for which he was writing. In
considering *Icebound*, for example, it is important to view the play within the context of the American theatre in 1923. *Icebound* was awarded the Pulitzer Prize in a year when the American drama was becoming deeply concerned with the methods and techniques of the "new realism." Any evaluation of this play must at least recognize that eight out of ten Pulitzer Prizes between 1917 and 1927 were awarded to realistic dramas. Furthermore, the 1923 season marked the first American tour of the Moscow Art Theatre, the most renowned advocate of the "new realism."

Finally, since Davis always wrote specifically for the stage, and since he was constantly concerned with the play as it related to the entire theatrical milieu, attention is also given to the theatrical appeal and effectiveness of each of the selected plays. *Icebound*, for example, displays a maturity in technique over Davis' first realistic work, *The Detour*, primarily in terms of integrating realistic methods with practical necessities of the stage.

The Davis plays comprise the bulk of the primary materials used in this study. Twenty were published during the playwright's lifetime, and eighteen more have been located in manuscript or promptbook form. Other materials that have been of great value include several of the Davis letters which are housed in the Theatre Collection of the Performing Arts Library at Lincoln Center. Moreover, the enormous clipping service of that library has been helpful in locating a number of early newspaper stories. In addition, the Walter Hampden-Howard Lindsay Scrapbook Collection in the archives of the Ohio State University Theatre Collection has been extremely valuable in providing
reviews, articles, and interviews with the playwright. Correspondence with people who knew Mr. Davis should also be noted, particularly the information and encouragement provided by the playwright, Mr. George Middleton.

Since the plays are central to this study, an additional word concerning them is necessary. Nobody seems to be certain of how many plays Davis actually wrote. He was asked repeatedly about the exact number, and his replies varied from 150 to 400. Often he said that he had simply lost count. The problem of arriving at a precise figure is compounded by the fact that he wrote many of the early plays under pseudonyms, many were done only in summer stock, and some had their titles changed between the tryout town and New York. In 1933 Johnson Briscoe attempted to compile an accurate list of the plays in an article published in the New York Sun.\textsuperscript{7} While there are errors in the list, the present study has leaned heavily on Briscoe's work, as well as a variety of other sources, in compiling a handlist of the 186 Davis plays which constitutes an appendix to this study.

Upon his death in 1956, the New York Times called Davis, "America's most produced and most prolific playwright."\textsuperscript{8} He began writing in a theatre dominated by Bronson Howard and finished in a theatre displaying Tennessee Williams. For forty-six years he devoted himself to the art of writing plays, graduating from the spectacular

\textsuperscript{7}Ward Morehouse, "Broadway After Dark," New York Sun, February 18, 1933.

\textsuperscript{8}New York Times, October 15, 1956, p. 25.
sensation of popular-priced entertainment to critical acclaim and an unparallelled string of professional productions. In the last two decades, however, he has undergone an almost total eclipse. Through an examination of the plays, the following chapters attempt to account for both his great success and his subsequent obscurity.
CHAPTER II

THE "TEN-TWENT-THIRT" DRAMA: 1899-1909

Owen Davis wrote his first full-length play in 1883. He was nine years old.1 The play, Diamond Cut Diamond, or The Rival Detectives, was a blood-thirsty melodrama in which all the characters were slain prior to the final curtain. The last, Davis reports, was forced to commit suicide.2 From this auspicious beginning, the clinical path to the popular-priced theatre appears short and steep. But the author of Diamond Cut Diamond had higher things in mind, and his descent to the "ten-twenty-thirt" was arrested by an ardent desire to emulate not Augustin Daly and Dion Boucicault, but Thomas Dekker and William Shakespeare. Davis' first professional production was set in the English countryside and its subject was the War of the Roses. Conspicuously absent were the mammoth caves, opium dens, and thieves' lairs of the sensational "mellers." For the White Rose, in Davis' words, was a "Romantic-Historical Comedy."3

1According to the City Clerk's Office of Portland, Maine, Davis was born in Portland on January 28, 1874. On his application to Harvard he gave his birth date as February 29, 1873. The obituaries and standard biographical sources state that he was born on January 29, 1874. However, I have been unable to verify either of these latter dates.

2Owen Davis, I'd Like To Do It Again (New York: Farrar & Rinehart, 1931), p. 3.

Before the War of the Roses was reenacted for the inhabitants of Peaks Island, Maine in 1898, Davis had devoted most of his twenty-four years to becoming a mining engineer. His father was in the coal and iron business near Bangor, Maine, where the family had moved shortly after Owen was born. He attended the Bangor grade schools and three years of high school, but before he finished his education the family moved to Middelsborough, Kentucky where the elder Davis was developing new mining interests. Encouraged by his father to become an engineer, Owen studied with various private tutors before entering the University of Tennessee in 1889. His stay in Knoxville was brief, however, and in the summer of 1890 he returned to Bangor and submitted an application to Harvard, "on my father's wishes that I should go to a Northern school."

Years later after Davis had become a successful Broadway dramatist, the newspapers invariably referred to him as one of the first of a long line of Harvard playwrights who had enriched the American theatre. But unlike Edward Sheldon, Philip Barry, Sidney Howard, and other alumni of the Baker Workshop, Davis went to Harvard in the fall of 1890 to enroll in the business course and continue his apparent interest in engineering. Workshop #7 was not yet a reality in 1890, although an aspiring playwright could select English 14 with Mr. Baker. Davis, however, studied mainly mineralogy, geology, and paleontology, and in his third year he transferred to the Lawrence Scientific School of the university.

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*4* Quoted from Davis' application to Harvard College, dated September 3, 1890.
While he was pursuing his scientific studies under the guidance of Professor N. S. Shaler, Davis was also developing a keen interest in the art theatre movement, which by 1890 had precipitated the formation of The Society of Arts, a company headed by Maurice Barrymore for "lovers of a better drama" in Boston. This society offered to Bostonian theatre-goers the plays of such avant-garde writers as William Dean Howells and Frank Stockton. Unfortunately, the project was not supported by the public, and it lasted only one season. Davis' clearest recollection of this venture was the night the ushers quit because the play was so dismal, and the few lovers of a better drama who entered the Hollis Street Theatre found no one to show them to their seats.5

Nevertheless, his exposure to the art theatre movement made a profound impression on Davis, and while he continued his engineering program, he also began to write poems and plays modelled on the Greek and Elizabethan drama. He had learned something vital about the theatre which was to haunt him for the rest of his career. He had discovered that there was both a commercial and an experimental theatre. The latter had a noble vision and purpose: to elevate the taste of the audience. The former was primarily designed to cater to its audience and make money for all its participants. At sixteen he rebuked the commercialism of the professional theatre and aligned himself with the "lovers of a better drama." A few years later he embraced the popular theatre in one of its most profitable forms.

In 1893 Davis left Harvard without taking a degree and began his brief career as a mining engineer in the Cumberland Mountains of

5Davis, I'd Like To Do It Again, p. 10.
Kentucky. He soon realized that he was completely unsuited for his chosen profession which consisted mainly of "digging holes." He also realized that he could get killed if he continued to work along the route of the Cumberland Valley Railroad which by July of 1894 was fast becoming a battlefield for the Debs strikers and the Kentucky State Police. As a respite from hole-digging, he began writing plays again and dreamed of going to New York where he could earn a living from what was still a "hobby." Eventually the Pullman strike was broken only to be followed by a new outbreak in feuding between factions of the legendary Hatfields and McCoys. And Davis grew more restless "at his dirty job in a dirty little southern town" where one was constantly in danger of being killed. New York seemed more glamorous than ever, and in the summer of 1895 he left the mountains, determined to become an actor or playwright or almost anything connected with the theatre.

Davis arrived in New York in the late summer of 1895 with twelve dollars, several play manuscripts, and a strong distaste for his former profession. He made the rounds of the managers' offices and discovered shortly that nobody was interested in his blank verse, comic or tragic. One of his most vivid memories was submitting a manuscript to the Charles Frohman agency. The play reader, Charles Klein, noted that Davis had an athletic appearance. Davis acknowledged the compliment. "Well then," replied Klein, "Why don't you take this masterpiece and throw it as far as you can." Fortunately, A. M. Palmer was looking for an assistant stage manager and utility man to play four walk-ons in

6Ibid., p. 12. 7Ibid., p. 27.
The Great Diamond Robbery starring the Polish tragedienne, Madame Janauschek, which had recently opened at the American Theatre. Palmer, sensing some small promise in Davis' writing, suggested that he accept the job and learn about the theatre from the inside. Davis agreed, and for twelve dollars a week he joined the company for the New York engagement and the long road tour. His subsequent experience was extremely beneficial. He discovered a variety of current staging techniques, and learned that playwriting was his only chance for survival in New York. "Neffer be an actor," Janauschek told him when the season ended. 8

The next fall found Davis once more making the rounds with his manuscripts and desperately in need of money. A chance meeting with a friend from Harvard led to his becoming football coach at the De La Salle Institute for fifty dollars a week; but he was still unable to convince anyone that he could write good plays. Finally, in February of 1898 he took his manuscript of For the White Rose to the Keough and Davis agency, and his fortunes began to change. William Keough scoffed at the War of the Roses, but told the author that if he wanted to make money he should write a play similar to the current hit at the Star Theatre. That evening Davis watched The Great Train Robbery. His initial reaction to what he saw is recorded in his autobiography. "Could I write a play like that? I thought anybody could, but didn't see why they should." 9 Five hundred dollars was why they should, and when Keough offered Davis the opportunity to desert his poetic muse for the sake of profitable melodrama, the young author jumped at the chance.

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8 Ibid., p. 18. 9 Ibid., p. 33.
Since he had been reduced to selling his clothes to pay the rent, he wrote his first sensational "meller" with all possible haste and deposited it on Keough's desk. The play was rejected.

Davis was extremely discouraged. After nearly three years in New York he was no closer to success than he had been when he arrived. Moreover, he was baffled by the fact that he could not write what appeared to be such a simple succession of sensational events as he had witnessed in *The Great Train Robbery*. He stopped writing and began studying the "mellers" from the ten cent seats of the gallery houses. He also began studying the reaction of the audience to what transpired on the stage. Through the winter and spring of 1898, Davis attempted to determine what it was that made the melodrama so attractive to the audiences that packed the Bowery theatres. He began writing again during the day while continuing his nightly tours of the popular-priced houses. Finally, in the summer he retreated to Maine to begin what he hoped would be an acceptable script. In Portland he persuaded the manager of the Gem Theatre on nearby Peaks Island to produce *For the White Rose*, and with a small income assured, he finished a new script. By September he was back in New York for another round of managers' offices.

In a dilapidated dressing room of the Star Theatre, Davis found Gus Hill, who agreed to produce the play if Davis would cast and rehearse it. Hill was the manager of a troupe of burlesque performers, and his specialty was swinging Indian Clubs. According to Davis, he did not even read *Through the Breakers* because he "wouldn't know if it was
good anyway." But he was impressed by Davis' enthusiasm and agreed to finance the production at least through its try-out in Bridgeport. On January 30, 1899 Davis brought his play to New York. It was a success. In fact, it was such a success that Through the Breakers ran in the popular-priced repertory for five years on three continents.

After his initial triumph, Davis had little trouble obtaining productions. He wrote three more "mellers" for Hill in the following three seasons, and one of his early farces, Over the Fence, was produced in Boston on April 9, 1900. In the fall of 1902 he signed a contract with Sullivan, Harris, and Woods, one of the most prosperous melodrama firms, and by the next winter he had written, cast, and directed four successful productions for them. When the firm broke up in 1905, Davis signed a remarkable contract with Al Woods. The contract specified that for the next five years Woods would produce only Davis plays, and that Davis would write for no other manager. Woods guaranteed to produce at least four new plays, as well as four revivals, in each of the contracted years. The former mining engineer had become the most important author in the popular-priced theatre.

Before examining what Franklin P. Adams called the "Davidramas," it is important to clarify the nature and appeal of the "ten-twentieth" which dominated the field of popular entertainment in the first decade of the twentieth century. Owen Davis did not invent the sensational melodrama, but he did capitalize on the existing structure to such an extent that he is generally credited with evolving a formula

10 ibid., p. 41.
which enabled him to manufacture plays at an incredible speed. Between 1905 and 1909 the team of Davis and Woods produced over fifty plays in what Lewin Goff has termed their "melodrama factory." Their output was so prodigious that Davis was eventually forced to assume pseudonyms so that audiences would not tire of the constant flow of his plays.

This mass production, however, was based on great consumer demand, and the nature and appeal of the product is a reflection of the nature and demands of the audiences who paid the bills. Seldom, if ever, in the history of American drama has there been such a perfect correlation between consumer demand and the playwright's wares.

In 1900 the average American working-class male in a northern metropolitan area earned slightly less than $500 per year. To do this he worked a 60-hour week. An unskilled laborer could count on $1.50 per day if he was able to find work. As Frederick Lewis Allen points out, the census of 1900 showed more than 6,000,000 workers idle at some time during the year. For female workers the situation was even more deplorable. Shopgirls in Boston were earning from $3 to $6 in a work week that was 70 hours long. In New York a woman doing sewing "at home" earned $.30 per day. Robert Hunter estimated that by 1904 there may have been as many as 20,000,000 people in the United States living in abject poverty.


The reasons for these conditions were, of course, varied and complex. But one of the most significant factors was the immigration of foreign workers and the resultant decline in wages due to the expanded labor force. The Iron Law of Wages demands, according to Allen, that "all salaries tend to fall to the level which the most unskilled or most desperate man will accept."\(^{14}\) Trade unions were in their infancy. Child labor made up a large percentage of the working force. And the immigrants, many with no knowledge of any language but their own, flowed virtually unchecked into the fast growing slums of the big American cities.

New York's lower east side, or Bowery section, was one of the fastest growing of these slum areas. From Union Square and Fifteenth Street down to the Brooklyn Bridge, the area between Broadway and the East River became the promised land for thousands of foreign immigrants seeking a new life in America. As the population expanded, groups of Chinese, Italians, and Jews banded together to create small nationalist pockets, many of which were overcrowded and appallingly filthy. Paul Bourget visited the Italian district and discovered "two rooms, small as boat cabins in which eight men and women crouched over their work, in a fetid air, which an iron stove made more stifling."\(^{15}\) The Italian playwright, Giuseppe Giacosa, claimed that, "it is impossible to describe the dirt and filth"\(^{16}\) of the Italian district of the Bowery. As the job market dwindled, increasing numbers of beggars and panhandlers appeared in the streets, and by 1905 Alvin Harlow reports that the

\(^{14}\)Ibid., p. 43. \(^{15}\)Ibid., p. 52. \(^{16}\)Ibid., p. 51.
Bowery had become "the Eden of Bums and Beggars." Many of them resorted to elaborate ruses in order to make their plight appear more pitiable. Children—rented by the day and dressed in rags—often accompanied the panhandlers as they wandered up and down the streets seeking money. A majority, however, could not afford such devices. Hundreds of unemployed, unskilled immigrants were caught in a deadly impasse between begging and stealing to obtain money for even the cheapest kind of meal, one frankfurter and coffee. Total cost: four cents.

Of course not everyone in the Bowery was poverty-stricken. There were thousands of families who worked at respectable businesses and managed to survive on their incomes. Many small shopkeepers existed as they had in the old country, living in small rooms above their stores and putting in long hours to pay the bills. Some even became relatively affluent in this pre-income tax era. Charles Solomon, for instance, had silver dollars imbedded in the concrete floor of his spacious Essex Street Saloon. But the pervading atmosphere in the Bowery was a sense of closeness, of people jammed together in order to eke out a living. In 1897, 50,000 people were living in the seven blocks south of Hester Street between Bowery and Essex. By 1900 there was one square mile inhabited by 290,000 people. And while such sections became

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increasingly bothersome for the Police department, for the aspiring showman and theatrical producer, the Bowery was a goldmine.

In 1898, when Owen Davis was rehearsing *Through the Breakers* for its Bridgeport try-out, the New York Police Department listed ninety-nine places of amusement on the Bowery—including saloons which provided music—but classed only fourteen as respectable.\(^{21}\) Public entertainment at the turn of the century, in addition to spectator sports such as baseball, was limited largely to theatrical ventures (burlesque, vaudeville, and various kinds of plays) and curiosity ventures such as the amusement park and the Dime Museum. Motion pictures were beginning to flicker, but they would have no mass appeal for another decade. There were no radios. Automobiles were playthings of the rich.

Dime Museums were one of the most popular entertainments, and they flourished on the Bowery. Specializing in freaks and monstrosities, a typical museum featured a mermaid, fat ladies, glass eaters, and other physiological marvels. One even advertised, "The living suicide, he kills himself every fifteen minutes."\(^{22}\) The museums sprang into popularity in the late nineteenth century, but their schemes and devices kept them in constant trouble with the law. By 1900 they had become "not only disreputable, but a cheat."\(^{23}\) Dress mannikins shrouded in a pale light were garishly advertised as, "the unclad female form in all

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\(^{23}\) Harlow, *Old Bowery Days*, p. 478.
its loveliness." Often the unsuspecting patron would be lured into a "Doctor's office" for a "phrenological examination" only to discover that the additional fee was sometimes as high as two dollars. But the museums prospered despite the repeated police warnings because they offered an inexpensive form of entertainment in a world that was otherwise dull and drab.

It was the theatrical enterprises, however, that provided the greatest mass entertainment, and sensational melodramas were written with their proletarian audiences clearly in mind. A typical "ten-twenty-thirt" play had the same basic appeal as the Dime Museum: entertainment largely in terms of visual sensation at a cheap price. There was as much excitement in watching a duel between giant balloons or a fist fight atop a speeding train, as there was seeing Bill Jones devour a piece of window glass between two slices of bread. And the "mellers" had the additional advantage of providing dramatic conflict which was often lacking in the museum exhibitions. Because of the diverse languages of their customers, the museums were highly oriented toward the visual, but so were the "mellers." Language was not really a barrier in a theatre employing stock costumes for stock characters and relying heavily on physical actions and scenic effects. Owen Davis described it this way:

One of the first tricks that I learned was that my plays must be written for an audience who, owing to the huge uncarpeted noisy theatres, couldn't always hear the words and who, a large percentage of them having only recently landed in America,

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24 Ibid., p. 479. 25 Ibid.
couldn't have understood them in any case. I therefore wrote for the eye rather than the ear and played out each emotion in action.  

Moreover, the melodramas were as inexpensive as the Dime Museums and were free from the additional hidden charges which became so prevalent in the latter. For a dime, the playgoer could watch the show from the top gallery; and for thirty cents, he could have one of the best seats in the house.

Recognizing the potential earning power of the popular melodrama, theatrical producers began to provide an increasing number of sensational plays as the nineteenth century drew to a close. The history of melodrama in America has been written recently by Frank Rahill, but it is important to review some of his major points in order to account for the emergence of the "ten-twenty-thirt" in the first decade of the twentieth century. Essentially, American melodrama in the first half of the nineteenth century was largely imported from England and France. A number of American authors wrote melodramas, but they were almost all adaptations of foreign plays. William Dunlap, for instance, presented a wide variety of adaptations from the French, and one of his most successful plays, Thirty Years, was based on Trente Ans by Prosper Goubaux and Victor Ducange. John Howard Payne, another prolific adapter, found the inspiration for one of his greatest successes, The Sentinels, in Les Deux Sergents by D'Aubigny. A large percentage of the plays, however, were simply imported complete from

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26 Davis, I'd Like To Do It Again, p. 36.

England. *Mazeppa*, one of the most famous of the early melodramas, is widely remembered for Adah Menken's performance in flesh tights in 1862; but the play had been thrilling American audiences as early as 1825.

Toward the middle of the nineteenth century American melodrama was bolstered by two important events. The first was the decision of Dion Boucicault (who emphasized the sensational aspect of the form) to come to America and produce his work. The second was the growing popularity of such indigenous plays as *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. The combination of these events inspired many Americans to take up the banner of melodrama, and by the 1870's the United States had contributed Augustin Daly to the long list of English, German, and French authors who had achieved considerable success in the genre. Daly, like Boucicault, emphasized the sensational aspects of the melodrama. In one of his most famous plays, *Under the Gaslight* (1867), Laura, the heroine, is locked in a baggage shed at the railroad station, and her friend, Snorkey, is tied to the rails. As the train approaches, Laura seizes an axe and chops down the door just in time to save Snorkey from death. It was this kind of scene which insured the popularity of the nineteenth-century melodrama and which was seized upon by the "ten-twenty-thirt" with great success.

Melodrama's great popularity in the seventies was not due to its productions in the first class New York theatres. American theatre was becoming more centralized, and the major producers, Lester Wallack and A. M. Palmer, still clung to British and French imports rather than American offerings. When they did present melodrama it was often a less sensational French or English brand than a native product. As a result,
the "blood and thunder plays," as they were now popularly called, became largely relegated to the Bowery and road theatres.

In the 1880's, however, with the emergence of David Belasco, William Gillette, and Augustus Thomas, American melodrama entered a new phase. Influenced greatly by the increasing demands for realistic stage presentations, these men refined the melodrama and gave it the benefit of good writing, logical plotting, and more believable characters. As Rahill points out, "they modernized the old melodrama, making it plausible, adult and even intellectually respectable . . . they threw out the kidnapped orphans, the ghosts, the missing papers, the foreclosed mortgages, and the missing heirs."28 Plays like Sherlock Holmes, Barbara Freitchie, and The Girl of the Golden West became respectable Broadway entertainment. Secret Service was praised by William Archer as, "the best drama of situation and adventure in the English language."29

The result of this modernization was a wide split between legitimate and popular melodrama. The Bowery theatres, realizing that they did not have the talent to compete with the Broadway houses, fell back on the sensationalism of the blood and thunder plays and exploited it to the fullest. The end product of this exploitation was the "ten-twenty-third," which flourished for nearly two decades before it was obliterated by the motion pictures.

The popularity of the "ten-twenty-third" in the first decade of the twentieth century would never have been so widespread if it were not

28 Ibid., p. 263. 29 Ibid., p. 263.
for one additional factor. As the "mellers" began to reach the height of their initial success, they suddenly found strong competition in their own back yard--the Bowery. Yiddish drama, growing out of a large and firmly entrenched Jewish population, outstripped all of the other nationalist theatrical movements and began to dominate the offerings at many of the old melodrama houses. Two of the most famous theatres, the Windsor and the Peoples, fell before the onslaught; and in 1900 Miners began to succumb. To combat the new competition, the managers had increased their offerings in the surrounding neighborhoods, and the "mellers" became permanent fare in Brooklyn and the West side. In their search for new homes the managers discovered still more demand for their sensational wares. In response, they hit upon an idea which was to have a profound effect on the "ten-twenty-thirt." Since 1896 the legitimate theatre had been operating within the jurisdiction of the Syndicate, and the enterprising showmen of the "mellers" witnessed the financial success of this operation. According to Rahill, the managers of the sensational melodrama "were a new breed of men; gifted organizers, adroit financiers, born gamblers, and keen unsentimental students of popular taste." 30 Led by Al Woods and Sam Harris they created a new syndicate of their own. Second rate theatres were organized in the principal cities between Boston and Kansas City, and the melodramas were packaged and promoted on a great "wheel" of theatres with a guaranteed income at every stop. The Stair and Havlin Wheel consisted of

30 Frank Rahill, "When Heaven Protected the Working Girl," Theatre Arts, October, 1954, p. 79.
thirty-five houses, five of which were in New York, and the remainder
spread out across the country in fairly straight lines or "spokes." In
the principal cities--Boston, Philadelphia, Kansas City, and Chicago--
the "mellers" were booked for one week, after which they would move on
to the next theatre in the circuit. In the smaller cities--Syracuse,
Columbus, Louisville, and Indianapolis--the plays would run for only
three days. The circuit operated a thirty-five to forty week season
beginning in the fall, and at the height of the winter activity there
were generally thirty-five different "mellers," including a number of
revivals, being presented by thirty-five different companies all
circling the spokes of the "wheel" which radiated outward from New York.
The profits from this operation were staggering, particularly for the
playwrights. George Middleton reports that Owen Davis "received eight
per cent of the company share or approximately two hundred dollars per
show per week."

Between 1905 and 1909 he was guaranteed by Woods at
least 8 productions a year, which amounted to a minimum seasonal income
of $56,000. Davis claimed that in one season he had as many as 18 plays
on the circuit.

A typical "ten-twenty-thirt" play varied only slightly from the
English and French models from which it had evolved. In discussing the
popular melodrama of the nineteenth century, Rahill has provided a
definition which is applicable not only to the "ten-twenty-thirt," but

31 George Middleton, These Things Are Mine (New York: Macmillan
32 Montrose J. Moses, The American Dramatist (Boston: Little,
to the Drury Lane and **Boulevard du Temple** plays of London and Paris.

Popular melodrama is a prose composition partaking of the nature of tragedy, comedy, pantomime, and spectacle. Primarily concerned with situation and plot, it calls upon mimed action extensively and employs a more or less fixed complement of stock characters, the most important of which are a suffering hero or heroine, a persecuting villain, and a benevolent comic. It is conventionally moral in point of view and sentimental and optimistic in temper, concluding its fable happily with virtue rewarded and vice punished. Characteristically it offers elaborate scenic accessories and introduces music freely to underscore dramatic effect.33

The actual plot of the play was invariably complicated and became even more so as the "ten-twenty-third" moved into mass production. Usually the author took a late point of attack so that the lost orphans, ruined women, and missing heirs had already been created prior to the first act. Most of the stories are built along a pursuit line with the villain constantly seeking either the heroine's virtue or her fortune. Just as he has cornered her, and at the last possible minute, she is rescued by the hero. This hero was inevitably poor, and his goodness would normally win the lady's heart and, often, a fortune from an unexpected source.

In addition to the hero, heroine, and villain, the plays usually featured a comic boy and girl who were friends of the good people. Their primary function was to provide comic relief as well as to rescue the hero or heroine from dangerous situations. Similarly, the villain ordinarily had a female companion who was as wicked as her counterpart. In the last act, after a seemingly endless number of schemes, the villains were punished and justice was served. On this rather standard framework, a variety of situations were constructed. Sometimes the heroine

would be kidnapped by a villain whom she had rejected, and the play would deal with the hero's attempts to rescue her. Sometimes the hero and heroine would be impersonated by the villains in an attempt to claim a fortune. Or sometimes the plays revolved around the abduction of children (many of whom might already be orphans) and the hero's attempts to save them. These plots were given appeal and individuality, however, by the variety of dangers that the good people could be threatened with before the villains were apprehended.

In the winter months of 1898, when Davis sat in the galleries of the "meller" theatres studying the plays and their audiences, it became increasingly apparent that what thrilled the masses most were the moments when the villain was about to perform some dastardly deed at the expense of the hero or heroine. Buzz saws whined, vicious dogs strained at their leashes, and tenements went up in flames. That the events leading up to and away from these moments were highly improbable seemed to make no difference. Moreover, since the outcome of the play was inevitable, the interest seemed to be in how things were accomplished rather than why. Characters were not consistently motivated. Poetic justice inevitably triumphed, and the success of a play depended upon novelty more than probability. Davis also realized that the thematic values bordered on unashamed romance. The audience, despite the glaring inconsistencies between the harsh realities of the outside world and the glamor of the theatre, demanded what Rollin Hartt calls the "Ten Commandments written in fire."³4 Sons must never wrong parents.

³4Hartt, The People at Play, p. 191.
Infidelity must not be rewarded. And the good man, even if he were incredibly poor, always triumphed. The sensational melodrama was not just escapist entertainment, it was the reaffirmation of a moral code which the audience believed to be natural and universal.

Therefore, when Davis plunged into the sensational plays he did not attempt to give the audiences anything new. He simply capitalized on what they wanted. Spectacular scenes, romantic sentiments, and a clear cut conflict between good and evil had become fixtures in the "mellers" long before Through the Breakers. But under Davis' prolific hand, the "ten-twenty-thirt" accelerated at a terrific rate. Of course, much of the speed with which he wrote was due to his contractual agreement with Al Woods. After the famous contract of 1905, Davis had committed himself to writing at least four new plays every year. It was a rare occasion when a play was held over on the Stair and Havlin Wheel because it affected the booking throughout the entire chain. A steady stream of dramas was in demand, and Davis is credited with evolving a formula in order to speed the composition of the popular melodramas.

A good deal of commentary has been devoted to this formula both by Davis and by subsequent critics of the American drama. Parts of it have been reprinted recently in John Tochey's History of the Pulitzer Prize Plays and in Jordan Miller's American Dramatic Literature. Some of the accounts stress the character-types aspect of the formula, and others stress the demand for a fixed number of scenes. Drawing on a number of sources, and particularly Davis' own prescriptions whenever
possible, I have assembled the essential parts of the formula as follows:

1. An exciting, provocative title is extremely necessary. This, according to Davis, constitutes a large measure of the play's potential success.  

2. Generally each of the four acts accomplishes a specific purpose.

   Act I: Start the trouble.
   Act II: Here things look bad. The lady having left home is quite at the mercy of the villain.
   Act III: The lady is saved by the stage carpenter. The big scenic and mechanical effects were always in the third act.
   Act IV: The lovers are united and the villains are punished.

3. The four acts should be further divided into no less than fifteen scenes, the end of each being a moment of perilous suspense or terrifying danger.

4. The plays are built around eight basic characters and then filled in as desired with "character types." The basic eight are hero, heroine, villain, villainess, comic boy, soubrette, heavy man, and comic.

5. "Every melodrama must be a play of human interest, and that means, as I understand it, a believable series of adventures that fall to the lot of some persons whom you have established in the sentiments of the audience."  

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36 Ibid., p. 29.
37 Ibid., p. 30. In an interview with the Chicago Tribune (July 5, 1908), Davis said that sixteen scenes was the rule.
38 Owen Davis, I'd Like To Do It Again, p. 101. In "Why I Quit Writing Melodrama" Davis omits the heavy man and comic and says that a father and mother "to provide sentiment" were part of the basic eight.
39 Chicago Tribune, July 5, 1908.
6. "My own plays fall into three fairly distinct types: the Western thriller, the New York comedy-drama, and the sexy type (heroine in distress)."

These six elements constitute the much discussed Davis formula for melodrama, and it is mainly due to them that the author has received even limited treatment in the various historical studies of the American theatre. In fact, the formula has been reprinted so frequently that it has become nearly synonymous with the Davis "mellers."

Accepting these statements as actually describing the "Davis-dramas," however, can be misleading because the author was not particularly consistent in following his own prescriptions. If we examine the "mellers," instead of what has been written about them, it becomes increasingly obvious that the formula is fraught with discrepancies. And the task of aligning theory and practice is not as simple as it appears to be. Consider, for example, the emphasis on the sensational title which Davis constantly stressed. Certainly Queen of the White Slaves, The Creole Slave's Revenge, and Secrets of the Police, or Bloodhounds of the Law seem adequate in the evocation of exciting images. But what of My Lady Nell or Far Away? What sensational events do they conjure in the perspective viewer's imagination? This is a small point, to be sure, since much of the drawing power of the "mellers" depended on the lithographed posters which Al Woods is said to have designed before the play was ever written. But consider the formula further. The four-act synopsis is, in general, a fairly accurate outline of a number of the sensational melodramas both by Davis and by

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40 Owen Davis, I'd Like To Do It Again, p. 35.
others. Charles Taylor's _From Rags to Riches_ (Metropolis, August 31, 1903) is an excellent example of a "ten-twenty-third" play which fits this outline precisely. However, a number of the "Davidramas" do not lend themselves to such a convenient breakdown. In _Lost at Sea_ the Heroine's plight is resolved in the second act, and she is never in trouble again. In _Reaping the Whirlwind_ the big sensation scene takes place in the last act instead of the third. And in _Confessions of a Wife_ Davis deserts the four act format altogether and relates the misadventures of Alice Rutherford in five acts.

With regard to the further qualification that the plays were divided into no less than fifteen scenes, there are a host of exceptions. _The Lighthouse by the Sea_ has only four scenes, one for each act. _Ruled Off the Turf_ has ten, as does _A Race Across the Continent_. _The Great Express Robbery_ has nine, and _Broadway After Dark_, eleven. Similar discrepancies may be noted in the requirement of the eight basic characters. _The Lighthouse by the Sea_ does not feature the famous red-clad villainess, nor does _At the World's Mercy_.

In terms of Davis' statements that these plays must be a series of believable adventures, there is a similar problem. Basically, it is unfair to criticize the "ten-twenty-third" plays for their improbabilities. They were never intended to be carefully constructed, logical stories. The essence of their appeal was spectacle, and their techniques were cinematic—a rapid altering of front and back scenes—to achieve an episodic quality and wide variety of effects. The coincidences, mishaps, lost letters, and missing heirs were all part of an understood contract between audience and author so that shortcuts could
be taken in order to get to the sensational aspects of the plays. But even within the framework of this "permitted improbability" contract, Davis, like the other writers of the "ten-twenty-three," found it necessary to present at least plausible character types involved in situations which could arise once the basic premises had been established. Thus, when he speaks of a believable series of adventures, he is requiring that they be believable within the wide range of the essentially improbable, but acceptable, scope of the "ten-twenty-three" dramatic context. An audience would accept Nellie, the cloak model, being thrown down elevator shafts and under elevated trains because she was a helpless female in the clutches of a villain who was automatically bad, and who had a clear, well-defined motive for wishing to dispatch her. In his quest for sensation, however, Davis often went beyond what could be considered believable even for the sensational melodrama.

Consider the case of *Ruled Off the Turf*, for instance, a 1906 product which was given a less than hearty reception. The action of the play is motivated primarily by the attempts of the villain, Waldo, to procure a letter from the heroine, Lucy. She has been instructed to get the letter, which contains incriminating evidence about Waldo, to the Racing Commission. Waldo, who fears exposure as the notorious "Slippery Dick," knows the contents of the letter and is determined to obtain it at any cost. After various attempts on her life, Lucy flees to the hero's home seeking help because Waldo and his men keep attacking her. Davis' desire for a believable series of adventures appears rather transparent when such a resourceful individual as Lucy cannot avail herself of either the U.S. mail or a local policeman. It is such
incidents as these that mar Davis' claim that part of the prescriptions for writing melodramas was a believable series of adventures.

As for the final statement that he wrote essentially three types of plays, here, too, we encounter difficulties. In examining the plays, such convenient lines of separation often become indistinct and blurred. As Davis warmed to the task of creating popular plays, he frequently broke his thematic and locale molds. The adventures roamed from Hard Luck, Alaska to St. Petersburg, Russia. Some plays became combinations of the standard types and some introduced the Maine Coast, southern coal mines, and the Sahara Desert. In his quest for sensation Davis later claimed that, "we touched upon every theme known to man and every location."\(^{41}\)

Thus, under closer examination, the formula theory does not provide a wholly accurate description of the "Davidramas," and if we are to make some assessment or evaluation of his work in the "ten-twenty-thirt" drama, it is necessary to establish some different and more viable criteria. In each of the "mellers" that I have been able to examine and in the dozens of reviews of plays which are no longer available, there are four standard ingredients. Regardless of locale, act structure, character complement, or number of scenes, each of the "Davidramas" provides spectacular scenic displays, a well defined conflict between good and evil (with the good invariably supported by a universal sense of justice), a romantic love story, and excellent

\(^{41}\) Davis, "Why I Quit Writing Melodrama," p. 29.
comedy. These four elements are present in each of the plays, and together they account for the popularity and the success of the many Davis "mellers."

The primary essence of the "Davidramas" was always the emphasis on the spectacular. The importance that Davis attached to the big scenic displays can be illustrated by the increasing number of sensational scenes that he wrote. Thus, in an early play like The Lighthouse by the Sea there are only four scenes, and what may be described as one scenic display located quite properly at the conclusion of the third act. In a late play, however, such as The Millionaire and the Policeman's Wife, the audience witnessed a duel between two divers at the bottom of the North River, the destruction by dynamite of the Tarrytown Bridge (followed by the hero and heroine leaping from their car to the branches of a nearby tree), the escape of the heroine on the roof of an elevated train, and a tenement fire in which a policeman clutches an infant to his chest and jumps from a third story window.

Second, Davis always established a clear cut conflict between the good and evil forces, with the hero normally presented as "poor or else very young and very drunk." 42 In addition, this dichotomy between good and evil was a reflection of a larger universal picture which exhibited to the audience an existence where honesty and virtue would always triumph over evil. It was a romantic picture, of course, as Davis recognized, but the audience demanded this system of values despite the injustices of their own lives. They craved the triumph of

42 Davis, I'd Like To Do It Again, p. 101.
justice in the melodramas, just as they demanded it in the tales of Horatio Alger and the pulp novels of Laura Jean Libbey. They needed escape from a harsh world and the assurance that there was a universal justice which would eventually reward the "poor but honest" in each of them.

Third, Davis presented a romantic love story between the hero and the heroine which was always important to the plot but which was never highly developed or overly sentimental. He knew that the audiences wanted a love story in order to see the good people rewarded with romantic bliss after their hardships at the hand of the villain. But he also had observed that audiences would not sit still long for romantic love because they had come for the sensational aspects of the production. Therefore, he developed the love interest quickly, sketching in the relationship with broad strokes, without devoting entire scenes to the hero and heroine. In A Race Across the Continent Hector and Sylvia rarely express any romantic sentiments to each other, but the love interest is assured by their proximity and their coordinated efforts to defeat the villains.

To the sensation, universal justice, and romantic love, Davis added comedy as his fourth primary ingredient. Of course, the alternating serious and comic scenes had long been a fixture of the melodrama. And Davis recognized that good comedy could be expanded and exploited just as the sensation scenes could. The comic scenes, like the serious story, were developed largely in terms of stock characters: the Irish mother, the German or Dutch fool, the Negro servant. Davis retained most of these, but he seemed to have a flair for comedy and he
often filled out his casts with additional character types. One of his favorites was a "humors" figure whose actions were determined by one primary trait. Minty Speck, for instance, in *The Lighthouse by the Sea*, is described as "crazy clean," and she washes wood so that it will burn better. Davis was also fond of introducing various comic vaudeville routines. Caesar and Dopey in *Ruled Off the Turf* decide that they will go "halves" on everything. In the course of the play Caesar makes Dopey assume half of his debts, and eventually Dopey is talked out of half his new suit. As his command of visual effects developed, Davis also began to utilize a number of sight gags. In Act III of *A Race Across the Continent* a horse-drawn carriage pulls up in front of a Chicago hotel to deposit Mrs. Braumbach and her dozen children. The carriage is quite small, and with the help of a conveniently located vampire trap, the vehicle seems to empty eternally. Later, the horse gets drunk.

In order to illustrate Davis' work in the popular-priced theatre, let us consider a typical "meller," *At the World's Mercy*, which was produced on February 12, 1906 at the Star Theatre. Like many of the "Davidramas" it does not fit a precise formula in terms of setting, locale, or character; but it does exemplify the features which made his work popular and profitable. The play opens in a rural area of Fairview, New York. There is a canal at the back of the stage, an ice-shed at left, and a small house at right. This is the home of Jack Austin, a good man who is addicted to alcohol. Jack and his brother, Grey, a physician, control the fortune of four-year-old Grace Atherton, their ward. In addition, both Jack and Grey are in love with Ruth Wingate,
who believes that Jack will eventually repay her trust and love by reforming from his drunkenness.

Grey, of course, is thoroughly despicable although the good people do not realize it. This was part of the permitted improbability contract. It becomes obvious quite quickly that he has been stimulating his brother's drunkenness with medication in order to obtain both Ruth's affections and Grace's money. Midway through the act, Jacob Grafdt arrives with his henchman, Bill Payton, "a bad nigger." Jacob is a Dutch Jew to whom Grey owes money, and Grey has promised to repay him by stealing from Grace. But Jack is still sober enough at times to check the accounts, and Grey can do nothing without his brother's cooperation. In desperation, Grey arranges to have Jacob and Bill kidnap Grace. They plan to take her to New York, knowing that Jack will follow, and once in the big city his need for alcohol will lure him to destruction. Additional characters include Mrs. Clancy, the ever present Irish neighbor and her son, Terry; Washington Griggs, a born pessimist, and his son, Bud, who is seven.

The abduction is successful, and Act II opens in New York showing the interior of Jacob Grafdt's pawn shop and a street leading to the entrance of a third class hotel. Grace is being held prisoner in the shop, and all the characters have come to New York in search of her. Naturally, several of them happen to be staying in the hotel across the street. Ruth discovers Grafdt's shop and is also captured by Jacob and Bill. Shortly after, little Bud arrives and manages to get himself hired as a clerk, in order to spy on Grafdt. In a wild fight scene at the end of Act II, the villains are routed and Grace and Ruth are saved.
One of the interesting features of the typical pursuit plot was that the play could end at almost any point. Since right ordinarily triumphed over wrong whenever the opposing forces met, the villains were normally thwarted several times in the course of the "mellers." This was fine, of course, as long as there were enough subplots or enough villains to keep the play going. Often, however, the major conflicts seemed to be resolved at the end of each act. Thus, the following act had to provide all kinds of additional exposition to recreate audience interest. When Davis moved out of the popular theatre, this task of creating and sustaining a major dramatic question appears to have been a very definite problem. His dramatization of Robin Hood in 1915, for instance, was a failure for precisely this reason. Once the first act was over there was virtually nothing to resolve. And once the author had deserted his reliance on spectacle, he had to search for something else to assure that the audience would return after the intermission.

Act III of At the World's Mercy shifts to the mountains of South Carolina and a small hut near the mouth of a coal mine. Right after the previous rescue, the children, Bud and Grace, disappeared. Mr. Griggs, knowing that his son is a resourceful youngster, has convinced everyone to come to the Grigg's home in the mountains and wait for the kids to arrive. In the meantime Jack has had another relapse, and Grey has locked him in the shack for further "medication." Eventually the children appear, and Grey lures them into the mine and then sends Bill in with some dynamite to blow them up. Jack, learning that the children are in danger, rouses from his stupor and rushes in to save them. In
the ensuing spectacle the dynamite explodes, the mine begins to flood, and Jack rescues the children.

In Act IV the action returns to Fairview, New York, and all the problems are resolved. Jack finally suspects Grey and demands that he be shown the books itemizing expenditures from Grace's account. Jacob turns up again, and he and Grey try to kill the children by collapsing a bridge under them. This scheme is foiled, however, when a thunderstorm suddenly erupts and Jacob is electrocuted. Grey then tries to poison Jack, but the doctor inadvertently drinks his own medicine. The villains are all dispatched, everyone has a mate (despite the three years age difference between Bud and Grace), Jack says, "hush," over his dead brother's body, and the play ends.

At the World's Mercy exhibits most of the characteristics of the typical sensational melodrama. The plot is episodic, complex, and packed with delayed exposition. The characters are, for the most part, stereotyped in the stock variety. The struggle is generated over money, and eventually justice is served as the good forces triumph over the evil. There is a generous supply of music to accompany the action and noble phrases to enunciate the virtue of goodness. And while the play does not comply with the exact formula of the "Davidramas," it does exhibit the essential ingredients with which Davis achieved his success.

In terms of spectacle, Mercy is first rate "Davidrama." There is a sensational scene in every act, with the biggest displays reserved for Acts III and IV. At the end of Act I Jack is thrown into the canal
and is nearly drowned "on a truck moving downstream toward right." At the end of Act II there is a wild brawl in Grafdt's shop involving fists, iron pipes, and a shotgun. These are routine matters at best, but in Act III Davis rises to the occasion. After the children have been lured into the mine, Bill pursues them with his arms full of explosives. The scene shifts to the darkened interior. The children are trapped, but Bud, the resourceful seven year old, hits the villain with a rock. Bill falls setting off an explosion. Miraculously nobody is killed, although Bill is blinded, and the blast rips open a hole in the wall through which water from a nearby lake begins to cascade. Bill continues to grope after the children until he stumbles into a hole and is drowned. Then Jack, despite his recent bouts with the bottle and Grey's medication, suddenly hacks his way through the wall with a troupe of miners at his back and rescues the children at the last possible moment. It was scenes such as this which became a Davis trademark. The darkened stage (usually representing a trap of some kind), the helpless victims, the rising water, and the accompanying music all combined to build a wave of suspense and expectation. Then suddenly a breach in the wall, the hero silhouetted in a blast of light, and the changing swell of the music into the major chords as the innocent were rescued from their impending doom. Some degree of the success and popularity of this type of scene may be gauged by the frequency with which it was repeated in the "Davidramas." In A Race Across the Continent Hector performs a

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similar feat breaking through the window of Casey's Thieves' Den to rescue Sylvia. In Secrets of the Police Nick Chambers in similar circumstances rescues Mary Bland from both the "Paris Sewers" and the "Black Hole of London." And in Reaping the Whirlwind the heroine is trapped in an old chateau with the villain, when suddenly the window drapes are thrown back revealing the hero in a blaze of light, poised to save the lady from disaster.

Near the end of Act IV the audiences of At the World's Mercy witnessed another scenic display: the electrocution of Jacob Grafdt. After carefully planning to murder Bud and Grace by pulling down a footbridge over which they are to cross, Jacob is forced to take shelter under an old tree. In detailed stage directions Davis describes what follows.

As the storm breaks clouds of dust blow in from left; flashes of lightning through storm clouds at back, thunder etc. . . . Jacob stands under tree up left and puts his foot on an iron plate on stage. Both of his heels are shod with iron and a wire runs up his trouser legs and meets on a small iron button on his chest. . . . He puts his other foot on second charged iron plate on stage, the electric current goes up wires and there is a flash of flame from his chest. Loud report of thunder, and at the same time an electric bomb comes down a wire from flies and explodes on limb of tree. Limb breaks away and falls. Jacob falls on stage dead.44

Jacob's death was one of the most spectacular moments in the play, and Davis obviously recognized the theatrical impact and value of stage electrocutions. In 1908 he wrote a similar scene for The Battle of Port Arthur, and in 1930 he used the same effect in The Ninth Guest.

44 Ibid., IV.1.13.
The dichotomy between good and evil, and the recognition of a universal order of justice, is also strongly prevalent in *Mercy*. Jack is addicted to alcohol, but his goodness is so deeply ingrained that he rouses himself from his stupor and performs miraculous deeds each time that Grace is imperiled. In the same respect, evil is absolute and inherent in the nature of the villains, and the evil characters of *Mercy* are as pernicious as any that the author ever created. Grey steals from his four-year-old ward and attempts to poison his own brother. Bill Payton tries to kill two innocent children, as does his employer, Grafdt. Moreover, Davis reinforces their wickedness in several interesting ways. Jacob, for instance, is not satisfied with just kidnapping Grace. Once he has imprisoned her in his pawn shop, he forces her to dress in rags and threatens to lock her in a dark closet with the rats if she misbehaves. Similarly, after Bill has been blinded, he does not attempt to escape or seek help. He keeps groping after the children. But it is the way in which the villains are destroyed that shows the real workings of poetic (if not providential) justice. Bill Payton is blinded and drowned in the cave in which he had hoped to entomb the children. Grey Austin is poisoned by the powders which he personally measured out for his brother's death. And Jacob Grafdt, lying in wait for the children, is struck down from above by a bolt of lightning. Davis knew his audience well, and he gave them their "ten commandments in fire."

He also knew that they wanted a love story which was romantic but not overly sentimental. In the case of *Mercy*, Ruth is already enamored of Jack before the play begins. She believes that someday he will be strong enough to overcome his addiction to alcohol and repay her
trust. There are no scenes devoted exclusively to their relationship, just brief sections where Jack is remorseful and ashamed because, "she loves me, it is true,"\textsuperscript{45} or short sequences where Grey makes advances to Ruth, and she declares her love for Jack. Davis did not need to devote much time to developing love interest because the audience would accept it once they were provided with the slightest clue. Moreover, actions spoke louder than any words, and the surest way of fanning the love flame was to have the villain somehow endanger the romance. Thus Jack is not permitted--by the author--to come to Grace's rescue in the pawn shop until Ruth has been abducted too. Then the rescue proceeds, and the romantic effect of hero saving heroine is swiftly dramatized without the audience realizing how carefully it was contrived for their benefit.

\textbf{At the World's Mercy} also illustrates a number of the standard Davis comic characters. Essentially, they are the stereotyped figures of the popular melodrama. Mrs. Clancy, the Austin's Irish neighbor, is constantly interfering in the lover's affairs, and while much of her humor is lost on a contemporary reader, the popular-priced patrons of 1906 were treated to--

\begin{quote}
He'll never marry ye! Niver! Bedad me heart is broke entirely! Oh Warra! Warra! Oh trouble an' sorrow! Oh the little scratch cat! Oh, Boo-hoo! Boo-hoo! Boo-hoo! She throws her apron over her head and runs around bellowing.\textsuperscript{46}
\end{quote}

Terry, the comic boy, pursues Polly, the soubrette, throughout the play, and in the final act, after a number of comic lover's quarrels, they are

\textsuperscript{45}\textit{Ibid.}, I.1.7. \textsuperscript{46}\textit{Ibid.}, III.1.10.
married. After only five hours of marriage, however, they are fighting once again. Terry is anxious to go out and search for Bud and Grace, but Polly starts to cry because she has just prepared their first meal. Terry relents and sits down to eat, at which point she accuses him of not loving her because he can eat while her heart is breaking. With similar juxtapositions, the argument continues until the lovers are reconciled when the appearance of another character forces them to assume the happy pose of a newly wedded couple.

It is Washington Griggs, however, who provides the best of the comic interludes. Griggs is a natural pessimist and, like many of the Davis "humors" characters, he has the majority of the effective comic lines. To the simple salutation, "How do you do?" he responds, "Don't ask me. Never mind me. All I hope is there aint none of yer families dead since I seen yer all." When Mrs. Clancy compliments him on how lively his daughter is, he replies, "I cant never see a lively young woman without I think--Lord knows but she may be dead tomorrow." And when Terry tells him that it's a lovely day, he remarks, "It reminds me of the day I buried my first wife."

In addition to the comic characters, there are a number of interpolations and vaudeville routines integrated into the action. Although it is difficult to appreciate many of the routines because the script usually just indicates where they are to take place without elaborating on them, one reviewer was particularly impressed by the

\[\text{Ibid.}, \text{I.1.14.}\]  \[\text{Ibid.}, \text{I.1.36.}\]  \[\text{Ibid.}, \text{IV.1.6.}\]
comic effects in a "set of fancy dances by Willie and Josie Barrows." The Barrows were a comedy team who played Terry and Polly, and they performed in a number of "Davidramas." The script also indicates a number of sight gags and routines written by Davis to capitalize on different situations involving the comedians. The most humorous of these is the scene in Act I where Terry and his friend, Job, fall down the chute from the ice-shed and are plunged into the canal. In general, however, it is the characterizations which provide the greatest humor in Mercy, and which demonstrate Davis' ability to create comic incidents, even with the rather one-dimensional characters of the sensational melodrama. In fact, as the author became more proficient in his writing, the specialties began to disappear and were replaced by scenes between the stage characters, rather than packaged vaudeville routines.

With the exception of an occasional farce or situation comedy, Davis labored on the sensational melodrama for ten years. He made no startling innovations in the form, but he developed a sure sense of what his audience wanted, and he gave it to them in generous amounts. Had he not decided to try his hand at higher things, it is doubtful whether there would be much value in examining the "Davidramas." They are monotonously similar and far beneath the author's capabilities. And they are of little value to the student of dramatic literature because they were written to be acted and not to be read. It is only because Davis learned about theatre in this highly theatrical form, and this

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50 From an unidentified review dated February 19, 1906 in the Theatre Collection at Lincoln Center.
knowledge colors his later work, that they must be considered. In response to the question of what contribution Davis made to the "ten-twenty-three," the answer is fairly obvious. He had an uncanny ability to give the masses what they desired. But there is another question which also must be considered: What did the "ten-twenty-three" contribute to Davis as a playwright?

Essentially, he came away from the popular-priced melodramas with a supreme knowledge of the limitations and possibilities of the physical theatre, a deeply ingrained trust and belief in the visual power of the stage, a fast developing sense of comedy, and a perceptive insight into the way an audience would respond to a variety of situations. But he also brought away a surprisingly meager knowledge of honest characterization, a rather infantile concept of dramatic structure, a shallow grasp of legitimate theatrical themes, and the reputation of being the best hack writer in the country.
CHAPTER III

UP FROM MELODRAMA: 1910-1920

When Lost in the Desert opened at the Star Theatre on January 14, 1901, the soubrette was played by Elizabeth Breyer, a twenty-year-old actress from Salt Lake City, whom Davis had coaxed away from the E. H. Sothern company the previous fall. Miss Breyer, in the role of Sally Peasley, received excellent notices from the critics, and by April Davis had persuaded her to become a permanent member of his company and his household. They were married on April fifteenth, and for fifty-five years she was his closest companion and best critic.

It was partly due to his wife's influence that Davis finally gave up the lucrative profession of manufacturing sensational melodramas. She declared, according to Davis, "that she would rather share in two thousand dollars a year legitimately earned than share in the results of my iniquity."¹ Despite the humor of this statement, it undoubtedly contained a trace of earnestness and truth. The "mellers" made a lot of money for Davis, and once he had discovered that he could produce them with relative ease, it became increasingly difficult to disown them. The money, however, was matched by, "ridicule and censure in almost equal quantities."²

¹Davis, "Why I Quit Writing Melodrama," p. 77.
²Ibid.
Following the Wood's contract of 1905, Davis had committed himself to the "mellers" through the season of 1909, by which time he was anxious "to retire from the popular-priced melodrama, step back over the years and pick up my ambitions where I had lost, or rather, left them."³

There were other reasons, of course, in addition to his wife's concern, which prompted Davis to abandon sensational melodrama. The most obvious was that Davis, along with Al Woods, Sam Harris, and others, could see that the motion picture business was rapidly encroaching on the domain of the "ten-twent-thirt." Recognizing that movies could provide thrills and sensations in a way that the stage could never match, Davis sensed "that it would not be long before they would drive us out."⁴ And he wanted to get out before the crash. Moreover, Davis found it increasingly difficult to write "mellers" because he could no longer take them seriously. "I found the audience refused to believe in exact proportions to my own disbelief."⁵ In his efforts to surpass every previous production, Davis found that--

Our audience began to drift away from us. 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.⁶

In retrospect, it is possible to find several explanations for Davis' rejection of the popular-priced theatre. And it is tempting to see the primary motivation as economic and opportunistic. The

³Ibid., p. 31.
⁴Davis, My First Fifty Years, p. 33.
⁵Ibid., p. 34.
⁶Ibid., p. 54.
"ten-twenty-three" was being threatened by the movies, and Davis could see the end coming. But Davis was sincerely interested in writing plays of which he could be proud. When his contract with Al Woods expired, it is quite probable that he was ready for better things even without the motivation provided by the motion pictures.

Breaking into the legitimate theatre, however, was a monumental task for a man with such a sensational reputation. Managers and producers refused to stage his plays, and in many instances, even refused to read them. One manager agreed to consider a script if Davis would change his name. But Davis had relinquished the convenience of pseudonyms when he left Al Woods, and he was determined to start from the bottom, if necessary, making the daily rounds from one producer to the next as he had done fourteen years earlier.

In 1910, when Davis made his first attempts at the "legitimate game," Broadway productions were dominated by three types of popular entertainment: farce comedies, musical plays, and serious dramas. The theatre was entering a transition period as it came increasingly under the influence of the European realistic and symbolist movements. In spite of the influx of foreign imports, Broadway still clung to a largely commercial form of entertainment. The biggest comic hit of the 1910-1911 season was Get-Rich-Quick Wallingford by George M. Cohan, a farce tale concerning the financial manipulations of an energetic con man, which ran for 424 performances at the Gaiety Theatre. Other comic hits of the season included Baby Mine by Margaret Mayo, The Concert by

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7Davis, "Why I Quit Writing Melodrama," p. 78.
Herman Bahr, and Nobody's Widow by Avery Hopwood. The musical plays were represented by Otto Hauerbach's Madame Sherry, The Pink Lady by C. S. McLellan and Ivan Caryll, and Naughty Marietta by Rida Young and Victor Herbert. The serious plays or social melodramas, as they were popularly called, included As a Man Thinks by Augustus Thomas, Mother by Jules Goodman, and The Gamblers by Charles Klein.

There were signs, however, in the 1910-1911 season that the theatre was beginning to rebel against its predominantly commercial fare. Maeterlinck's The Bluebird had a fairly successful four-month run; Sarah Bernhardt played a four-week engagement of French classics at the Globe Theatre; and Robert Mantell introduced a season of Shakespearean repertory at Daly's. In general, though, the plays that are usually considered the healthiest products of the American stage were meeting with disappointing receptions. In a period when success was measured by a run of approximately 100 performances, The Faith Healer by William Vaughn Moody lasted for only 6 performances, and The Scarecrow by Percy MacKaye managed only 23.

The most ambitious of the Broadway offerings were the social melodramas, and in the second decade of the twentieth century this genre dominated the serious theatre. Social melodramas were an extension and refinement of the "modern melodramas" which had come of age in the late nineteenth century under Belasco and Gillette. To the scenic realism of the modern melodramas, a new dimension had been added: social criticism. Under the influence of Arthur Wing Pinero and Henry Arthur Jones, American writers in the early decades of the twentieth century began to come to grips with problems in their society. Clyde Fitch, Charles
Kenyon, Charles Klein, and many others, turned to such topics as political corruption, financial speculation, and sexual immorality as subject matter for their plays. William Meserve provides a cogent description of the state of the serious drama at the time that Owen Davis began his quest for legitimacy:

Convention now dictated that serious drama be at once comedy, problem play, and criticism of society. The mode was melodrama (and sometimes comedy), but the themes of these serious plays reflected the dramatist's concern for problems in contemporary society.8

Despite the dramatists' concern, these plays, in retrospect, seem naive and superficial. They raised important issues but their resolutions were inevitably conventional and consistent with current moral standards. This strange mixture of conventionality and iconoclasm prompted one critic to remark:

One may see social melodrama as a compromise on the part of the playwrights, managers, and audiences. It suggested a break toward the modern drama of Ibsen and Shaw at the same time that it kept safely within the bounds that managers and playwrights knew were successful at the box-office.9

By 1910 the foremost writers of this genre were Rachel Crothers and Eugene Walter. Miss Crothers, who wrote plays for nearly twenty-five years, and who is remembered most widely for Susan and God (1937), made a considerable contribution to social melodrama with A Man's World (1909) and He and She (1911). In A Man's World she dramatized the double standard of morals, and while she comes close to a shocking

9 Ibid., p. 185.
conclusion, the play really begs the question. The heroine is about to defy social convention by marrying a man who is the father of an illegitimate child. At the last moment, however, she rejects him because he feels no responsibility toward the child. Thus, the question of immorality is cleverly shuttled into the background. As Margaret Mayorga has observed, "It is the man's smugness that the heroine finds impossible to forgive rather than his license."\textsuperscript{10} In He and She Miss Crothers turned her attention to the problem of a woman caught in the conflict between a career and her duties as a wife and mother. Ann Herford is so successful in her artistic career that she wins a prize that she and her artist-husband, Tom, have been competing for. But she realizes that she has been neglecting her daughter, and in the end she gives her designs to Tom and relinquishes her career. Thus, despite her "sensational" subject matter, Miss Crothers eventually retreats to the conventional "a woman's place is in the home" conclusion.

Dr. Seelig, the "raisonneur" of Augustus Thomas' \textit{As a Man Thinks} (1911), pronounced, "There is a double standard of morality because upon the golden basis of woman's virtue rests the welfare of the world."\textsuperscript{11} This is probably the clearest statement of what became the most popular theme for writers of serious plays in the second decade of the twentieth century. And of these writers, the most prominent was Eugene Walter, the ex-newspaper man from Cleveland, who shook the

\textsuperscript{10} Margaret Mayorga, \textit{A Short History of the American Drama} (New York: Dodd, Mead and Co., 1932), p. 291.

\textsuperscript{11}Meserve, \textit{An Outline History of American Drama}, p. 65.
stanchions of American drama in 1909 with *The Easiest Way*. Walter, who
resented the romance and sentimentality that had grown up in the
theatre, set out to draw realistic appraisals of social problems. *The
Easiest Way* was one of the first American plays to have an unhappy
ending, and the play probably influenced the career of Owen Davis more
significantly than any other single factor.

*The Easiest Way* tells the story of Laura Murdock, a woman of
"questionable morals," who falls in love with a young man named John
Madison. She confesses her past to Madison, and they plan to reform and
live a happily married and conventional existence. But while Madison is
off making his fortune, Laura is forced by poverty to revert to her
former existence as the mistress of Willard Brockton. She tries to hide
her indiscretion from Madison when he arrives to marry her, but Brockton
forces her into an admission of her guilt. At the end both men renounce
her. Laura, however, responds to their cruelty by dressing up for a
night on the town and "to hell with rest." Walter's play ran for 157
performances in its first Broadway production, and was the most contro-
versial drama in New York when Owen Davis embarked on his new career.

In 1910 there were three avenues that a playwright could take if
he found it impossible to sell his scripts to Broadway producers. He
could write for the various stock companies outside of New York who were
anxious to find new material. He could write for touring stars who were
always searching for vehicles to flatter their talents. Or, he could
attempt to secure a matinee performance with a Broadway company, either
out of town or in the midst of a New York run. Davis capitalized on all
three of these methods in order to keep an income for his family (which
had grown to four), and to keep his work in view of audiences, critics, and producers.

Early in 1909, between The Millionaire and the Policeman's Wife and The Convict's Sweetheart, Davis had written a "romantic-pastoral comedy" called The Wishing Ring, which he sold to a Montreal stock company for an October production. The Wishing Ring is the story of a young girl who finds true love when her neighbor's gardener is revealed as a wealthy prince. With its rose garden settings and fairy tale characters, it apparently met with some success. And on January 20, 1910 the play was given a matinee performance by the Shuberts at Daly's Theatre with Marguerite Clark in the leading role. Miss Clark, who was appearing at Daly's in The King of Cadonia, won acclaim for her performance, but the play was not a success. In the words of one critic, "The author of The Wishing Ring failed to fill in the gaps previously devoted to thrills and gunplay with anything as equally convincing." 12

Despite the failure of his first Broadway matinee, Davis continued to write at almost as fast a rate as he had in the days of the "mellers." In February he convinced William Brady, an old friend from the days of the melodrama, that his new farce comedy, Cherub Devine, was worthy of production, and Brady agreed to give Davis a matinee performance in Philadelphia. Brady even donated Douglas Fairbanks to the cast, and Cherub Devine opened to a good house on the afternoon of February 17, 1910 at the Walnut Theatre. Again the author discovered

that he had manufactured a flop, and the reviewers were unanimous that Davis belonged in the "blood and thunder" drama, but not in the legitimate theatre.

Fortunately, William Brady, who promoted both plays and prize fights with equal success, had faith in Davis' ability to write comedy, and he agreed to finance a farce called The Rejuvenation of John Henry at the Majestic Theatre in Milwaukee that summer. The reception was only mediocre. In addition to John Henry, Davis had finished a melodramatic fantasy called Lola, which he convinced Daniel Frohman to produce at a matinee performance in March of 1911. Lola is a "psychological study" of a girl who loses her soul after her scientist-father restores her to life with an "electrical-apparatus." Laurette Taylor was the unfortunate heroine. Again Davis suffered a set-back, although the play was "borrowed" and re-written nine years later as The Blue Flame (in which the machine turns Lola into a vampire), and police were required to restrain ticket seekers in Boston where Theda Bara was reportedly making $6,000 a week.13

Lola sealed Davis' fate with the Frohmans, and since they represented many of the Broadway theatres, he was forced to fall back on the stock companies. He sold a comedy titled An Everyday Man to a Chicago theatre, and a tired western adventure, An Old Sweetheart of Mine, to a producing group in Richmond. By January of 1912, after a little more than two full years of constant writing, he had reached Broadway on only

two afternoons, without success on either occasion. He had written comedies, pastoral romances, and fantasy, but to no avail. In a little more than a month, however, Davis' Broadway fortunes were due to change, with disastrous results.

William Brady, who would eventually play an important role in Davis' career, had always been a fan of the sensational melodrama, and he knew that Davis was the best in that particular business. Accordingly he summoned Davis to his office and convinced the prolific, but frustrated author that he was stupid to give up what he could do best. The weakness of the old melodramas, in Brady's estimation, was that they never had the benefit of good actors and professional Broadway production. Brady promised Davis a first-rate cast if he would write a modern melodrama worthy of Broadway. Davis faltered, and then agreed. The result was Making Good with William Courtleigh and Doris Keane which opened on February 5, 1912. It struggled for eight performances before Brady posted the closing notices.

The New York Dramatic Mirror greeted Making Good with, "Third Avenue has walked over to Broadway and taken up its abode, which cannot conceivably last long, at the Fulton Theatre with a play that sounds like a chapter from the adventures of Fair Rosamond and Desperate Desmond."14 The play, which featured the stereotyped hero, heroine, villain, and villainess, revolved around a foreclosed mortgage and contained a spectacular scene in which a log jam on the Penobscot River

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14 New York Dramatic Mirror, February 7, 1912.
was dynamited in the last act. In Davis' words, "Making Good was terrible, and I was the laughing stock of Broadway."\(^{15}\)

In one respect, though, \textit{Making Good} was a beneficial experience. It forced Davis to take stock of his career: to assess what he had done and in what direction he was going. He moved his family to Westchester and began working on a new script. Money was still no urgent problem because he had cranked out a colorful suffragette play, \textit{A Man's Game}, which Estha Williams was touring in the mid-west. For perhaps the first time in his life as a professional playwright, Davis worked slowly and carefully. By January of 1913 he had completed \textit{The Family Cupboard}.

Realizing the disdain which was connected with his name, Davis did not make the rounds with his new script. Instead, he sent it to a play broker with specific instructions that the author's name was not to be revealed under any circumstances. Several days later the broker informed Davis that he had sold \textit{The Family Cupboard}, and the manager was extremely anxious to learn the identity of the author. The manager was William Brady. "It was rather dread news," Davis related, "since following \textit{Making Good}, Mr. Brady had thrown me out of his office and practically forbidden me to enter its sacred ground."\(^{16}\) But Brady recovered from his shock and gave \textit{The Family Cupboard} an excellent production in the summer of 1913. The play was an immediate success and

\(^{15}\) Davis, \textit{My First Fifty Years}, p. 58.

\(^{16}\) Davis, \textit{I'd Like To Do It Again}, p. 113.
eventually ran for 140 performances. After three years, Davis had finally succeeded in the legitimate theatre.

In looking back over the Davis plays from 1910 to 1913, it appears as if he experimented with every conceivable type of drama before gaining some success with a genre that was becoming increasingly popular because of its sensational subject matter. In reality, however, the plays are not as diverse as they first appear. *Lola, An Old Sweetheart of Mine, Making Good, and The Prodigal Father* are simply variations on the old melodrama. They all contain the standard characters, plots, and themes and are woven into a fairy tale land of poetic justice and romantic love. The comedies, *John Henry, Cherub Devine, and What Happened to Mary* are simple extensions of material that Davis had proved himself capable of producing as early as 1900 in *Over the Fence*.

Why then, one may ask, did Davis continue to write what were essentially second-rate plays if he were serious in his intentions to produce legitimate dramas? Why, instead, did he not write, or attempt to write, a more mature drama prior to 1913? The answer to these questions is that Davis did, in fact, write a serious, well constructed play almost as soon as he left the "mellers," but because of his reputation and the nature of the play, he could not get it produced in New York. In order to earn a living, he began to write hack plays that he could sell to stock companies. And with *Making Good*, he was nearly forced back into the rut from which he was trying to emerge. In short, Davis was being pulled in two directions. He was desperately trying to cater to a New York taste for romance with such plays as *The Wishing Ring* and *Lola* because he wanted, perhaps more than anything, to be
produced on Broadway. But he also wanted to write a good play. In 1911 he wrote Driftwood and nobody would touch it. For two years he tried to get it into New York production. Finally, in 1913 he compromised the vision of Driftwood with his desire to be produced and wrote The Family Cupboard.

Driftwood is one of the most important plays that Davis wrote in the second decade of the twentieth century. In it are the seeds for nearly all his successful works prior to 1921. Unfortunately, it was never published, or produced in New York, so that its significance has passed unnoticed. Moreover, because of an error in dating (Davis claimed that he wrote the play in 1905), it has been generally classed with the sensational melodramas and forgotten. But Driftwood is not "ten-twent-thirt" drama; it is a social melodrama obviously inspired by The Easiest Way, which Davis acclaimed as "the best play of the last fifty years."17

Driftwood tells the story of Helen Warner, a virtuous young girl, who runs away from her Boston home to marry Larry Groves, a wealthy New Yorker. Since she is below his social rank, Groves installs her in a New York hotel room while he goes to break the news to his Long Island family. On the way, however, he is injured in an automobile accident, and through the long months of his recuperation, Helen believes that she has been deserted. "Defiled and unclean" because of her one night with Groves, Helen is powerless to do anything but attempt

17 Davis, My First Fifty Years, p. 154.
to earn her own meager way in the big city. Being an attractive girl, however, she is forced to leave each job because her boss eventually becomes suspicious of her mysterious past and makes advances which endanger her position or her once-marred honor. Finally, nearing the end of her endurance, she accepts a job as a secretary with the Wayne and Harrington Law Firm. At this point the play begins.

James Wayne is a successful New York lawyer who becomes intrigued with Helen and attempts to seduce her. He is married but she does not know this. When Wayne becomes insistent that they go out for "dinner and a show," Helen realizes that she is once more on the verge of losing her job or finally giving in to his demands. She relents and accepts his favors. At this point Larry Groves, her former lover, comes to his friend Wayne to enlist help in searching for the girl he had lost months before. The actual time lapse since the accident is somewhat vague, but Helen says in Act II that she has waited nearly three years since she was abandoned. The confrontation between Helen and Groves is a frustrating and heart rending experience for her. After all this time, he has finally returned, but four days too late. She tells him that she is "a vile thing." Furthermore, she discovers that Wayne is married, and she flees from the office after calling Wayne "a beast."

Helen seeks refuge with Simpson, a kind old man, who works in her office. Shaken with remorse, she writes to her sister and asks for forgiveness and help. Groves arrives, but Helen sends him away because she has committed "the sin that is unforgivable." Then Alice, Helen's sister, takes her home to rest and regain her health. Alice's husband is James Wayne.
In the last act Helen has been installed at the Wayne's country home. She is convinced that she is going to die and reminds Alice that "the wages of sin is death." But Larry Groves persuades her to hang onto life until they can get a fresh start and make up for all they have missed. He outlines a plan whereby they can flee to South America, "where civilization is two hundred years behind and where being faithful is what is really important." Helen accepts his offer, and the lovers are united. Wayne and Alice are also reconciled, although Alice is unaware that her husband was Helen's seducer.

In spite of the problems of this script (and there are many), it was a dangerously controversial product in 1911. After several attempts, Davis managed to sell the script to Leffler and Bratton in May, but they were wary of the ending in which Helen, despite her errors, is given another chance. They opened the play in Memphis on October 8, and their fears seemed to be justified. In a ringing three column review in the *Memphis Commercial*, Hugh Huhn denounced *Driftwood*, Davis, D'Annunzio, Ibsen, Tolstoy, Hauptman, Suderman, and Strindberg.

The world is tired of moral iconoclasts. . . . The woman who steps from her high estate and barter her precious jewel of virtue for the baubles of life is an interesting character; but woman is given by the great father of us all her gift of virtue and once lost it can never be regained. . . . What is the use of arguing with the laws of society? They cannot be changed. . . . Owen Davis must remember that tears will not wash away the stains from her soul, and all the tears she sheds cannot cleanse her of the moral smirch her character has sustained.19


19 *Memphis Commercial*, October 15, 1911.
And yet, in spite of his fervent denunciations, Huhn had a good deal of praise for Davis' achievement in the drama of "serious ideas."

Owen Davis has exhibited unexpected genius in Driftwood. He has never written with more virile strength, with more adroit shading, nor with such a liberal display of human sympathy. He has in this play the foundation of a strong drama, if he shows the fruits of folly and ends consistent with the truth.20

Unfortunately, Driftwood proved too controversial to continue, and it was withdrawn. Two years later, on December 17, 1913, it was revived in Providence, but the script was still too explosive and was finally shelved for good.

From the vantage point of half a century, it is difficult to see anything violently controversial in Driftwood. In fact, the thing that most impresses the reader is the conventionality of the play. For, while Davis was trying to illustrate the evils of the double standard and the injustice of man to woman in the same way that Walter was, the "villain," James Wayne, suffers very little for his deeds. At the end he is comfortably at home with his wife who remains ignorant of the entire affair. The only real breach of convention is that Helen is allowed to be united with Groves; but this, too, is glossed over in the flight to Brazil where civilization is behind and will tolerate such behavior. Davis puts his heroine through a host of heartbreaks and brings her close to death in her shame. But even this cannot condone marriage or happiness in America. If the play seems dishonest today, it is not because the lovers are united; it is because they are forced to flee to South America.

20 Ibid., October 15, 1911.
However, "from the vantage point of half a century" ignores the social forces which shaped the theatre in 1911 and 1913. While Driftwood was receiving its second try-out in Providence, Bayard Veiller was watching the critics denounce his new play, The Flight, because it was tasteless enough to portray a house of prostitution on the stage. In a reply in the New York Times, Veiller defended his transgression, not in artistic terms, but because the play was taken, "incident for incident from a warning sent out last year by the Travelers Aid Society to girls in all parts of the country."21

In spite of the fact that Driftwood was never produced in New York, it provides an excellent example of Davis' early efforts as a writer of legitimate drama. The plot is as contrived as most of the "mellers" in order to subject Helen to as many miseries as possible. The unexpected automobile accident, the prior friendship between Groves and Wayne, and the marriage between Wayne and Helen's sister all demonstrate the careful plotting of a man skilled in creating situations rather than characters. And the shock ending in Act III, where Alice is revealed as Wayne's wife, is an interesting substitution for the big spectacle scene which traditionally occurred in the third act of the sensational melodrama.

But, surprisingly, there is nothing episodic about the plotting. Davis demonstrates a sure knowledge of building suspense and tension, which is lacking in many of the more commercial plays following Driftwood. The question of Helen's fate is the thread that pulls all

the other strands through to the last climactic scene. And the reversal at the end of Act III is as stunning theatrically as the reversal in *The Easiest Way*.

In terms of characterization, however, Davis is not as skillful in disguising his contrivance. Helen is simply the heroine of the "mellers" moved uptown: the virtuous girl who is capable only of being abused. Unlike Laura in *The Easiest Way*, she seems unable to do anything about her plight. Similarly, Larry Groves is a ghost of the virtuous "meller" hero who is buffeted by the plot and powerless to create any situation out of his own action. Only Wayne, the villain character, is essentially changed from the "ten-twenty-thirt." He is presented somewhat sympathetically in keeping with the convention of attacking, and yet defending, the double standard. The minor characters include Simpson, the traditional father figure; his daughter, Hattie, the soubrette; her suitor, the comic boy; and Simpson's mother, an elderly humors character, who is deaf and who provides the comic relief.

Davis had the opportunity in *Driftwood* to create a truly stunning play. But, unfortunately, it stands between two poles as most of the social melodramas do. It recognizes a problem and then avoids the inevitable. Davis attempted to go beyond Crothers and Walter by allowing Helen to slip twice and still get her man. But the ending is still artificial because of the flight to Brazil. Moreover, Wayne is absolutely unscathed by the events, and his wife is ignorant of the entire affair. Had Davis allowed the inevitable to develop—the confrontation between Wayne and his wife with Helen in their home—then his powers as a social dramatist would have been tested. The result might have
been disastrous in the self-conscious theatre of 1911, but it would have been more honest drama.

Unable to secure a Broadway production of *Driftwood*, Davis turned to more romantic, less sensational fare. But when *Lola* and *Making Good* also failed, he was forced to make a decision about his work. In writing *The Family Cupboard*, he returned to the field of social melodrama carefully tailoring the play for Broadway tastes. With *Driftwood*, Davis stood briefly on the brink of moral iconoclasm; with *The Family Cupboard*, he introduced impropriety only for the sake of being fashionable.

*The Family Cupboard*, as the title suggests, concerns a skeleton in the Nelson family closet. The skeleton is a pretty vaudeville actress, Kitty Claire, who is Mr. Nelson's mistress. Unfortunately, his indiscretion is discovered by his son, Kenneth, who exposes his father's secret. Nelson is so ashamed that he breaks off with Kitty. In retaliation, she ensnares Kenneth, who has never met her. Pretending to love him, Kitty eventually persuades Kenneth to marry her. But the marriage is foiled by Nelson, and Kitty deserts Kenneth for an old vaudeville friend. After a sentimental scene in which Nelson prevents his son from committing suicide, the family is happily united.

*The Family Cupboard* delighted Broadway audiences and a majority of the critics. This was the first serious drama they had witnessed from the pen of the former "meller" expert, and the response ranged from surprise to high praise. Louis Sherwin, writing in the *New York Globe*, must have pleased Davis immensely when he said, "Mr. Brady's pride in having stood by Owen Davis for many years despite failures almost
disastrous is quite justifiable." In his enthusiasm, one writer predicted that The Family Cupboard, "will prove to be the most daring play of the new season inasmuch as it deals with incidents not usually discussed in mixed assemblages." But in comparison with Driftwood, the play seems rather tame. Under the guise of a serious play of ideas, Davis created what was in essence, a highly theatrical, highly commercial, social melodrama. The Family Cupboard displays a maturity in dramatic technique but a willing concession to conventional propriety. Thus, while Kitty has obviously been forced into her life as an adventuress by the "beastiality of men," she is never given a chance for reform or repentance because she is "tainted." And tradition held (despite the courageous vision of Driftwood) that when a woman is tainted there is no hope for her. From Dumas fils to Pinero to Walter, the popular theatre demanded retribution.

The Family Cupboard failed as a serious discussion of social problems, but it succeeded in theatrical effectiveness, primarily because of Kitty, who is one of the first three dimensional characters that Davis created. Despite her career as an adventuress, Davis gives her warmth, understanding, and sympathy. She is a passionate, selfish woman who is capable of anger, love, and humility. As played by Irene Fenwick, Kitty won unanimous raves from the critics. In the words of one reviewer, "She played the role with remarkable virtuosity, and with

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22 New York Globe, August 23, 1913.

all the necessary tears, violence, seductive luring and billingsgate temper without overstepping the limits of discretion."24

In addition to Kitty, Davis welded a number of highly theatrical moments out of the rigid demeanors of the other characters. The author had displayed his ability to shock in Driftwood, and now he coupled it with visual action which was intensified by a carefully controlled orchestration of sounds. The high point of the play is when Kenneth discovers that Kitty has been his father's mistress and confronts him with the truth.

Kenneth raises his arm and strikes his father a hard blow across the face with his open hand. Nelson looks at him for a moment, then leans heavily on chair by table. His head falls forward. In perfect stillness his sobs are heard. Kitty laughs, a nervous, hysterical laugh, ending in tears.25

It was an extremely effective moment. Every reviewer mentioned it. The master of the visual melodrama was beginning to master the legitimate stage. The long curtain in Act III fell on, "Kenneth has bowed his head at the table. Kitty slowly tears her handkerchief to pieces."26

The Family Cupboard did not establish Davis as a successful dramatist, but it showed signs of considerable promise. The play suffered from clichéd characters and an overly sentimental ending, but it had a fairly long run in a mediocre season. Moreover, Davis learned a valuable lesson from The Family Cupboard: a Broadway success, like a

24 New York Dramatic Mirror, August 27, 1913.
26 Ibid.
Bowery success, was essentially a theatrical experience, and many of the tricks that he had accumulated in the "mellers" were not a hindrance at all. Driftwood, despite its ambitious thesis, was not nearly as theatrical as The Family Cupboard. Every night when Kenneth struck his father, and the audience gasp faded into the long silence broken only by Nelson's sobs and Kitty's nervous laugh, the author knew that he had struck a responsive chord.

Following his first Broadway success, Davis began to write with renewed energy. The Family Cupboard had whetted his appetite, and now he wanted a real success: a full season run. By August of 1914 he had cranked out three more stock plays while carefully building what he hoped would be a real triumph. He was convinced that he could be a successful "commercial playwright," and the glamor of New York production seemed sufficient to satisfy his needs. Inevitably he would be plagued by his old desire to write "something meaningful," but for the moment everything was forgotten while he labored on the next script.

The new play was called Sinners. Its theme is the corruption of innocence when exposed to the evils of the big city, a standard "meller" theme. The plot concerns the trials of a virtuous young girl from New Hampshire who becomes involved with an immoral gang of adventurers, another melodrama device. Its protagonists are pure, and its antagonists are evil, in accordance with the so-called formula prescriptions. And its resolution displays unmitigated poetic, even providential, justice. In short, nearly everything about Sinners is cut from "ten-twenty-thirt" cloth. It opened on January 7, 1915, and ran for 220 performances. In a season that featured the first offerings of
the Washington Square Players, Sinners was a season long hit. It played three times as many performances as Pygmalion (with Mrs. Patrick Campbell) and The Weavers by Gerhart Hauptman, both making their New York debuts. Had it not been for a stunning new play called On Trial by Elmer Reizenstein, Sinners might have attracted even greater attention.

Reading Sinners today is a perplexing experience. It smacks of the worst kind of maudlin nineteenth-century sentimentalism. Its situations are so contrived that one wonders why Davis, not to mention an audience, was not embarrassed by the play. Consider one blatant example. Mary Horton, the heroine, is about to go off on an overnight auto trip with a man whom she has just met when a letter arrives from her mother warning her of the evils of the city. The letter was occasioned by a dream in which Mrs. Horton saw Mary "in some kind of dreadful danger." Mary rushes home, and in Act II she relates that she stood on the brink of disaster but was miraculously saved by her mother's voice. It is ironic that this kind of a scene could partially insure a play's success in a year that is traditionally designated by historians and critics as the beginning of modern American drama.

Sinners was old fashioned before it opened, but there are obvious reasons why it succeeded. First, Davis was banking heavily on the sensational aspects of the story which had served him so well in The Family Cupboard. Following the success of The Easiest Way, plays dealing with sexual misconduct had flourished on Broadway. In the old "mellers" only the villains had mistresses, but now mistresses were the vogue in the legitimate theatre. Second, the American theatre had
entered a romantic phase in the second decade of the century which was to have a hey-day until disillusionment set in after the war. The first great wave of realism, fostered by Belasco and Gillette, was primarily a realism of decor and environment. But it was not accompanied by a corresponding wave of realistic character portrayal. Thus, plays like Secret Service and Sherlock Holmes were still peopled with basically romantic figures capable of super-human efforts. And when the social dramatists turned to current problems for examination, characterization was ordinarily sublimated in favor of thesis. Often, as in the case of The Easiest Way, character behavior was not particularly consistent from act to act because the thesis dominated the play.

The result of these two movements (realistic decor and social problems) was a host of plays where the prized quality was emotional reaction to situation rather than realistic characterization. Actresses were classified according to whether they were "emotional" or not, and great emphasis was placed on scenes in which tearful partings and reunions could be exploited to the fullest. Like a doctor listening to a pulse, Davis produced with the sobbing characters of Sinners an atmosphere which was in keeping with the Broadway heartbeat. The final act of Sinners is worthy of Richard Steele or Colley Cibber. In the healthy atmosphere of the New Hampshire countryside, nearly all the sinners are converted. Burns Mantle, in the New York Evening Mail, did not object to the idea of reformation, but he (and the other critics) found the quantity of the reformations ludicrous.27

27New York Evening Mail, January 9, 1915.
In addition to the realistic sets, suggestive subject matter, and sentimental characters, Davis created in *Sinners* his most theatrical play since the "mellers." The visual effects that he had tested in *The Family Cupboard* were exploited and perfected in *Sinners*. The second act curtain was a master stroke of Davis staging. Mary Horton's companions have followed her to New Hampshire, and after supper Mrs. Horton has gathered them in the parlor to sing. The sinners gather: mistresses posing as wives, and hypocritical men watching their manners in front of their hostess. Polly, who has long since lost her virtue, begins to play the organ. Mrs. Horton leads them in singing "Christ Receiveth Sinful Men." The sun slowly sets outside the New England cottage. Hilda, another sinner, begins to weep. Willie and Joe, the two villains, hang their heads. The singing continues as the room grows darker, "except for red light of sunset shining in on Polly at the organ."  

From *Driftwood* in 1911 to *Sinners* in 1915, there is an obvious shift of emphasis. Davis, who started with high ideals and a minimum of theatrical effects, eventually began to cater more and more to public taste and to rely on his superb knowledge of staging techniques. *Sinners* is a dismal play, but it was shrewdly designed for a sentimental audience that responded to its archaic and plodding situations with tears and applause. But Davis knew that there was something intrinsically wrong with the play, and he longed to be free from it. He began to be nagged with doubts about his writing ability. He spoke of *Sinners*  

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as "rather stilted and old fashioned," and conceded that it was "neither a very good play nor a very well written one." Filled with renewed longings to write something better, he began a new script which was tentatively called Forever After. In 1918 it became the supreme accomplishment of his first decade in the legitimate theatre.

Forever After is a simple play: direct, concise, and unpretentious. Ted Wayne has been wounded on the battlefield, and as he lies awaiting help, his mind flashes back over the story of his love for Jennie Crane. In three revealing scenes, Davis outlines their romance from the time they were sixteen-year-old sweethearts in a small Vermont town to the time when Ted left because Jennie's parents objected to a marriage beneath her social rank. In spite of her mother's attempts to involve her with boys of her own set, Jennie remains faithful to Ted. With the advent of the world war, she becomes a field nurse in France. In the last act Ted is brought to her hospital, where she nurses him back to health. And amidst the ravages of war, their former problems evaporate and they are reconciled "forever after." The theme is as straightforward and simple as the plot. True love conquers all. And in the fairy tale land of Forever After, it is honest and believable.

For the premiere performance William Brady provided an excellent cast, headed by his daughter, Alice, as Jennie and Conrad Nagel as Ted. The play opened on September 9, 1918 and was an instant success. With Alice Brady carrying the show, Forever After ran up 312 performances

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29 Davis, My First Fifty Years, p. 67.
and finally established Owen Davis as a man to be reckoned with in the American theatre.

*Forever After* is a curious blend of past and present; the immediately contemporaneous and the woefully clichéd. Ted's speech in Act I, where he is trying to explain to Jennie the reason for their unhappiness, provides an interesting starting point:

It's money. Your father is a rich man. My dad is just a country doctor. It makes a lot of difference.\(^{30}\)

Even if one were not aware of Davis' statement ten years earlier that the hero of the "mellers" was always poor (or else very drunk), this speech is still surprising. The Horatio Alger theme had certainly run its course in the legitimate theatre, and this was 1918, the year that John Ferguson saved the Theatre Guild, and John Barrymore scored 204 performances with a Tolstoy play called *Redemption*, and Maeterlinck's mystical *Betrothal*, under the direction of Winthrop Ames, played 120 performances at the Shubert Theatre. But Owen Davis surpassed them all in popular acclaim with a poor boy-rich girl love story.

At the same time, however, *Forever After* was an extremely contemporary play. In a year that saw war plays in abundance (*Friendly Enemies*, *Under Orders*, *Where Poppies Bloom*, *The Better 'Ole*), *Forever After* utilized the great war without romanticizing its conditions. There are three brief scenes on the battlefield, all showing Ted as he drifts in and out of his delirium. *Forever After* is not really a war play, but the war is there, just as it was in many plays up and down

\(^{30}\)Owen Davis, *Forever After* (New York: Samuel French, 1928), I.11.15.
Broadway. Burns Mantle, after seeing the 1918-1919 season, remarked, "the morale of a nation at war was partly in the theatre's keeping, and it met the obligation with greater dignity and a nobler spirit than you might imagine that it could muster."^31

But the most effective modern aspect of Forever After was its dramatic structure. Ever since Elmer Rice had introduced Broadway to the cinematic technique of the "flashback" in On Trial, dramatists had been experimenting with this versatile method of play construction. In Forever After, Davis brought together the multiple theatrical elements to form an intricate and cohesive flow of past and present action. Consider, for instance, how carefully the transitions from scene to scene are effected. At the end of Act III, sc. i, Jennie has discovered Ted in the Army base hospital. In her grief, she tries to explain how much she loves him, as a "one-step," played by a distant Army band, is heard in the background.

The lights fade down and out. During this the one-step played by the army band has swelled. As the lights go out the same music is caught up by a small string orchestra. Lights up. Jennie's home on a winter night in the midst of a dancing party. From the hall the sound of the orchestra playing the one-step.32

By employing various transitional techniques, Davis was able to make the play flow back and forth with an almost dream-like quality. In Act II he uses dialogue for a similar shift in time. Scene i ends with Ted on the battlefield, and scene ii opens with Ted and Jennie standing by a natural spring on a river bank three years earlier.


32Davis, Forever After, III.i.52.
Ted: I know it's going to be all right ... but ... I'm so thirsty ... so thirsty.

Jennie: (Her voice answering out of the darkness as the lights slowly fade out.) Don't be silly, Ted. A little spring water won't hurt you.

(Black out)

Jennie: (As the lights come up on a little clearing by the Thames River near New London.) Drink.

Ted: Gee-- but that's good.33

The flashback technique enabled Davis to employ his theatrical knowledge with excellent results, and Forever After was one of the first Broadway hits to completely master this novel structure.

In writing Forever After Davis was probably aware of D. W. Griffith's flashback effects in such films as Birth of a Nation (1915) and Intolerance (1916). Griffith, who was constantly exploring the technical possibilities and limitations of the camera, was responsible for introducing to the films such techniques as the dissolve, fade-out, and close-up. But since Davis was utilizing primarily audio transitions--through the use of music and dialogue--it is likely that his greatest influence was the stage production of On Trial. The motion pictures were never to achieve anything as sophisticated as the audio flashbacks in Forever After until they managed to reproduce sound, nearly ten years later.

Forever After illustrates several important aspects of Davis' maturity as a legitimate playwright. The most significant is the absence of sensational subject matter which had been an integral part of

33Ibid., II.i.30.
his drama since *Through the Breakers*. There are no seducers, murderers, mistresses, or unfaithful wives in the play. And while this may not at first seem important, it has wide reaching consequences. For, without the sensational subject matter, Davis was forced to create believable characters to keep the flimsy plot from collapsing. *Forever After* still contains romanticized people, but they represent a long stride in the author's attempts to write honest characterizations.

Jennie is the best of the characters, and it is her strength and personality which dominates the play. Moreover, with Jennie, Davis created a character who changes and develops as the play progresses. Her development reflects the thematic development of the play. As a sixteen-year-old school girl, she loves life and believes "The world's all right . . . no matter what happens, things come out right in the end."\(^{34}\) But after losing Ted, and seeing the horrors of war, she relates:

> Oh, yes, I was sentimental, even a little worse than most of the others, I'm afraid. I was romantic and I had my share of imagination, and perhaps a little more than my share of the capacity for belief. . . . I believed in all sorts of absurd things . . . I actually believed in love. . . . That's my only excuse--that and the fact that I don't believe in much of anything any more.\(^{35}\)

However, when she discovers Ted among the wounded soldiers and vows to nurse him back to health, Jennie's attitude undergoes a significant change. Her faith is reaffirmed, and she knows that, "no matter what happens, or how black things look--it will come out all right in the end."\(^{36}\) She is wiser in the ways of the world, but she is able to regain her belief in the power of love.

\(^{34}\)Ibid., I.ii.16.  \(^{35}\)Ibid., III.iii.49.  \(^{36}\)Ibid., III.iii.72.
Thus, in terms of characterization, *Forever After* marks a significant turning point in Davis' career. When a playwright turns from an essentially plot-oriented approach (where characters are largely puppets) to an attempt at human development, a landmark has been established. There are no people like Jennie in the sensational or social melodramas. The heroines do not change because their characters are complete and fixed from the beginning.

Many of the other characters of *Forever After* exhibit Davis' concern for "believable people." Jack, for instance, Ted's rival for Jennie's love, provides an interesting study of the author's maturity. Jack wants to marry Jennie, but when she explains that she will always love Ted, he acknowledges his defeat and eventually becomes Ted's best friend. One way to gauge Davis' progress is to compare Jack with Dave Burly in an earlier play, *At Yale* (1906). In *At Yale*, under nearly exact circumstances, Burly, the rival suitor, arranges to have the hero beaten up in a boat house on the day of his big rowing race.

The great strength of *Forever After* is its simplicity and honesty. Davis tried to write about "life and youth as I saw it," without resorting to sensational effects. The transitions between the scenes are highly theatrical and skillfully planned, but within the scenes the action is quiet and direct. In a note on producing the play, Davis later wrote, "The battlefield is always seen in dim light. It is constructed so as to be set and struck silently and quickly. No attempt

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37 *New York Times*, October 6, 1918.
at revolving stages or elaborate trickery is in keeping with the spirit of the play." 38

And yet, despite its many virtues and long run, Forever After is not a particularly strong play. In terms of Davis' own career, it is a considerable achievement, as a comparison with any "ten-twenty-thirt" play will testify. And in the curiously romantic and naive Broadway season of 1918, it had the exact combination of novelty of execution, romance of theme, and suggestion of war to make it a hit. Under further examination, however, its weaknesses are apparent.

The war background, for instance, is completely incidental and has no function except to serve as a "deus ex machina" to bring the lovers together at the end of the play. An automobile accident en route to a college reunion could have accomplished the same purpose. More damaging to the plot, however, is the fact that there is virtually no suspense. The play begins with Ted wounded, and while one wonders how he got there, as soon as Jennie appears in a nurse's uniform, the outcome is apparent and assured. Furthermore, the continual emphasis on the plight of the poor hero (Ted got through Harvard, but he had to come home and work in a drugstore to care for his mother) borders on the absurd. Heywood Broun, reviewing for the New York Tribune, suggested several courses of action that a young man could take in such circumstances, and then added, "This young man was different. He just went around snivelling and being ashamed of his overcoat." 39 This is

38 Davis, Forever After, p. 73.
somewhat harsh criticism, but it is partially justified by the overly sentimental lines that Davis forces his leading man to utter. Ted is the weakest of the characters mainly because of lines such as these:

She'd just moved to town, Jack, you know, and the teacher gave her the seat next to me. I walked home with her that day--'twas June. She wore a little blue dress, and her mother had made her a new red schoolbag.\footnote{Davis, \textit{Forever After}, I.i.6.}

Even within the romantic context of the play, such speeches seem strangely archaic and out of place.

\textit{Forever After} represents a merger of the two basic impulses that can be seen in Davis' work throughout the second decade of the century. Like \textit{Driftwood}, \textit{The Family Cupboard}, and \textit{Sinners}, the play deals with social forces that inhibit or somehow constrict human behavior. And second, like \textit{The Wishing Ring}, \textit{Robin Hood}, and \textit{Lola}, \textit{Forever After} is really a romantic fairy tale veiled ever so slightly in realistic garments. In fact, nearly all the Davis plays prior to 1921 reveal an essentially romantic temperament. The sensational melodramas, \textit{Driftwood}, and \textit{Forever After}, despite their dissimilarities, are all basically romantic visions of a world where good and evil can be rather easily isolated and judged as such; where a sense of justice eventually harmonizes the disruptive forces in society; and where romantic love is exhibited as a virtue and power which can triumph over all opposition.

Before the close of the second decade, Owen Davis had established himself quite securely in the legitimate theatre. While he had not yet produced a really first-rate play, he had managed several commercial successes, and was at long last beginning to erase the reputation of the
popular-priced melodrama. He followed *Forever After* with two more commercial hits: *Opportunity*, a social melodrama in the vein of *Driftwood*; and *At 9:45*, a murder mystery. But by 1920 there was a definite change in the air. The romantic theatre was dying just as Davis had finished his apprenticeship. A new, strange theatre was taking shape, destroying old habits and conventions. Broadway was alive with words like "expressionism" and "Freudianism," and phrases like "the subconscious response" and "Art as a weapon." Dramatists were being forced to look beyond a new horizon with O'Neill's 1920 naturalistic study of the dreary Mayo farm. And a few years later the conventions and clichés of the romantic theatre were challenged again by the imagination and vitality of *The Hairy Ape* and *The Emperor Jones*. 
CHAPTER IV

NEW REALISM AND OLD FARCE: 1921-1926

On January 28, 1921 Owen Davis celebrated his forty-seventh birthday. For twenty-six of those forty-seven years he had been actively engaged in writing plays for the professional theatre. In the past five years he had had nine Broadway productions, four of which had been successes. And now, for the second time in his career, the theatre to which he had devoted his constant energies was slipping away from his grasp.

The signs had been hardly perceptible at first. A small group called the Washington Square players had moved into the Bandbox Theatre on East Fifty-Seventh Street in the winter of 1915 and presented a season of plays by Maeterlinck, Andreieff, Chekhov, and Alice Gerstenberg. The same winter also saw the opening of the Neighborhood Playhouse which featured, among other productions, a revival of Captain Brassbound's Conversion by George Bernard Shaw. And a year later, the Provincetown Players leased a tiny theatre in Macdougal Street for their premiere of Bound East for Cardiff by Eugene O'Neill.

With the advent of the Great War, Broadway had responded with a number of sentimental dramas which seemed to lessen the impact of the "little theatre" movement in New York. But the seeds had been planted and they continued to grow. America was producing a new generation of
writers who were taking a franker, sharper look at their surroundings. Under the influence of European playwrights (many of whom had been writing for twenty years), and the sudden popularity of the theories of Sigmund Freud, dramatists like Gerstenberg, Susan Glaspell, and Eugene O'Neill were laying the foundations for a revolution in American drama.

As the war drew toward a close, a new flurry of activity erupted, and the signs of change became more difficult to ignore. In the spring of 1918 Arthur Hopkins presented Alla Nazimova in The Wild Duck (with settings by Robert Edmund Jones) at the Plymouth Theatre. Hopkins followed the premiere of The Wild Duck with successful revivals of A Doll's House and Hedda Gabler, again combining the talents of Nazimova and Jones. A year later the Theatre Guild was launched on its long and influential career with a production of The Bonds of Interest by Jacinto Benavente. In December of 1919 Maxim Gorky, one of the most admired foreign authors, received a successful New York production. Night Lodging opened at the Plymouth Theatre on December 22 under the direction of Arthur Hopkins. And two months later, on February 3, 1920, the production of Beyond the Horizon demonstrated that the American theatre had at last produced a playwright who was capable of infusing the "new realism" with indigenous themes and dramatic vitality.

In retrospect, it is relatively easy to trace the events of the post-war revolution, as well as the significant events prior to the war. But, in addition to the actual plays, there were influences outside the drama which had profound effects in the theatre. The growing popularity of the motion pictures began to siphon off a large "popular" section of play-goers and left the theatre more susceptible to experimental forms
of playwriting. The publication of Barbara Low's *Psychoanalysis: An Account of the Freudian Theory* in 1920 had a tremendous impact in popularizing Freud and made American audiences more cognizant of the concerns of the "avant-garde" writers. And finally, the war had been responsible for dispelling the romantic myth of man's brotherhood and was forcing artists in all fields to reassess their views about the very nature of mankind. As Owen Davis wrote several years later, "The Great War was over by this time and the changes it brought about in our moods and our standards was being sharply reflected in our theatre."¹

But, in 1921 it was not so easy to account for the multiple influences which were changing the American drama. Critics and historians could not appreciate or fully comprehend the vast changes that were taking place. And writers, who were so close to the fact, could not see in the tentative signs the actual events of a revolution. No sooner was O'Neill classified as a "realist" than the appearance of *The Hairy Ape* and *The Emperor Jones* destroyed such convenient categorization. That the theatre was changing was undeniable, but in what direction it was going was the subject of wild speculation. Oliver Sayler, in 1923, began his study of *Our American Theatre* with,

Something has happened to our American theatre. Not so long ago, it was a luxury, a pastime, an industry. A harmless adjunct to life, a game played according to traditional rules... Today, it is the most provocative of the arts. And it is chaos, confusion, contradictory currents. Cross-currents, cross purposes and a patchwork of perversity...

¹Davis, *I'd Like To Do It Again*, p. 131.
Yet we are stumbling, with all our awkwardness, into an appreciation of the need for a more vivid theatre.²

By the late twenties, however, definite trends began to emerge. The most obvious was that America had entered a phase of realistic character portrayal which was beginning to dominate the offerings of both the commercial and the little theatre. What Price Glory? (1924), Craig's Wife (1925), The Silver Cord (1926), and Street Scene (1929) were all products of the insurgent American realism inspired by Ibsen, Chekhov, Gorky, and O'Neill. Moreover, the realistic plays were meeting with both popular and critical acclaim. Craig's Wife, Street Scene, They Knew What They Wanted (1924), and In Abraham's Bosom (1926) were all awarded the Pulitzer Prize. By 1927 the trend toward realism had become so marked that Arthur Hobson Quinn wrote in his History of American Drama, "The most significant tendency in the American drama since 1920 has been the attempt to deal sincerely with character."³

The second trend was that American writers were striving to create a distinctly American drama, utilizing American situations, locales, characters, and themes. Thanks to experimental projects such as Workshop 47 and the Provincetown Players, a whole new generation of writers had been produced who were not satisfied with simply adapting foreign plays. Rather, they were concerned with incorporating the techniques of the Europeans into their own environment. The old order was passing. Avery Hopwood, Winchell Smith, George Broadhurst, Langdon


Mitchell, and Channing Pollock were giving way to a younger generation who, in the words of Elmer Rice, "surveyed the American scene with a sharp and skeptical eye."\(^4\) John Howard Lawson, Robert Sherwood, George Kelly, S. N. Behrman, Sidney Howard, Elmer Rice, Philip Barry, and Paul Green combined with many others to provide the American drama with a transfusion of vitality which has never been matched. The Pulitzer Prize in drama, which had been first awarded in 1918, was a symbol of the new longings to create a particularly indigenous theatre.

Finally, the post-war revolution incorporated not only the European realism, but the symbolic and expressionistic techniques which had grown up in reaction to Ibsen, Chekhov, and Gorky. O'Neill, Rice, Lawson, and Sophie Treadwell experimented with expressionistic plays, and The Adding Machine and The Emperor Jones received Broadway productions. It was as if the American drama, which had lagged behind the continent for so many years, had suddenly discovered everything at once and was attempting to make up for its negligence by a process of mass digestion.

In the winter months of 1921, however, few playwrights sensed the impending events that were about to engulf the stage. Broadway was riding high with a new season of 157 plays (roughly one new play every other day from August to June).\(^5\) Heartbreak House, The Emperor Jones, and Lilith were symptomatic of things to come; but the "Great White


Way" still clung to its commercial image, and The Bat, Rollo's Wild Oats, and Ladies Night were all enjoying successful runs.

At age forty-seven, though, Owen Davis watched the revolution taking shape and recognized clearly what was to come. Despite his progress in Forever After, he had slipped back into the rut of sentimental melodrama in 1920 with Opportunity, which had a successful run but which is plagued with improbabilities, theatrical gimmicks, and sensational subject matter. His career had reached a crossroad just as the American drama had. Davis, along with Mitchell, Pollock, and Thomas, was a member of what was fast becoming the old guard. But, unlike many of his contemporaries, Davis saw in the new stirrings, possibilities for a renaissance.

He began studying the new realism with considerable care. He read Ibsen, Gorky, and Hauptman. Just as The Easiest Way had stimulated him eleven years earlier, now he was inspired by Beyond the Horizon. "O'Neill," he later wrote, "at that time was growing into what he has been ever since: the only really great dramatist America has ever produced." In the realism of the new drama, Davis saw his opportunity to create something at last of which he could be genuinely proud. And for the first time in his career he found himself in the vanguard of the revolution instead of the ranks at the rear.

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6 Davis, My First Fifty Years, p. 87.
In the spring of 1921 Davis decided to abandon the sentimental drama and experiment with the new realism.

I once more threw my box of tricks away and sat down quietly and tried to study out a new method. In this I was helped by the change that had begun to come over the drama. I was influenced as all our writers were by the Russian and Hungarian dramatists who had discarded the artificial form of the "well-made play" and were writing a new form of photographic realism.7

The immediate result of his efforts was The Detour, which Davis always called, "The best play I have ever written."8

He took the manuscript to Lee Shubert, who was pleased and utterly amazed. Shubert offered the role of Stephen Hardy to Augustin Duncan, who had scored a great success in the Theatre Guild's production of John Ferguson, and Duncan agreed to play the part and direct the production. With the talented Effie Shannon as Hardy's wife, Helen, The Detour opened at the Astor Theatre on August 23, 1921, two months prior to Anna Christie, O'Neill's second realistic study and his second Pulitzer Prize winner.

Unfortunately, The Detour was a commercial failure. It ran for only forty-eight performances. Seldom, however, had a failure received such sensational acclaim. "Hail Owen Davis!" read the first line of Jay Kaufman's review in The Stage. And then he added:

The man who has written so many cheap and tawdry melodramas has written a great play. Great is such a misused word. It has come into our slang and so has come to mean, in many cases, very little. But here I use it in the largest sense. Owen Davis has written a play which takes him out of

7Davis, I'd Like To Do It Again, p. 121.
8Davis, My First Fifty Years, p. 83.
the class of Broadway playmongers--forgive the word--and places him in the Eugene O'Neill class... This is a play. And how few plays we have these days.9

Alexander Woollcott greeted The Detour with:

This welcome and quite astonishing piece is not perfection—not by a long shot. But it is not so far from perfection as it is from Sinners.10

And Louis De Foe pronounced:

Playwrights need not languish without hope when one of them proves it is possible to leap from Forever After to The Detour. This piece of sound dramatic realism at the Astor puts Owen Davis, who has been a long time coming, in the list of the arrived... He has accomplished more than in all his other numerous plays combined. The Detour makes him eligible to a place among the elect of his craft.11

Montrose Moses summed up the general reception when he wrote, "Though The Detour ran only a short while, it was acclaimed as a sheer bit of realistic writing, representative of the very best so far found in American dramaturgy."12

Nevertheless, the play did not attract a popular following, and its tenure at the Astor was almost immediately in jeopardy. The 1921-1922 Broadway season broke all records for play production, and theatre space was at a premium. One hundred and ninety-six new plays eventually

9S. Jay Kaufman, "The Detour," The Stage, LXXXIV (August 27, 1921), 305.

10New York Times, August 24, 1921.

11Unidentified review in the Lindsay-Hampden Collection of the Ohio State University Theatre Collection.

opened in fifty-five theatres. On September 14 Lee Shubert withdrew The Detour in favor of The Blue Lagoon, a spectacular melodrama by Norman MacOwen and Charlton Mann. In spite of its short run, however, The Detour made a significant impact. Twelve years later Montrose Moses included the play in his anthology, Representative American Dramas, along with such classics as The Adding Machine, The Emperor Jones, and The Green Pastures.

The Detour is the story of a woman who tries to realize her dreams through her daughter. Helen Hardy, a middle-aged housewife, has spent a dreary existence confined by the meager fields of her husband's Long Island farm. The only thing that makes her life bearable is her dream that someday her daughter, Kate, will escape from their drudgery and become an artist. For years, Helen has been saving money, and as Kate is about to leave for New York, her father, Stephen Hardy, demands that the money be spent on land for the farm. A violent quarrel erupts, and Stephen rebukes his wife and daughter for their foolishness. Stung by his rejection, Helen vows to leave home with Kate.

In the last act, however, Kate's painting is appraised by an artist, who finds no promise and little talent. Faced with a choice between a dream and the realities of the situation, Kate gives up her money, her career, and her mother's hopes. She agrees to marry Tom Lane, their neighbor, who is a younger version of her own father. Helplessly, Helen watches her daughter begin the cycle of drudging

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despair from which she had hoped to save her. Helen's only consolation is that perhaps Kate will have a daughter, and the dream of the yet unborn child gives Helen new hope.

The Detour was a remarkable achievement. For, on its rather simple framework, Davis manipulated a number of themes which were to become vital issues in the drama of the next two decades. In its portrayal of the romantic call just beyond the horizon, it is obviously indebted to O'Neill. But in Helen's wishes to see her dreams fulfilled in her daughter and in her relentless desire to charter Kate's future, Davis was exploring a natural desire which Sidney Howard later exploited bitterly in The Silver Cord. Similarly, in Helen's devotion to a dream as the only thing that makes life tolerable, Davis dramatized one of the most recurrent themes of the realistic drama, and one which would eventually receive supreme treatment in Iceman Cometh. Moreover, in his recognition of man's eternal struggle with a hostile environment, Davis laid the foundations for his own classics, Icebound and Ethan Frome, as well as a number of the regional plays such as In Abraham's Bosom, Desire under the Elms, and The House of Connelly.

But the strength of The Detour is not just its thematic values. The real vitality and significance of the play arises from the honest portrayal of character. There are no good or bad "types" in The Detour; only individuals with their peculiarly distinct personalities and characteristics. One may dislike Stephen Hardy for his primitive attitude regarding a woman's place in the home, or because his pride causes him to reject his wife after twenty years of devotion. But one cannot help
sympathizing with his brutal struggle against the soil. When Helen tells him that she is tired of being a slave, he replies:

You ain't been any more of a slave than I've been! You're a good worker, but you ain't worked like I do. There ain't a foot of this land here I ain't watered with my sweat!14

Similarly, Helen's plans for her daughter are designed primarily for Kate's benefit, and not her own vicarious, selfish experience. Thus, one can feel tremendous compassion for Helen's struggle to prevent her daughter from being wedded to the soil. "It ain't enough," she tells Kate, "Life ought to be bigger than--than this kitchen."15 Helen's mistake is not in her dream. It is in her estimation of her daughter. For Kate, ironically, is more akin to her father than Helen is willing to admit. It is Tom, Kate's lover and a realist, who recognizes:

If you ask me I'd say it's him she takes after. (Helen laughs) She does! She's slower thinkin' like him, and more set, more contented. She's quieter than you, and she ain't so smart.16

Eventually, Tom is justified in his estimation when Kate submits to her father's demands. She wants a husband and a home more than her mother's dream.

Thus, by a skillful blending of character relationships and conflicts, Davis succeeds in presenting a compelling realistic study of people caught in a narrow, inhibiting existence. And in the author's objective view of his characters, The Detour achieves at times that

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14 Owen Davis, The Detour (Boston: Little, Brown, and Co., 1922), II.i.76.
15 Ibid., I.i.8. 16 Ibid., II.i.57.
fleeting quality which all the realists sought—a sense of truth.

Tom: I'd rather have one real dollar than dream I was a millionaire!

Helen: I s'pose so—I'd rather have one real dream than be a millionaire.\textsuperscript{17}

These are the two opposing views which crystallize much of the conflict in the play. But neither one is totally right or wrong. Stephen and Tom, the practical men of the soil, cannot possibly understand the desires of the dreamers, any more than Helen can agree that their life is worth the sacrifices it demands. The men accept life for what it is, but Helen can not. She tries through Kate to find something more meaningful. The title of the play does not refer to just the events of the third act when Helen is preparing to flee from her home. Rather, her ten-year dream for Kate has been a detour. By encouraging her daughter to escape, Helen is taking "another way around, to get to the same place."\textsuperscript{18}

The things I wanted to do you're going to do. . . .
That's what I'm offering to you, my dear! One of my dreams--come true.\textsuperscript{19}

But there is no escape for Helen, and the detour vanishes when Kate gives up her ambitions. Only a new dream can comfort Helen, and at the final curtain she has made another turning. Once more she starts saving money: for Kate's daughter.

In spite of its honesty of purpose and strength of characterization, \textit{The Detour}, as Alexander Woollcott observed, is not perfection.

\textsuperscript{17}Ibid., II.i.55.  \textsuperscript{18}Ibid., I.i.31.  \textsuperscript{19}Ibid., I.i.9.
The ending is too contrived for a truly realistic study, and the comic relief characters smart strongly of the melodrama. Somehow a Jewish furniture dealer and his comic son seem strangely out of place on the Hardy farm. Moreover, while Davis does not intrude on his characters, his plot manipulation is readily visible. The cost of Stephen's new land is precisely the total of Helen's savings. The land is owned by Tom, who needs the money to marry Kate. And the tourist who stops to buy eggs and butter is a famous artist. Eventually, the multiple coincidences begin to detract from the realistic intent. Still, the play was one of the first early attempts to deal honestly with character, and, in this respect, it succeeds. In terms of Davis' own career, it is a stunning achievement. As one writer remarked, "After this nothing can surprise us--not even a naughty French farce by Eugene O'Neill." What followed, however, was even more remarkable. A year later came Icebound and a Pulitzer Prize for the former king of the "ten-twenty-third."

In an article for the Saturday Evening Post, Davis gave the following advice to young playwrights:

Don't try to tell of the sort of life you don't know anything about. If you know the little girl next door, tell a story about her--forget the King of France. With Icebound, Davis turned to the people he knew best: the small town inhabitants of Maine.

I am now turning toward my own people, the people of Northern New England. . . . I have tried to draw a true

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20 Unidentified clipping in the Lindsay-Hampden Collection of the Ohio State University Theatre Collection.

picture of these people, and I am of their blood, born of generations of Northern Maine, small-town folk, and brought up among them.\footnote{22}{Owen Davis, Icebound (Boston: Little, Brown, and Co., 1923), Foreword.}

Like The Detour, Icebound has a direct and simple plot. The Jordan family is a bitter and repugnant collection of spinsters, widows, and quarreling couples. They have gathered in the parlor of their mother's home in Veazie, Maine to await the death of the matriarch, who is critically ill. Each member of the family anticipates a modest, if not substantial, gain from Mrs. Jordan's will. Their desires are thwarted, however, when the estate is awarded to Jane Crosby, a distant cousin, who nursed Mrs. Jordan in the last months of her illness.

Ironically, the only member of the Jordan family who displays any real decency or promise is the younger son, Ben, who is the black sheep of the clan. He is currently evading the law on an arson charge, and when he is arrested, Jane arranges his bail on the condition that he will stay and run her newly inherited farm. Despite his rancor at being a "bond slave" to a female cousin in his own home, Ben has little choice. Ultimately, it is revealed that Mrs. Jordan had arranged the situation in order to regenerate her younger son. Ben marries Jane as the play closes, although there is no assurance that they will ever be really happy. And Mrs. Jordan's final wishes seem to have reached out from the grave to unite the only people for whom she cared.

Icebound, in many respects, is a bitter play. Gone is the objective view which permeates The Detour. In its surgical analysis of
the greed, jealousy, and hypocrisy of the Jordan family, *Icebound* is one of the most pessimistic views that Davis ever reached. Even the happy ending is somewhat tarnished by the fact that Ben and Jane have only an average chance for happiness because of their basic incompatibility, and because they are still subject to the narrow, icebound environment which stifles human love and compassion. A comparison with the romance and optimism of *Forever After* illustrates how far Davis (and the American drama) had journeyed in attempting to portray man as a product of his environment and heredity. *Icebound* refers not only to the bleak landscape of northern Maine, but to the bitter and narrow minded people who have grown hard and cold in their love of self and concern for material gain.

But the characters are not "types" or Machiavellian caricatures. *Icebound* exhibits the "reformed" Owen Davis at his very best in creating believable individuals. Henry Jordan, the older brother, is an exceptionally well-drawn figure. Beleaguered by a nagging wife and a marginal business, he is constantly pulled between expressing his own dislike for Jane and Ben, and fawning over them to obtain loans for his store. And Davis illuminates his shallowness and hypocrisy by the platitudes that Henry resorts to when he is pleading his own pitiful case:

> Well--what's passed is passed. Folks that plant the wind reap the whirlwind! There's no use cryin' over spilled milk.\(^{23}\)

\(^{23}\)Ibid., III.1.98.
And later:

Well, Ben, so you've got the money! I guess maybe its better than her havin' it; after all blood's thicker than water!  

But Davis refuses to let Henry become a one-dimensional hypocrite, and he attempts at least to explain, if not justify, Henry's conduct.

Henry: (Honestly) If I could make her well by givin' up everything I've got in the world, or ever expect to git, I'd do it!

Sadie: All of us would.

Henry: If it's in my mind at all, as I stand here, that she's a rich woman, it's because my mind's so worried, the way business has been, that I'm drove most frantic; it's because, well--because I'm human; because I can't help it.  

Ella, Henry's sister, is also "human," and at age thirty-six she sees in the possible legacy a chance to escape from her depressing existence as a "maiden lady." She is as selfish and petty as her brothers and sisters, and her conversation reflects her narrow mindedness:

Henry: Are you going to let him talk about God like that, like he was a real person.

Ella: I don't know as a body could expect any better; his father was a Baptist!  

At the same time, there is something terribly pitiful about her plight. Her anguished soul is artfully revealed by Davis when she blurts out in Act I:

I never had anything in my life; now I'm going to. . . I've never had a chance; I've been stuck here  

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24 Ibid., III.i.102.  25 Ibid., I.i.18.  26 Ibid., I.i.15.
till I was most forty, worse than if I was dead... Now I'm going to buy things—everything I want— I don't care what— I'll buy it, even if it's a man! Anything I want!27

As with Henry, and the other members of the Jordan clan, Davis allows us to understand their motivations while brutally exposing their hypocrisy and greed.

In contrast to the Jordan family, Jane Crosby has managed to retain some kindness and compassion. She dutifully respects her death-bed promise to Mrs. Jordan to run the farm and attempt to find some decency in Ben. It is not an easy task. The Jordans fawn over her when they need help and scorn her when they don't. Ben resents her, despite everything she does for him, and grudgingly obeys her requests. Slowly Jane, too, is worn down, embittered, and hardened by the Jordans and their land. "I laughed a lot before I came here,"28 she tells Ben. And to Henry's inquiry about the Jordan inheritance, she replies:

I've lived, and run this house, and half supported all of you on what I've made the place earn... I am worth just as much as the day I took the property, and I'm not going to run behind, so you see, after all, I'm a real Jordan.29

In spite of her kindness and tolerance, Jane finds herself lashing out at the people she ends supporting: "I hate you, the whole raft of you. I'll be glad to get away from you."30 It is only her love for Ben which prevents her disintegration and provides what optimism there is at the end of the play. For, love, Davis seems to be saying, can be a redemptive force and can provide a brief thaw, just as the coming of spring brings a brief thaw to the icebound land.

27Ibid., I.i.12.  28Ibid., II.i.66.  29Ibid., II.i.58.  30Ibid., I.i.29.
The reality of the characterizations is further enhanced by the localisms which Davis infuses into the dialogue. The references to clearing a path under the clothes-line, the heavy flannels, and the pork fat for chillblains all have an authentic ring. The allusions to the State Prison in Thomaston and the paper mills in Old Town also serve to confine the Jordan farm within a distinctly regional environment and lend added reality to the individuals and events. Davis knows his people well, and the characters are more credible because he understands the total environment within which they function.

In addition to the carefully delineated characters, Icebound is an immensely theatrical play, which partially accounts for its relatively successful New York engagement, a success that was denied The Detour. Critics are divided as to the merits of the two plays, but their essential difference has been heretofore overlooked. For, while they are both "realistic studies," The Detour is stronger dramatically, but considerably weaker theatrically. The Detour is full of strong, basic conflicts which are carefully contrived and shrewdly exploited. The confrontation between Helen and Stephen, in which he rejects her after twenty years of marriage, is an extremely effective scene. And the reversal, where Kate is forced to choose between her mother and her father, is also unmatched by anything in Icebound. Icebound is more muted in terms of strong dramatic conflict, but it is far superior in its use of the whole theatrical milieu. Davis learned from the failure of The Detour, I am convinced, that even the "new realism" could not totally ignore the theatre's greatest strength--visual impact.
The end of Act II provides an interesting example. Jane has planned a small party for her birthday, and she has bought a new blue dress for the occasion. Ben has described many times a girl whom he had met in France during the war. She was wearing a blue dress, and Jane plans to surprise him with her purchase. In her absence, though, Nettie, another distant cousin, tries on the dress and while Ben is relaxing by the fire,

The door at right is thrown open and Nettie stands in the doorway, the light from the hall falling on her. She has on Jane's blue dress and is radiant with youth and excitement.

Ben embraces her, and then:

The dining-room doors back of them open and Jane stands in the doorway, looking at them. She has removed her apron and has made some poor attempt at dressing up. Back of her we see the table bravely spread for the festive birthday party.

And back of the entire scene, we can see the master of the melodrama weaving his story with a minimum of dialogue and a maximum of action. Davis' concern for visual effects is apparent throughout the play.

Ben's initial entrance in Act I is prepared by, "The early fall twilight has come on and the stage is rather dim, the hall is in deep shadows."

And the scene prior to the birthday party is played around a glowing fireplace. "Jane crosses and sits in the chair beside Ben, the evening

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31 Ibid., II.1.89.  
32 Ibid., II.1.91.  
33 Ibid., I.1.20.
shadows deepen around them but the glow from the fire lights their faces."34

The Detour has stronger confrontations, but Icebound is a more effective play. The Detour has faucets with running water and frying pans with pancake batter, but Icebound has a carefully created and controlled mood which enhances the movement and impact of the play. The action of The Detour takes place in less than twenty-four hours; Icebound covers five months. In the former, Davis provides us with a replica of the Hardy kitchen complete with flour barrels, sugar buckets, and cider jugs. In the latter, he is more concerned with the seasonal change from October to April, both outside the Jordan home and within the hearts of his characters. The Detour, like Kate Hardy's painting, tends to be photographic, while Icebound is selective and highly theatrical.

Icebound was produced by Sam Harris, another old friend from the "meller" days, on February 10, 1923. It was greeted with mixed reviews, but a majority of the critics recognized its merit.

Icebound, which opened Saturday night at the Sam H. Harris Theatre, is the most aspiring work he has done for the stage and it contains some of the most satisfactory ingredients he has ever employed in the brewing of a play.35 One reviewer was so enthusiastic that he wrote, "Icebound is as good as most of Ibsen and better than any of Hauptmann's."36 But this view was

34 Ibid., II.1.84.
36 Unidentified review in the Lindsay-Hampden Collection of the Ohio State University Theatre Collection.
tempered by the critic who felt that "the better grade of drama is still some paces ahead of Mr. Davis' talents."37 As the season progressed, however, Icebound justified Harris' faith in Davis as a legitimate playwright. The play ran for 170 performances and brought to the author the greatest triumph of his career. On May 14, 1923 Davis was awarded the Pulitzer Prize, and on December 6 he was officially elected to the National Institute of Arts and Letters. The former "meller" dramatist had accomplished a feat that was considered virtually impossible. He had risen to the top of both the popular and legitimate drama, and next to O'Neill, he was hailed as the most promising writer of realism in America. Ironically, his two careers blended for a moment when he was notified of his Pulitzer Prize award. A voice from the past announced to the startled author over the telephone, "Listen, sweetheart, who do you think cops the Pulitzer Prize this year?--you'd never guess--neither would I--a guy told me--it's you!" The caller was Al Woods.38

Davis' award ignited a controversy that has seldom been equaled in the stormy history of the Pulitzer Prize. Alexander Woollcott criticized the selection committee for bypassing The Texas Nightingale by Zoe Akins, and Percy Hammond expressed his preference for The Fool by Channing Pollock. Other critics favored Merton of the Movies by Kaufman and Connelly, You and I by Philip Barry, or The Torch Bearers by George Kelly. In June the Literary Digest aired the entire controversy in an

37 Ibid.

38 Davis, I'd Like To Do It Again, p. 141.
article entitled, "Wrangling over the Pulitzer Awards," and it was apparent that there was no consensus among the journalists.

The major objection to Icebound was that its emphasis on "slice of life" character studies weakened its dramatic structure nearly to the point of boredom. The critics who objected to its selection (and there were many who did not) felt that "nothing ever happens." The plot is virtually transparent, and the regeneration of evil through love is a tired cliché. There is certainly some validity in these charges. The plot is rather thin and has overtones of a Cinderella story. The poor cousin eventually triumphs over her wicked relatives and marries the honest son. But the greatest strength of Icebound is its characterizations and, in this respect, the play towered over its competition. Icebound was worthy of its award for, like Beyond the Horizon and Anna Christie, it is relentless in its depiction of the human condition. In a theatre that was becoming increasingly concerned with realistic and indigenous drama, Davis' bleak New England study could not be denied. It is ironic, and symptomatic of thinking at the time, that the critics who denounced Icebound nearly all pointed to The Detour as a more significant accomplishment. And The Detour, beneath its realistic exterior, is as contrived and "well-made" as almost anything Davis ever wrote. The furor eventually subsided, and in a season that saw the first American visit of the Moscow Art Theatre, Icebound was held up as an example of America's ability to write honestly of real people in real situations. Whether the play would endure as a significant

contribution to the new drama, only time could reveal. One thing was certain. Davis' reputation was growing swiftly.

The years from 1921 through 1926 were the most successful of Davis' long career. In addition to his two realistic plays, he was also developing his ability to write farce comedy, which he had always loved, and which he had practiced since the early days of the "mellers." Comedy was a respite from the dreary realism, and while he found farces much more difficult to write, they brought him his greatest commercial success. In October of 1923 Icebound was followed by The Nervous Wreck, which became so popular that it was adapted for the musical stage and screen as a vehicle for Eddie Cantor. In September of 1924 The Haunted House began its Broadway run, and in October of 1925 Easy Come, Easy Go capped this trio of farces with 180 performances at the George M. Cohan Theatre. By the middle of the decade, Davis was firmly established as one of America's most versatile and successful playwrights.

Of the three farces, The Nervous Wreck was the greatest financial triumph. It earned approximately $21,000 per week in its season-long run, compared to approximately $9,000 for Icebound. The play is based on a short story by E. J. Rath and concerns a timid hypochondriac's efforts to defend and marry the girl he loves. The action is set in the "badlands" of Arizona, and much of the humor arises from Davis' satire of the western frontier drama. Henry Williams is the absolute antithesis of the traditional cowboy hero. Yet, through a continuous series of mishaps, accidents, and coincidences, he defeats the villains and gains the heroine's love. Like most of the Davis farces, the situations and

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characters are amusingly improbable, and there is a great emphasis on visual, physical action. In spite of its great success, however, the play is rather dated. The dialogue often runs to vaudeville gags:

Henry: Just a few minutes ago I saw him rushing down the road on a tall, dark, romantic horse.

Underwood: Rheumatic horse?

Henry: Possibly, it was a stranger to me.

Underwood: I didn't know Chester could ride!

Henry: Neither did the horse.\(^{41}\)

and the loose, episodic plot is a patchwork of what are now western clichés. The Nervous Wreck opened on October 9, 1923 with an excellent cast that included Otto Kruger, Albert Hackett, William Holden, and Jane Walker. It ran for 261 performances. Five years later it had an equally successful run as a musical comedy (Whoopee) with Eddie Cantor.

Despite its limitations, The Nervous Wreck is considerably better than Easy Come, Easy Go which was produced on October 26, 1925 with Otto Kruger and Victor Moore. Easy Come, Easy Go is the story of two bank robbers who take refuge in Dr. Jasper's Health Farm. There they encounter a strange assortment of people including a millionaire, a bank president, and an anemic young socialite. In the resulting confusion, the robbers renounce their past and become honest citizens. Although Davis called the play a farce, its moralizing tone and line of serious action detract from its humor. It has little of the sparkle of

\(^{41}\)Owen Davis, The Nervous Wreck (New York: Samuel French, 1926), II.1.83.
Davis' other farces, and with the demise of the health farm fad of the twenties, the play is archaic and only occasionally entertaining.

The Haunted House had the briefest run of the three (103 performances), but it is one of the finest comedies that Davis ever wrote. Originally it was titled Find the Woman and was produced in Hartford on April 21, 1919. Unfortunately, 1919 was the year of the actor's strike, and when the Broadway theatres were shut down, the play closed out of town. Davis worked on the script at various times during the next few years, and in 1923, when The Nervous Wreck was being re-written, he borrowed an entire scene from Find the Woman. Finally, in the late spring of 1924 he re-wrote the play, and it opened in New York on September 2, 1924 as The Haunted House. It was produced by Lewis and Gordan, directed by Howard Lindsay, and starred Wallace Eddinger.

The Haunted House, like The Nervous Wreck and Easy Come, Easy Go, spoofs a popular fad. In this case, the fad is the murder-mystery play which had developed simultaneously with the war years, and to which Davis had contributed his popular At 9:45 in 1919. By the mid twenties, the mystery play held a prominent position in the fare of the commercial theatre. The Bat, by Avery Hopwood and Mary Roberts Rinehart, opened in September of 1920 and ran for over two years. Similar successes, inspired by The Bat and the numerous works of Bayard Veiller, included Broadway (1926), The Racket (1927), and The Perfect Alibi (1929).

Eventually, the murder-mystery would become refined and "legitimately adult" in the next two decades, and Broadway would be inundated by such plays as Angel Street (1939), Night Must Fall (1936), and Kind Lady (1935). In 1924, however, the plays varied only slightly and were
being produced according to a proven format which was precise and efficient. Frank Rahill outlines the mystery formula in this way:

Characteristically the framework is the police interrogation at the scene of the crime. . . . After suspicion has been directed at one character after another, a confession is finally extorted by psychological means from the least likely person by a detective of the intuitive type usually not connected with the police and often a woman. 42

The Haunted House is a superb parody of this formula, as well as many other aspects of the murder-mystery drama.

The play takes place at Edward Evans' summer cottage in Cedar Bluff, New York. Evans' daughter, Emily, has come to the cottage for her honeymoon with Jack Driscoll, in spite of her father's warnings that the house is haunted. They have barely arrived when strange things begin to happen. Lights go on and off. Moans and dragging chains are heard from an upstairs which is deserted. A palm print is found in the dust of a table top. Jack's troubles are further complicated when his former sweetheart, Isabel, arrives and, almost immediately, is slain (off stage) by a shotgun blast.

The sudden activity at the Evans cottage attracts a number of people to the scene of the crime. Ezra Nestle is the local policeman who periodically conducts an investigation and faints every time someone mentions blood. Ed White, the rural milkman, is completely bewildered by the proceedings but eventually solves the mystery. Dan Grogan is a burlesque version of the New York detective who successively apprehends nearly everyone and answers inquiries with, "Everything points to an

42 Rahill, The World of Melodrama, p. 291.
important arrest in time for the morning papers." Morgan is a tramp who breaks into the house and is subjected to a number of harrowing cross examinations. And finally, Desmond Duncan is a novelist and amateur detective who insists on utilizing the most scientific techniques for criminal investigation.

The major obstruction to solving the crime is that there is no corpse. Everyone assumes that Isabel has been shot because of the blood around her car, but nobody can find a body. This does not deter Duncan, however, from pursuing the investigation. In a parody of the "deduction theory," Duncan affirms, by examining Morgan's pipe, that the tramp is "a muscular fellow, left handed, with a good set of teeth, careless in his habits, and at present rather short of money." After Duncan explains how he arrived at his conclusions, Morgan reports that he found the pipe in the closet. But Duncan is not stymied. He proposes that they conduct a seance, thereby enabling Isabel to personally identify her killer.

Duncan: It is necessary, of course, that we include in our experiment all of those present who are in any way under suspicion. Mrs. Driscoll, of course, and you, Mr. Driscoll...

Dan: Put the milkman in. We ain't playin' no favorites...

Duncan: Now we will begin.

Ed: Well, make it snappy. I got to water my milk.

\footnote{Owen Davis, \textit{The Haunted House} (New York: Samuel French, 1926), III.i.75.}

\footnote{Ibid., I.i.39.}
Duncan: One of the soundest beliefs of the true spiritualist is that the dominant mind controls. Are you willing, for the moment to give me your minds?

Jack: God knows you need one.

Ed: (To Ezra) Ezra, give him yours. It's no good to you. 45

The seance fails, too, and Duncan resorts to psychoanalysis, hypnotism, and a "truth serum" in his search for the killer. Unfortunately, all he discovers is that nobody likes his books.

In true murder-mystery fashion, suspicion is cast on everyone: Ed, because he was seen digging worms at night; Emily, because she was jealous of Isabel; and Duncan, Jack, and Dan, because they all (coincidentally) knew Isabel prior to the crime. In the last act Davis compounds the situation when Isabel is discovered, perfectly healthy, asleep under a tree. Duncan is ecstatic because her footprint matches the one found at the scene of the crime. In a brilliant satiric jab at the mystery tradition, Isabel is arrested for her own murder because all the evidence points to her. Before reason can prevail, Ed finds the real corpse--one of his cows--and Duncan is unmasked as the "villain."

He haunted the house periodically, studying people's reactions to ghosts, in order to obtain material for his novels.

The Haunted House entertained, confounded, and dismayed Broadway audiences. At the final curtain, when they realized that the entire play was a joke, some cheered and many were indignant. As Stark Young reported, "The audience with every other breath laughed for three

45 Ibid., II.1.66.
acts . . . without making out exactly what it all was." In terms of commercial appeal, Davis had made a mistake. He had tried to kid a tradition that was still growing in popularity and still being taken extremely seriously. Arthur Hornblow was bewildered by the play and criticized it for not being what it was burlesquing.

This farcical mystery play is more farcical than mysterious. It uses up several hours tracing the murderer of a cow. Before the "mystery" is solved, everyone supposed the victim to be a woman. Why, nobody knows. Years later Davis said of the play, "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."

*The Haunted House*, like so many of the Davis plays, is immensely theatrical, and its emphasis on visual impact is carefully designed and exploited. The influence of the "ten-twenty-thirt" thrillers is obvious throughout. The stage suddenly plunged into darkness, the sound of rattling chains, and the bloody footprints are all tricks that Davis had mastered as a young man on the Bowery. Moreover, he employs a variety of special effects to underline the mock horror of the situation.

The lights go out, all but a green spot through the window above fireplace, with this spot being focused on the door to play on Ezra . . . The weird laugh is heard again.

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48 Davis, *My First Fifty Years*, p. 94.
49 Davis, *The Haunted House*, I.i.46.
And later:

The stage is dark, save for a green spot. .. A heavy chain drops with a terrific crash ... sounds of falling bricks, Fuller's Earth thrown in to make dust in the light.\textsuperscript{50}

The continual emphasis on sight gags is also reminiscent of earlier Davis efforts.

Duncan: (Bursts violently in the door. He is carrying a large auto cushion which he drops on the stage) .. I have found the body.\textsuperscript{51}

When the seance is interrupted, the lights flash up to reveal: "Ezra hiding on the floor at end of couch. Ed, on console, head buried under pillows."\textsuperscript{52} And the fainting constable, Ezra, who cannot stand to see or hear of blood, bounces up and down for three acts until finally,

Duncan: Isabel, I arrest you for murder.

Isabel: Murder!

Duncan: Of that poor woman.

Isabel: What woman?

Duncan: That doesn't matter. It's against the law to kill any woman.

Morgan: I always said it wasn't no woman. It was a man.

Ezra: How do you know?

Morgan: Because no woman could bleed that much.

Ezra: Oh. (He faints and falls stage center. No one, however, pays the least attention to him.)\textsuperscript{53}

\textsuperscript{50}\textit{Ibid.}, II.i.72. \textsuperscript{51}\textit{Ibid.}, I.i.28. \textsuperscript{52}\textit{Ibid.}, II.i.70. \textsuperscript{53}\textit{Ibid.}, III.i.92.
The slapstick and sight gags were responsible for much of the play's success, but its best humor arises from its satiric assault on the murder-mystery format. For Davis followed the mystery formula exactly, while at the same time, he kidded its basic ingredients. Thus, the investigation takes place at the scene of the crime although there has been no crime committed. Suspicion is cast on nearly all of the characters, but for reasons which are either improbable or ridiculous. And the psychological methods, which were normally used in the mystery plays to detect the killer, are parodied in numerous ways. Duncan's use of psychoanalysis on the bewildered Morgan, for instance, is supposedly responsible for restoring the tramp's ability to speak; when, in reality, Morgan is so terrified by the events that he prefers to remain silent. Deduction enables the police to build a strong case against nearly everyone but the guilty party. And ultimately, the application of "pure reason" leads to the greatest absurdity: the arrest of Isabel for her own murder. Finally, the discovery of the victim--Ed's cow--is followed by a further satiric comment on the murder-mystery tradition. The amateur detective figure, who was normally the person who solved the crime, is revealed as the villain. It is this careful juxtaposition of the authentic mystery format with the satiric comments on that format which gives The Haunted House considerable comic appeal.

Unfortunately, the play was years ahead of its time. Audiences who had thrilled and screamed through The Bat were not ready to accept hilarity and murder in the same package. Four years later Barry and Rice tried a similar experiment with Cock Robin, but conditions were still not ripe for satiric murder. The mystery play held on valiantly
as a staple and stable item until 1941 when Joseph Kesserling's tale of the Brewster sisters demonstrated that murder and comedy could be compatible. *Arsenic and Old Lace* ran up 1444 performances.

The popularity of the "pure" murder-mystery play, however, was only slightly diminished by such comedies as *Arsenic and Old Lace* and Davis' *Mr. and Mrs. North*. And by the early fifties, the mystery play was once more firmly established as solid commercial entertainment.

With only slight variations on the standard format, plays like *Dial M for Murder*, *Ten Little Indians*, and *The Mousetrap* proved convincingly that the mystery play was not merely a fad of the twenties, but a staple item of the professional theatre. As late as the 1965-1966 Broadway season, *The Hostile Witness* and *Baker Street* were still capitalizing on a format that Davis had been satirizing in 1924. And the lasting humor of *The Haunted House* is due to the fact that so much of its satire is still as viable today as it was in the twenties. In this respect, it is one of the few Davis comedies which has outlived its own era.

In the summer of 1926 Davis was offered a Chair in Dramatic Literature at the University of Michigan. This was a great honor, even for a man who had won the Pulitzer Prize. It was a greater honor for a man who had written *Tony, the Bootblack* and *Nellie, the Beautiful Cloak Model*. But Davis turned the offer down because he wanted to continue writing. Thousands of words--of praise and of expectation--had been written about him since *The Detour*, and he was anxious to justify his critical acclaim. Moreover, he was striving to find a better solution to good American drama than realism was providing. For Davis was
becoming discouraged with the pessimistic view of life that the realists had produced. He hoped to find an alternative to that pessimism and to write of that alternative in a "great play." At age fifty-two, he hoped that he had time.
CHAPTER V

OPTIMISM, ACHIEVEMENT, AND OBSCURITY: 1927-1944

The "new realism," which Davis had championed in the early twenties, continued to prosper in the next decade, particularly in the plays of Clifford Odets and Sidney Kingsley. But by the mid-twenties, Owen Davis had abandoned his somber character studies almost as abruptly as he had embraced them. Even though The Detour and Icebound brought him his greatest critical success, and were viewed by many as symptomatic of better things to come, Davis was unhappy with the direction that the theatre was taking in its quest for dramatic reality.

Realism such as I attained in The Detour is not the whole end of art, there is something more for the artist to attempt. . . . Having shown that I can without trickery, write of the realities of life, I want to see whether a play cannot be written which will be more positive in its effect on the audience--sending them from the theatre not only intellectually entertained, but spiritually glorified.¹

In the years between 1927 and 1944 Davis wrote sixteen new plays for the legitimate theatre, only two of which were successful. And while he continued to produce an occasional murder-mystery and several topical comedies, the plaintive cry for a serious drama of optimism is

the most recurrent theme throughout the last phase of his career. In 1931 he wrote:

After the production of *The Nervous Wreck* I tried very hard to write the play I earnestly wanted to write, but I couldn't get it. *The Detour* and *Icebound* were true plays from my point of view, honest attempts to do the best work I knew how to do. But I had a feeling that the American drama should express a more optimistic note.\(^2\)

In 1933:

The old days of the Cinderella story and the Prodigal son story . . . are dead in our theatre, I am sure, and in their place must come understanding and human pictures of life . . . not stories of futility and hopeless despair.\(^3\)

In 1941:

In learning to write true plays we sometimes have lost sight of the fact that to be true one need not be dull, that many exciting and beautiful things are happening every day, and that love and life and faith and sacrifice, even in these dreadful times, are just as thrilling as they ever were—just as true!\(^4\)

I quote these passages not to belabor the point, but to illustrate how deeply Davis felt the need for a more optimistic drama. And it was this need which drove him to abandon the very plays that had elevated him to a place among the elect of his craft. It was not the technique of presenting on stage "honest characters from real life" to which Davis objected. What caused his concern was a strong belief that American drama, in the pursuit of honesty, would become inordinately gloomy and pessimistic.

\(^2\)Davis, *I'd Like To Do It Again*, p. 184.

\(^3\)New *York Herald-Tribune*, April 23, 1933.

\(^4\)Ibid., March 2, 1941.
Thus, the last phase of Davis' career presents, in many respects, a strangely ironic picture. As America careened toward a disastrous financial breakdown and a widespread depression, Owen Davis was attempting to write a serious drama of optimism. After years of responding to the immediate concerns and demands of his audience, he wrote continuously through one of America's most turbulent decades with only one poor melodrama (Just to Remind You) which reflects the drama of social protest. And the final irony was that when he eventually did create a truly compelling play in Ethan Frome, it was one of the most pessimistic scripts that he had ever written.

With the exception of Ethan Frome, Davis' serious dramas after 1927 were failures. Dread, which was produced by Sam Harris in 1929, concerns the effects of "a gnawing guilty conscience and its subsequent redemption." Davis termed it, "my most important contribution to the serious psychological drama." It closed out of town. In 1932 he attempted a more optimistic play in the vein of Icebound called The Harbor Light, which premiered in May at the University of Iowa. Erlanger bought the rights to this story of the decay of a prosperous New England family, but it was never produced in New York. That same year, Davis and his son, Donald, dramatized Pearl Buck's highly successful The Good Earth for the Theatre Guild; but even with Alla Nazimova and a guaranteed subscription list, the play lasted for only fifty-six performances.

5 Unidentified clipping in the Lindsay-Hampden Collection of the Ohio State University Theatre Collection.
6 Ibid.
Davis' most spectacular failure, however, was *Jezebel* which was produced and directed by Guthrie McClintic in 1933. Davis wrote the script for McClintic's wife, Katharine Cornell, but when a previous commitment forced her to withdraw, Tallulah Bankhead was cast in the leading role of Julie Kendrick. After a week of rehearsals, Miss Bankhead became seriously ill and was, in turn, replaced by Miriam Hopkins, who was building an excellent reputation as a motion picture actress. Davis, who had invested a large amount of money in the show, was busily re-writing the script to accommodate each succeeding actress, and the fortunes of *Jezebel* attracted considerable coverage in the newspapers. Finally, Miss Hopkins opened in the play on December 19, 1933, along with Reed Brown, Jr., Joseph Cotten, and the playwright's son, Owen Davis, Jr. In spite of all the publicity, *Jezebel* was soundly panned by the critics and managed only thirty-two performances.7

*Jezebel* is the story of Julie Kendrick's intense and destructive love for her cousin, Preston. And the play clearly illustrates Davis' dilemma in trying to write an honest drama while striving for a sense of optimism. In a conscious attempt to avoid the "dull and drab," he set the action on Julie's Louisiana plantation a few years prior to the outbreak of the Civil War. Julie has recently returned from a European tour to reclaim Preston's affections. He, however, has married in her absence, and at Julie's homecoming party he presents his wife, Amy, to the Kendrick family. Julie is outraged, and during the course of the

7In 1938 *Jezebel* was successfully adapted for the motion pictures with Bette Davis in the leading role.
evening she tries to push Preston into a duel with her new suitor, Buck. But her plans are thwarted when Ted, Preston's brother, intercedes and accepts the challenge. After Buck is shot, Julie's scheming becomes obvious to everyone. Her friends begin to desert her, when suddenly it is revealed that Preston has contracted yellow fever. In his delirium he defends her honor, and as the play ends, he and Julie are taken to Lazaretto Island (where the fever victims are being gathered) presumably to die together.

In spite of its romantic trappings, Davis conceived the play as a starkly realistic study of human motivation and conduct. Julie is a fully developed, three-dimensional character driven to desperate acts by her love for Preston. And Preston at first seems to be equal to her strength and cunning. But what begins as a powerful struggle of wills eventually breaks down into a romantic melodrama complete with pistols, delirium orations, and vows of eternal love. And Davis' desire to make the play "spiritually glorified" in its depiction of true love only causes it to plunge into implausibility. Everything is sacrificed for the mechanics of the plot, and the result is chaos. The last act provides the best example of Davis' "optimism." The sheriff has ordered that Preston be removed immediately to Lazaretto Island where his chance of surviving is minimal. However, there is a possibility that he will live if he receives constant attention. Amy volunteers to go with her husband, thereby risking her own life, but Julie demands that she be allowed to accompany Preston, since she has always loved him. Any then changes her mind, even though her love for Preston has been carefully established, and she is shuffled out of the way in order to prepare for
the romantic ending. Thus, instead of a play about the destruction of everything Julie loves, Davis creates a romantic conclusion where she eventually gets her man, and their love is seen as a triumphant force which may even prevail over death. It is not a happy ending, but with its overtones of martyrdom and Forever After, it is saved from a bleak (but more honest) pessimism.

Unfortunately, Davis' failures were not limited to just his new serious efforts. He continued to write a variety of plays as he had always done, but he could not find the ingredients for a successful production. The Triumphant Bachelor (1927) is a farce comedy about a young man who wagers with his married friends that he can make their supposedly trusting wives doubt their love. Even within its farcical framework, the events are highly improbable, and the play ran for only twelve performances. It is probably the weakest script that Davis ever wrote for the legitimate theatre. The plot is virtually transparent, and the characters (particularly the men) are so similar that it is difficult to distinguish among them. The dialogue is only occasionally funny, and the central theme—that marriage is not always bliss—is lacking in both insight and originality. In Tonight at Twelve (1928) he attempted a comedy with serious overtones about marital infidelity which was unanimously denounced by the critics. It ran for sixty performances. As the American theatre entered a new decade, Davis' losses continued to mount. The Ninth Guest (1930), a murder-mystery play, was a disappointing failure. Just to Remind You (1931), a social drama about gangsters in New York, closed in less than two weeks. In 1934, after the collapse of Too Many Boats and Spring Freshet, Davis
signed a contract with Procter and Gamble to write scripts for a weekly radio series, "The Gibson Family." And at the age of sixty, his career seemed to be over. But Owen Davis was still to write his greatest play.

Since 1911, when Ethan Frome was first published, several playwrights had tried to dramatize Edith Wharton's bleak New England folk tale. But she had refused to allow any stage adaptations. Finally, in 1934, the son of a Santa Barbara theatre manager, Louis B. Christ, Jr., wrote an unauthorized version under the pen name of Lowell Barrington and sent it to Jed Harris for consideration. Harris liked the script and, in turn, mailed it to Mrs. Wharton, who was then seventy-four and living in France. She was unimpressed. However, in her reply to Harris she added that if he really wanted to produce Ethan Frome, "he should get that man who wrote Icebound." Harris was elated, and he immediately contacted Davis who "had a copy within an hour and began laying out the story line the next day."

Davis' son, Donald, was also excited about Ethan Frome, and he agreed to help with the dramatization. Donald had first collaborated with his father in 1932 on their unsuccessful version of The Good Earth. And while he had playwriting ambitions, he had no desire to "ride piggyback into fame." After two futile attempts on his own, however, Donald agreed to undertake at least part of the task of Ethan Frome. It was a wise decision. In 1936 the play opened to rave reviews and became Davis' first hit in ten years.

8 Newsweek, February 1, 1936, p. 33.
9 Davis, My First Fifty Years, p. 136.
10 Mantle, Contemporary American Playwrights, p. 90.
It is not surprising that Edith Wharton wanted "that man who wrote Icebound" to dramatize Ethan Frome, because the two works have many similarities. Both are set against the frigid landscape of northern New England, and both show how the people who inhabit this land have been affected by years of struggle with the soil. While neither Icebound nor Mrs. Wharton's novel is a completely deterministic study, they both use the regional environment in a metaphorical sense to underline the harshness of their central characters. Thus, the cold, cruel winters are manifested in the cold, cruel aspects of the Jordan family and in the malevolent hypochondriac, Zenobia Frome. And, in each case, the promise of human love brings warmth into the frigid environment. In Icebound, Davis carries the metaphor to the extreme by making Ben and Jane's growing affection coincide with the coming of spring. In Ethan Frome, Ethan and Mattie's love makes them oblivious to the cold, and thus, their happiest hours are spent walking home in the bitter nights from the Starkfield church socials.

Ethan Frome, as Mrs. Wharton conceived the story, is the tale of Frome's love for Mattie Silver, his wife's cousin, who comes to the Frome farm to care for Ethan's wife, Zenobia. Zenobia is a whining hypochondriac whom Ethan married out of loneliness after his mother's death. But the marriage was a mistake, and Zenobia's petulant demands have driven her husband into more debts than he can ever hope to repay. Each time that he makes a small profit, the money vanishes in a welter of pills, tonics, and remedies for Zenobia's imaginary illnesses. At twenty-eight, Ethan has hardened into a bitter, inarticulate, old man.
Then Mattie Silver arrives, and Ethan's life is slowly transformed. Mattie awakens in him a youth that he had long since buried and an increasing dislike for his wife, whose despicable nature is more apparent in comparison with her vivacious, innocent, and healthy cousin. Eventually, Zenobia becomes suspicious of Ethan's obvious transformation, and she hires a new housekeeper, whom they can not afford, to replace Mattie. Ethan, however, after a glimpse of what life could be like, refuses to let Mattie leave. Driven nearly mad by the conflict between his love for Mattie and his Puritan ethic of duty to his wife, Ethan finds solace only in the thought of suicide. Thus, he and Mattie attempt to kill themselves by crashing their speeding toboggan into a giant tree. But the attempt fails. Mattie is permanently crippled and partially deranged. As the novel ends, Ethan is nearly fifty and is now chained to two invalids in a life that is long, hard, and meaningless.

Of course, such a brief outline cannot begin to convey the power and appeal of Mrs. Wharton's grim story. The actual events of Ethan Frome's life are relatively mundane. But the impact of the novel arises from its careful selection and focus of materials, as well as the numerous details that are merely suggested and then left to the reader's imagination. Moreover, in its portrayal of the hopelessness of Ethan's attempts to find happiness, and in the inevitable disaster which follows because he is unable to surmount the ethical and environmental forces which have shaped him, Ethan Frome suggests the presence of a tragic
fate similar to which the Fifth-Century Athenians paid tribute. In the words of Joseph Wood Krutch:

When Mrs. Wharton wrote *Ethan Frome* she was fresh from the lessons which Maupassant and Flaubert, not to mention Henry James, had taught her. From them she had learned how the realistic novel could be redeemed by a scrupulously selective craftsmanship from the sprawling and chaotic formlessness to which it seemed condemned; how its materials, if economically used, could be pointed up until there emerged from a story of everyday life something not too remotely resembling the clear, clean note of ancient tales.\(^1\)

If the extremely pessimistic view of *Ethan Frome* disturbed Davis, it was not obvious. For, in dramatizing the novel, he followed Mrs. Wharton's narrative line with little deviation. The play opens with a prologue twenty years after the attempted suicide, and then the first scene reverts to the time just prior to Mattie Silver's arrival. After the action has progressed to the night of the disaster, an epilogue portrays the agonizing results of Ethan's attempt to escape from his tormented life. Thus, the entire play is framed by scenes in the present which is identical with the structure of the novel. Moreover, Davis was careful not to invent additional incidents. The play deals only with events from the novel, and the character complement remains the same. In almost every respect, the script is as faithful a re-telling of Ethan Frome's story as the playwright could devise.

Once his son had agreed to help him with the dramatization, Davis made extensive preparations for their collaboration. Each of them was assigned definite areas of responsibility. Davis assumed the task

\(^{1}^{1}\text{Joseph Wood Krutch, "Ethan Frome," }\text{The Nation, CXLII (February 5, 1936), 168.}\)
of laying out the story line, shaping character conflict and motivation, and overseeing the long, gradual build to the final moment of the disaster. Donald assisted with a large portion of the first draft dialogue, which was then re-worked and edited by his father. Apparently the collaboration worked smoothly, and their efforts were rewarded when Mrs. Wharton wrote to Davis:

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

As most of the critics observed, however, the Davis dramatization is more than just a workman-like transcription. And while it is interesting to compare the novel and the drama, the play must ultimately be considered and evaluated on its own merits.

In terms of characterization, *Ethan Frome* is Davis' finest play. Each of the leading characters is an effective and skillful creation, authentically designed and honestly motivated. And each has a depth of believability which Davis had succeeded in creating on occasion in other works, but never with such a degree of consistency. There are few moments when one is conscious of the plot determining the actions of the characters. Instead, the entire chain of events seems to rise spontaneously out of the desires of the people involved.

Of the three leading characters, Zenobia is the most pivotal because it is her personality and conduct which shape Ethan's grim

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12 Davis, *My First Fifty Years*, p. 139.
existence and spark his love for Mattie Silver. And Zenobia's intense hypochondria and almost casual cruelty is deftly exhibited in a number of effective scenes.

Ethan: But why—what'd you want to go to Bettsbridge for?

Zeena: To see the new doctor--that's what for!

Ethan: But you can't do that now, Zeena! You know we just ain't got the money to lay out for any new doctors . . .

Zeena: (Sighs) I know! I know I'm just a burden to you. Right this minute I got pains way down to my ankles and shootin' back up through me . . . like I was bein' stabbed!

Ethan: Zeena, how're we goin' to pay the doctor anyway?

Zeena: Well . . . I got what's left of the cow money . . . t'ain't much . . . but it'll have to do, I s'pose.

Ethan: That's every cent we got in the world! You can't take that money, Zeena. You just can't!

Zeena: Nonsense! Why, course I can, Ethan . . . . You ain't that mean!13

Zenobia, as conceived by Mrs. Wharton, is a completely despicable person. But Owen Davis knew the limitations of one-dimensional characters, and thus, the playwright's attempt to soften her somewhat by emphasizing the justification for her behavior.

Zeena: I'd a been ashamed to tell him you grudged me the money to get back my health when you know I lost it nursin' your mother!

Ethan: You lost your health nursin' my mother?

Zeena: Yes, I did . . . . and my folks all told me at the time . . . you couldn't do no less than marry me after . . .

__13__Owen Davis, _Ethan Frome_ (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1936), II.ii.132.
Ethan: Zeena!

Zeena: I went and lost my health nursin' your mother and the good Lord knows she was nothin' to me. It was a wise decision, for it gives an added dimension to Zenobia's personality. This is her rationalization, her bargaining point. It is why, in her thinking, Ethan is in her debt and why her outrageous demands should be respected and fulfilled. Furthermore, this careful delineation of her motives serves to compound Ethan's guilt when he finally contemplates deserting her.

In spite of her imaginary illnesses, however, Zenobia is the strongest character in the play. It is her unyielding will in the third act which subdues and destroys any chance for Ethan's happiness. Driven nearly to suicide, Ethan tries to win his release from her in a scene which illuminates her strength—a strength which thrives on Ethan's guilt and which is backed by the threat of social condemnation.

Ethan: I want a chance to make a fresh start. I want to get away and go out West an' make a fresh start.
Zeena: What'd I do?
Ethan: I'll give you the farm and the mill, Zeena! For your own—I'll make 'em over to you!
Zeena: What'd I do with 'em?
Ethan: . . . You c'd sell 'em both and keep the money, Zeena, all for yourself!
Zeena: Who'd I sell 'em to?
Ethan: Well--maybe you couldn't sell 'em right off . . . I'd send you money all right and you might be's well off as Mis' Hale or any of them one day!
Zeena: And how'd I eat till then?  

14 Ibid., III.1.194.  15 Ibid., III.ii.223.
In her patient, martyred manner, Zenobia eventually shatters Ethan's romantic dream and leaves him no alternative but suicide. It is an extremely effective scene, free from heroics or shouting, with the hypocrite, Zenobia, arguing from a position of virtue and respectability. But the supreme irony is that she defeats him with completely practical objections—How'd I eat till then? Earlier in the play she is willing to spend their last cent on an "Energex Vibrator," but now she raises the issues which she knows will strike Ethan with the most force. She is a carefully drawn figure: apparently helpless and pitiable in her sickness; cruel and cunning in her treatment of Mattie and Ethan; and strong in her determination to drag her husband down into her bitter and impoverished existence.

In contrast to Zenobia, Mattie Silver is naive, impetuous, and completely free from deception. In spite of her poor opinion of herself, her youth and radiance awaken in Ethan a feeling which he has never known. Like Jane Crosby in Icebound, Mattie brings laughter into a cold home, until she, too, begins to harden in the frigid atmosphere. But Mattie never becomes bitter, and she maintains until the abortive suicide an innocence which is the key to her attractiveness. One reviewer commented on Mattie's stupidity, but it is not stupidity which leads to her disaster. It is her incredulity that arouses Zenobia's wrath. After she and Ethan return later than usual from the church "sociable," she feels no need to lie to Zenobia, although Ethan has already told his wife a somewhat different version of why they were delayed.
Mattie: I'm terribly sorry about last night . . . we was
just awful late, wasn't we Zeenie? (Ethan is
standing stock still . . . nervous and embarrassed
and alarmed at what Mattie is about to say . . .
he is studiously re-lacing his boots.) Well, it
was all my fault every bit . . . I went and
promised Denis Eady the last dance and he just
wouldn't let me go . . . and poor Ethan, there he
was waitin' out in the cold . . .

Zeena: (Glances from one to the other of them . . . she
smiles slightly . . . Ethan is overwhelmed with
embarrassment.)

Later in the same scene, Mattie is discussing with Zenobia the possibil-
ity of Denis Eady proposing to her:

Mattie: (Laughs) Oh! My--why he wouldn't never do that!

Zeena: He might . . . if you was to give him the chance.

Mattie: Why--gorry--what ever put that idea into your head,
Zeena! And I never thought of him that way at all!
I don't like him!

Zeena: Paupers can't be choosey, Mattie.

Mattie: Oh, I'm not choosey, Zeena, honest I'm not . . .
(Then she chuckles and says quickly) Like I was
sayin' to Ethan only last night . . . I says nobody
ain't never asked me yet, I said, and he said, if he
wasn't married he might ask me himself . . . so course
I said, sayin' that don't mean anything' . . . But
still 'n all, I says, its real nice of you to say it
. . . and it was, too, wasn't it?

Zeena: (Sitting rigidly upright in the bed. Mattie glances
at her and is suddenly terrified.)

It is moments such as these which point up with economy and precision
the essence of Mattie's personality and which crystallize the difference
between the two women. The qualities which Ethan finds so attractive in
Mattie are the points that Zenobia seizes on to destroy them.

16 Ibid., II.i.112. 17 Ibid., II.i.116.
Between the malevolent Zenobia and the innocent Mattie is Ethan, the character who undergoes the most significant change only to be thrown back into the despair from which he had hoped to escape. His evolution is artfully developed by the playwrights in a number of revealing scenes. At the outset, prior to Mattie's arrival, Ethan is an introverted, taciturn farmer, desperately trying to ignore (and endure) Zenobia's daily complaints.

Zeena: You don't never answer anythin' I say.

Ethan: You don't never say anythin' I can answer.  

But he is no match for Zenobia, and when she does irritate him enough to drive him out of his studied silence, it is only to suffer another defeat.

Ethan: I got cows in the barn starvin' because I can't buy feed--I ain't paid Jotham in months--we ain't had enough to feed ourselves . . . Zeena, there ain't no use talkin'--we can't do it--we just can't have no hired girls!

Zeena: Now, Ethan--Mattie ain't a hired girl--she's my cousin--She's comin' all the way up here just to help me in my last sickness. . . .

Ethan: I can't do it--and I won't!

Zeena: Well--she's comin' just the same, Ethan.  

In spite of his harassment, Ethan never says an unkind word about Zenobia, and it is this quality which impresses the reader with the depth of his character. It would be easy to console with others in his misery, but Ethan is fully conscious of his commitment to his wife and the freedom with which he made it.

18 Ibid., I.122.  19 Ibid., I.124.
Ethan: Right after the funeral... Zeena was packin' to go along back home... but I got to thinkin'...
if I didn't get somebody around here to talk to...
I might go the way my mother did, so I asked Zeena to stay and marry me and she did, that's all.20

For Ethan, the marriage is a fact, like his poverty, which cannot be altered. And his daily struggles with Zenobia and with the land are an integral part of his quietly agonized existence.

But Mattie changes all that, and for the first time in his life, Ethan is suddenly aware that life could be something more than drudgery. With Mattie, Ethan begins to emerge from the cultivated silence that he has so long used to protect himself from Zenobia. On the long walks from the church to the Frome farm, he demonstrates his knowledge with an adolescent pride to this girl that he loves.

Mattie: (Looking up at the sky--she points) Where? The big one--there?
Ethan: No, no, no... Look. See the dipper?
Mattie: I guess so.
Ethan: See the pourin' side of the dipper?
Mattie: Is that the North Star--that little thing?
Ethan: It's as big as the world, maybe bigger.
Mattie: It don't look it.
Ethan: That's because it's so far away.21

In the brief and touching scenes between Ethan and Mattie, the playwrights reveal, with considerable skill, the tenderness and compassion

20 Ibid., I.iv.92. 21 Ibid., I.iv.88.
of Ethan Frome. Behind the solemn facade is a man capable of great love.

Ethan: Well, now . . . folks do marry . . . no gettin' away from that. So if you was to marry some fellow . . . why it'd be natural you'd be leavin' us.

Mattie: If? That's a mighty big "if" Ethan!

Ethan: Say, Matt . . . you ain't cryin'?

Mattie: Course I ain't!

Ethan: Why, Matt--lots of folks'd want to marry you.

Mattie: I ain't noticed any great rush so far!

Ethan: Well . . . take now . . . I would . . . if I could.22

However, Ethan is not to find his happiness with Mattie, and when Zenobia eventually decides to send her away, he is unable to prevent it. Ethan is powerless. There is no escape from Zeena because there is no escape from himself. Zenobia's hold on him is stronger than the single band of the marriage vow. Ethan is inexorably rooted in the stark and lonely landscape of his environment. He is thwarted by the poverty of his farm and mill, by the Puritan heritage which formulates his inarticulate thoughts, and by his lifelong acceptance without question of the things that have happened to him. For, acceptance is the key to Ethan's character. He says of his marriage in a momentary regretful note, "Sometimes I think . . . I might never have done it . . . if mother'd died in the spring . . . instead of the winter!"23

But the marriage did take place and is accepted with all the other events of his life. Thus, after the futile suicide, Ethan goes on as

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22Ibid., I.iii.85.  23Ibid., I.iv.93.
before, while Mattie disintegrates into a whining replica of Zenobia. For Ethan there is no final release. There is only life as it is—to be endured until death. And Ethan Frome is likely "to touch a hundred."\textsuperscript{24}

Unlike any other Davis work, \textit{Ethan Frome} has a single, relentless line of action which gathers all the incidents into a thorough-going and inevitable chain of events. And much of the strength of the play arises from this carefully controlled action as it builds to the final disaster. Ethan and Mattie's innocent, honest, yet destructive, love is nurtured through each scene until it eventually leads to its agonizing consequences. But Ethan does not actually take Mattie in his arms and kiss her until moments before they attempt to commit suicide. Until that moment, their relationship, which is the cog on which the play turns, is established with the utmost skill and subtlety. Neither one is able to take the first step toward an open display of affection. And Davis controls their reactions with an unusual number of detailed stage directions:

He takes the slipper from her hand . . . puts it on his foot . . . she reaches for his other boot . . . he is leaning close to her . . . and suddenly moves his foot away from her . . . with an abrupt lurch. He is strangely moved and deeply embarrassed.\textsuperscript{25}

and later:

He stops speaking abruptly . . . standing close to her . . . she looks up at him and smiles gratefully . . . they are standing close to each other and he suddenly realizes it . . . he shifts about . . . away from her slightly . . . murmering rapidly.\textsuperscript{26}

\textsuperscript{24}Ibid., Epilogue, 260. \textsuperscript{25}Ibid., II.iii.162. \textsuperscript{26}Ibid., II.iii.163.
It is this precise attention to detail which allows the tension of the play to build so effectively to the moment when they throw themselves into each others arms and rush, almost joyously, down the ice-covered hill to what they hope will be annihilation and freedom.

This same attention to detail is evident throughout the script and is responsible for creating much of the play's theatrical effectiveness. As with Icebound, and most of the Davis plays, the emphasis on visual stage effects is a vital part of the drama. More than any other Davis play, Ethan Frome depends on the eye rather than the ear, because the major characters tend to be introverted and inarticulate. As a result, much of the impact depends on the unspoken thought, the emotion which does not rely solely on dialogue for expression.

The final scene in Act I is an excellent example of the way in which Davis uses the theatre to tell his story. Ethan and Mattie have returned from Starkfield to find the house locked and dark. As they wait uneasily outside:

Ethan: Shush. (A vague eerie light appears suddenly shining through the cracks of the house. . . . They wait tensely, as the light grows stronger approaching the inside of the door. Suddenly the door opens and Zeena stands there in the doorway against the black background of the kitchen . . . holding a flickering oil lamp. The light deepens fantastically the hollows and boniness of her drawn severe white face.)

Zeena: I felt so mean 't I couldn't sleep. (Conscious of their uneasiness . . . Ethan and Mattie move forward slowly and reluctantly . . . through the doorway, into the kitchen . . . and without another word, Zeena closes the door.)

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27 Ibid., I.iv.98.
It is an extremely effective moment. With only one line of dialogue, a line which was later cut in Gassner's anthologized version of the play, Davis succeeds in capturing the essential conflicts of the drama in visual terms.

The end of Act II, however, is even more impressive. Zeena has gone to see a new doctor in Worcester, and as night falls, Mattie and Ethan are alone in the house. But they are reminded of Zeena by a number of things, particularly the ancient rocking chair from which she barks her daily commands and which has become a symbol of her creaking existence. As Mattie prepares to go upstairs, Ethan attempts to express his feelings for her, but he is helplessly inarticulate. Finally:

Ethan: (His hands grip the back of Zeena's rocker . . . at last Mattie is forced to turn away . . . she moves reluctantly toward the foot of the stairs . . . he watches her and then calls intensely) Good night, Matt!

Mattie: (Turns at the bottom of the stairs . . . smiles slightly) Good night, Ethan!

(She goes up the stairs . . . he stands motionless watching her . . . until the flicker of the lighted candle she carries disappears after her. Then slowly he relaxes his tense grip upon the back of Zeena's rocker . . . as his hand drops to his side . . . the rocker creaks back and forth very slightly . . . he stands . . . staring at it helplessly)29

This is Owen Davis at his very best—utilizing his immense theatrical and dramatic skill in a brief and flawless orchestration. The moving actor, precise gesture, flickering candle, and creaking rocker all mesh

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29 Davis, Ethan Frome, II.iii.176.
to underscore the unspoken words and crystallize the essence of Ethan's dilemma.

Ethan Frome is the fulfillment of the potential that Davis displayed in The Detour and Icebound. And, in a sense, it represents a merger of the individual strengths of his two former character studies. Like The Detour, Ethan Frome profits from strong dramatic confrontations, which were the best features of his story about Stephen and Helen Hardy. But unlike The Detour, Ethan Frome does not suffer from the contrived plotting of his earlier effort. Similarly, like Icebound, Ethan Frome is a wholly theatrical play, relying on visual effects to build and capture the mood and atmosphere which is so vital to the final impact. But unlike Icebound, Ethan Frome does not bog down in an attempt at character delineation. Ethan Frome has an inevitable and compelling plot line which grows out of and eventually engulfs its leading characters. It is a starkly pessimistic study of man in a meaningless existence, and as such, it has more universality, more lasting appeal than anything Davis ever wrote.

Ethan Frome opened on January 21, 1936 with one of the most splendid casts of Davis' career. Pauline Lord, who had created the female leads in Anna Christie and Strange Interlude, played Zenobia Frome. Ruth Gordon, the star of Saturday's Children and Hotel Universe, was Mattie Silver. And Raymond Massey, who had played the title role in Norman Bel Geddes' Hamlet, was Ethan Frome. The settings were designed by Jo Mielziner, and the play was directed by Guthrie McClintic.
It was a superb production. Joseph Wood Krutch spoke for a majority of the critics when he wrote:

Ethan Frome as now acted at the National Theatre is successful and engrossing beyond all reasonable expectation. . . . Pauline Lord, Raymond Massey, and Ruth Gordon make it live. Thanks to them and to the direction of Guthrie McClintic, the whole is not only tense and absorbing . . . it is overwhelmingly powerful.30

Davis received his second Pulitzer Prize nomination for Ethan Frome, but the competition was much more formidable in 1936 than it had been in 1923. Also in the running for the now prestigious award were Dead End, Winterset, Paradise Lost, and Idiots Delight. (Porgy and Bess was declared ineligible because it was an adaptation of a previous play.) After a number of ballots, Robert Sherwood's anti-war drama, Idiots Delight, with Alfred Lunt and Lynn Fontanne, was announced as the winner. It was the first of three such awards for Sherwood, who called it a high honor, "particularly in this season."31

Ethan Frome was the climax of Davis' long career. Although he continued to write for eight more years, he never again produced anything as effective as his dramatization of Edith Wharton's masterpiece. The following season (1937) he collaborated with Lawrence Stallings and Arthur Schwartz on a musical, Virginia, which concerns the arrival of the first company of professional English actors in America and their subsequent entanglement in the Revolutionary War. In spite of excellent performances by Gene Lockhart and Nigel Bruce, Virginia was a failure.

Davis was no novice in the musical theatre. In 1929 he had written the book for *Spring Is Here*, with music by Richard Rodgers and lyrics by Lorenz Hart. *Spring Is Here* ran for 104 performances, even though Davis admitted, "The book didn't amount to anything." But he had been reluctant to write musicals following his collaboration with Rodgers and Hart because he felt that the author had no real control over the development of the play. In Davis' estimation, the form was dominated by the score, and the book was only a necessary, but minor, adjunct to the music. *Virginia* did not change his mind.

In 1938 Davis' health began to fail. He had been plagued by deteriorating eyesight for several years, and now, at age sixty-four, he was suffering from a variety of internal disorders. On New Year's Day of 1939 he was taken to Lennox Hospital where his condition was listed as serious. He was confined for nearly five months. By June, however, he was well enough to move to his summer home in Skowhegan, Maine, where he and his family had vacationed for the past twelve years. There his health slowly improved, and he wrote to Sam Harris in July that he expected to be recovered by the fall.33

Skowhegan was the home of the Lakewood Playhouse, and for several years Davis had "vacationed" by writing an occasional comedy for the company. Most of the plays were announced as "try-out" productions, although they ordinarily ran their week at Lakewood and were then

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33 Letter from Owen Davis to Sam Harris in the Theatre Collection at Lincoln Center. Dated July 7, 1939.
forgotten. But Davis enjoyed the excitement of working again in the stock system, and in the summer of 1939 he attempted to "write himself back into shape" with two new plays—Indian Summer and Love and All That. Both ran their week and disappeared, and Davis, in spite of orders to rest, found himself back in the hospital. "I was in about the same shape as the One Horse Shay," he wrote, "each morning when I woke up I found that another part was missing."  

He did nothing for six months, and slowly his strength returned. And with his strength came the desire to write. During his recuperation he had become interested in the Mr. and Mrs. North stories by Frances and Richard Lockridge, which were appearing with increasing frequency in The New Yorker. Davis was fascinated by the light-headed but loveable heroine, Pamela North, and he was convinced that she would be an instant success in the theatre. In the summer of 1940 he began his dramatization, drawing incidents from a number of the stories as well as from one of Richard Lockridge's early novels, The Norths Meet Murder.

Because of his earlier difficulties with The Haunted House, Davis was uncertain how far he could spoof the North's encounters with murder. In August Mr. and Mrs. North was given a special preview at Lakewood, and the audiences responded enthusiastically to "the rather screwy but very lovable Mrs. North and her bewildered husband."  

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34 Unidentified clipping in the Lindsay-Hampden Collection of the Ohio State University Theatre Collection.

35 Davis, My First Fifty Years, p. 151.

36 Ibid., p. 149.
result, Davis re-wrote the script "rather kidding the mystery part of it."\(^{37}\) The play opened in New York on January 12, 1941 with Peggy Conklin and Albert Hackett in the leading roles. Unfortunately, its impact was dampened somewhat by the arrival of *Arsenic and Old Lace*, which premiered just two days prior to Davis' comedy. But Mr. and Mrs. North was favored by the critics and the public, and it became an immediate success. Later it was serialized for both radio and television, and was eventually sold to MGM for $30,000.\(^{38}\)

Unlike *The Haunted House*, *Mr. and Mrs. North* is not a farcical spoofing of the murder-mystery tradition. It has a serious, logically developed plot, and its humor arises from its characters and dialogue rather than from a basically improbable series of events. The murders are quite real, but the play is funny because of the way the Norths (particularly Pam) react to them. The Norths are not "types" as the characters of *The Haunted House* are; they are distinctly individual people who are capable of great humor.

As the play opens, Gerald and Pam have just returned from separate weekend trips to discover a dead man in their apartment. There are numerous clues, a variety of suspects, and eventually, another corpse. In true murder-mystery fashion, suspicion is cast on several of the North's acquaintances, and finally, Gerald becomes the prime suspect. The police seem rather baffled by the entire affair, and it is the

\(^{38}\) *New York World-Telegram*, July 25, 1941.
amateur and slightly scatterbrained Pamela who unmasks the killer by
destroying what would otherwise have been a perfect alibi.

This routine plot, in the tradition of earlier Davis efforts
such as The Donovan Affair and At 9:45, is given renewed life and comic
vitality by the character of Mrs. North. Typical of her reactions to
the events that swirl about her is the scene in which she and Jerry
discover the first body in their liquor closet.

Pam: Darling--you know they'll think we did it. They always
do.

North: People who find bodies--yes, they do. Usually--say,
Pam, you didn't see it (Looks at the body) him--I
mean, before you left here yesterday.

Pam: No--I'd have mentioned it.39

It is this kind of unexpected humorous reaction to a basically serious
situation which provides the best comedy because it is both incongru-
ous and yet completely in keeping with Pam's personality.

Unfortunately, Mrs. North cannot carry the entire show, and the
play becomes somewhat strained as it progresses. After years of writing
farce, Davis does not seem entirely comfortable in what is essentially a
manners comedy. And too much of the dialogue appears to be reaching for
witty repartee while falling short into vaudeville gags.

Lieutenant: Mrs. North--Mullins and I don't see things just
the way they do down at the District Attorney's
office--but I want you to know we want to help
you in any way we possibly can.

Pam: (Touched) Why, thank you, Lieutenant, I really think
you are trying to say something very sweet to me.

39 Owen Davis, Mr. and Mrs. North (New York: Samuel French,
1941), I.1.24.
Mullins: Oh, no, lady! Honest! The Loot's a gentleman, he ain't on the make. 40

Still, in spite of the rather forced dialogue, the play was successful enough to run for 163 performances and provide Davis with another Broadway hit as he approached his sixty-seventh birthday. It was his last success.

Davis' final plays, The Snark Was a Boojum (1943) and No Way Out (1944), ran for a combined total of thirteen performances. The Snark is a disastrous dramatization of a Richard Shattuck story, originally from Lewis Carroll's Hunting of the Snark, about a group of women involved in a race to have a baby. Burton Roscoe, the drama critic for the New York World-Telegram, was painfully embarrassed by the comedy:

I haven't had such an experience in the theatre since I sat with some other parents in the auditorium of Mamaroneck High School and watched grown-up neighbors of mine make spectacles of themselves. 41

The Snark Was a Boojum closed in less than a week.

No Way Out, Davis' last play, was originally titled The Perfect Crime, and it ran for eight performances in October of 1944. It is the story of Dr. Niles Hilliard, a brilliant physician, who is attempting to murder his stepdaughter by refusing to diagnose and treat her for Addison's disease. As Barbara grows weaker, however, her friend, Enid Karley, who is also a physician, begins to suspect that her condition is very critical. She requests permission from Dr. Hilliard to examine his patient, but he refuses. Convinced now that something is wrong, Enid

40 Ibid., III.125.
41 New York World-Telegram, September 2, 1943.
tries to persuade a local doctor to serve as a consulting physician, but he rejects her suspicions of the renowned Niles Hilliard. Enid is, therefore, faced with the necessity of violating medical ethics in order to save her friend's life. But before she can expose Hilliard, his mistress, Heather, who is posing as a nurse, inadvertently gives their plot away, and Barbara is saved. In spite of its sensational subject matter, the critics were unanimous in their opinion that No Way Out was a dull play. John Chapman was kinder than most when he pronounced, "the best an audience can get out of it is a mild dose of lethargic encephalitis."  

No Way Out is not a particularly pleasant note upon which to close Davis' career, but his reversion to melodrama is too ironic to overlook. After years of building a legitimate reputation and attempting to shake off the "indiscretions" of his youth, Davis' final play has most of the characteristics of the old "mellers" with which he had first made his mark in the theatre. The characters are of the "stock" variety, complete to the evil woman figure who is the mistress of the villain. The plot is constructed around the villain's attempts to destroy an innocent girl and seize her fortune. Regardless of Enid's dilemma, the issues, like the people, are clearly good or bad, and justice triumphs at the final curtain. But the most melodramatic device is the revelation scene in the third act. Hester is involved in a struggle with Barbara when a locket breaks away from the villainess' throat and falls

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to the floor. Inside the locket is Niles Hilliard's picture, and as it flies open, the evil pair is exposed. This scene could easily have been borrowed from an old Bowery manuscript. In fact, the last time that Davis had used the locket in a revelation scene was At Yale, produced in 1906.

The central issue of No Way Out is supposed to be the question of whether a physician can violate medical ethics in order to save a patient's life. But this is quickly thrust into the background by the absolute villainy of Niles Hilliard, and the question is never resolved. When Dr. Karley finally persuades an outside physician to examine Barbara (just prior to the struggle over the locket), it is on the basis of the same evidence that the same doctor had rejected in the previous act. Thus, even in its improbability of plot, No Way Out harkens back to earlier and, now, very distant days. It is a fascinating play, more than thirty years behind its time.

Davis wrote No Way Out after one of his frequent hospital confinements, and after 1944 his various ailments grew worse. To combat the boredom of his sickness, he began writing a series of reminiscences, My First Fifty Years in the Theatre. In 1949 he was stunned by the death of his son, Owen Davis, Jr., who had given up a promising acting career to become an executive producer at N.B.C. Television. The younger Davis was drowned in a boating accident in Long Island Sound on May 22. But, despite the accumulating pain of his old age, Davis remained an optimistic and basically happy man. In 1950 he finished his book of reminiscences with, "I have lived a long, full life and I have my share, and more, of happy memories."43

43 Davis, My First Fifty Years, p. 157.
He died six years later, on October 14, 1956, at the age of eighty-two. Moss Hart and Oscar Hammerstein sent condolences on behalf of The Author's League of America and The Dramatists Guild, both of which Davis had served as President. But the American theatre had nearly forgotten one of its most prolific playwrights. In an indignant moment, Philip Watson wrote to the editor of Variety, "Probably not more than forty people, including the family, attended the funeral. It was sad and shocking. . . . He was a kind man who lived an exemplary life."

44 Variety, October 24, 1956.
SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

Before attempting to reach some conclusions regarding the nature of Davis' contribution to the American drama, it will be useful to summarize briefly the major developments and accomplishments of his lengthy career. From 1899 to 1909 he wrote, almost exclusively, sensational melodramas for the popular-priced theatre. He became so proficient in the "mellers" that by the middle of the decade his name was nearly synonymous with this type of entertainment. The "ten-twenty-thirt" plays, like the French and English melodramas from which they descended, relied heavily on stock characters, pursuit plots, a sharp distinction between good and evil, spectacular scenic displays, music to underscore dramatic effects, a mixture of comic and serious scenes, and the inevitable triumph of justice. Although Davis employed all of these elements, he concentrated primarily on elaborate scenic displays, a generous amount of farce comedy, a romantic love story, and a poetic (and often providential) sense of justice. The widely quoted Davis "formula" for melodrama is not, as we have seen, a wholly accurate description of his techniques. It can be applied with some validity to his work after the Woods contract of 1905; but prior to that, it is neither a precise nor consistent account of his practice.
By 1909 the motion pictures had begun to pose a serious threat to the popular-priced theatre, and Davis abandoned the "mellers" even though they were providing him with an annual income of approximately $56,000. His decision, however, was mainly prompted by a sincere desire to write a better type of drama, as well as his wife's insistence that he not renew his exhausting contract with Al Woods. Thus, while the rise of the motion pictures was simultaneous with Davis' departure from the "mellers," the silent films did not drive him out of the popular theatre. By 1909 he was quite ready to give up the "ten-twenty-third" which, by his own admission, he could no longer take seriously.

In spite of the notorious reputation that Davis had acquired writing thrillers, his ten years of Bowery drama were not entirely fruitless. He left the "mellers" with a supreme knowledge of the possibilities and limitations of the physical stage as well as a deeply ingrained trust and belief in the visual power of the theatre. And his background and training in a highly theatrical drama eventually played a vital part in his quest for legitimate Broadway success.

In the next decade Owen Davis accomplished a feat that was considered virtually impossible. He successfully made the transition from the popular to the legitimate theatre while the other authors of the "ten-twenty-third" (Charles Taylor, Theodore Kremer, Clarence Bennett, and Lillian Mortimer) passed into obscurity. At first it was extremely difficult for Davis to obtain productions, and occasionally he reverted to his former ways with such plays as Lola and Making Good. But he ultimately made some progress by writing a number of social melodramas, which were then the most popular type of serious entertainment.
In his new career he was greatly influenced by Eugene Walter's *The Easiest Way*, which Davis always considered the finest play ever written by an American dramatist.

The social melodramas reveal an increasing maturity in Davis' dramatic skill as well as many vestiges of the "ten-twenty-thirt." *Driftwood* has almost no originality of character, but it does have a unified dramatic action which is a considerable improvement over the episodic plotting of the "mellers." *The Family Cupboard* is not really a serious discussion of social problems, but it contains Davis' first fully developed character--Kitty Claire. In addition, *The Family Cupboard* has several fine scenes in which Davis combines visual action with sound and lighting effects to produce strong dramatic situations. *Sinners* is plagued with "stock" characters and absurd events, but again Davis demonstrated his ability to write highly theatrical drama. And finally, with *Forever After* he abandoned his reliance on sensational subject matter and created for the first time a play which is not wholly plot oriented. *Forever After*, in spite of its heavy sentimentality, was a milestone in Davis' career. It was his greatest popular triumph, running for 312 performances, and it proved quite conclusively that the former "meller" champion could create consistently believable characters.

The plays from 1910 to 1920 represent Davis' apprenticeship in the legitimate theatre. He wrote little of lasting value, but he did have several commercial hits which demonstrated to his critics that he was capable of better work than he had produced for years on the Stair and Havlin Wheel. Moreover, the legitimate plays of this decade are
closely linked to the "mellers" by the author's basically romantic view of life. In fact, nearly all of the Davis efforts prior to 1921 are essentially romantic visions of a world where good and evil can be easily isolated and judged as such; where a sense of justice eventually harmonizes the disruptive forces in society; and where romantic love is exhibited as a virtue and power which can triumph over all opposition. Therefore, it is not surprising that following his sojourn into the new realism, Davis was seized with a desire to write a drama of optimism.

By 1920 the post-war realistic revolution was beginning to take its toll of established American dramatists, and Owen Davis was once again caught in what appeared to be a dying theatre. But unlike Langdon Mitchell, Winchell Smith, and Avery Hopwood, Davis believed that the new realism could successfully transform the American drama into a truly adult theatre, and he began to study the works of Ibsen, Hauptmann, and Gorky with considerable care. He was also greatly influenced by Eugene O'Neill's first Pulitzer Prize play, Beyond the Horizon.

The years from 1921 to 1926 were Davis' most successful in the legitimate theatre. The Detour, his first attempt at the new realism, was a commercial failure but an artistic success. Its strong characters, uncomplicated situations, and dramatic confrontations nearly conceal its rather contrived plot. And in spite of its brief run, The Detour proved that Davis was definitely capable of creating first class drama. He always considered it his finest play. Davis followed The Detour with Icebound, which was awarded the Pulitzer Prize and which earned him membership in the National Institute of Arts and Letters.
Icebound is one of the most pessimistic plays that Davis ever wrote. Its bitter picture of the greed and hypocrisy of the human condition is only partially tempered by the romance of the last act. But it is an honest and effective drama, unmarred by the plot contrivance of The Detour. The characters are carefully developed and fully realized, and the events are basically simple and unobtrusive. Its skillful blending of the realistic and the theatrical qualify it as one of Davis' finest achievements. After witnessing the maturity and sophistication that O'Neill, Odets, and others brought to the new realism, Icebound appears at times to be somewhat stilted and naive; but there is little doubt that it deserved its high honors in 1923.

In addition to his somber character studies, Davis wrote three highly successful farce comedies which brought him further popular acclaim and a great deal of money. The Nervous Wreck was the most successful of the three, running for 261 performances. It was subsequently transferred to the screen where Eddie Cantor achieved great acclaim in the role of the timid cowboy. Later Danny Kaye revised the script for one of his earliest films—Up in Arms. But The Haunted House, a satirical spoof of the murder-mystery play, is a more delightful script and exhibits some of Davis' best work in a genre that he had loved since the days of the "mellers." His adroit farcical comments on the standard mystery format make The Haunted House one of the few Owen Davis plays to have an appeal beyond the time of its composition and production.

By 1926 Davis had reached the apex of his career. The critics were comparing his realistic plays with those of Eugene O'Neill, and the former king of the "ten-twenty-third," who once claimed that he wrote
plays for people who could not read, was offered a Chair in Dramatic Literature at the University of Michigan. But Davis abruptly abandoned his realistic efforts at the height of his success and began talking about a new serious drama of optimism. He felt that the American drama was becoming too bleak and pessimistic, and that plays must be written which reaffirmed the basic goodness of human nature and such values as love, faith, and hope. Through the collapse of the stock market, massive bank failures, the dust bowl, bread lines, and the rise of the political activist drama, Davis continued to preach the need for a theatre of optimism. He tried for several years to write such a play, but was unsuccessful. For ten years he went without a Broadway hit. Finally, in 1936 he collaborated with his son, Donald, on a dramatization of Ethan Frome which emerged as the finest play of his career.

There is little, if any, optimism in Ethan Frome, but Davis was faithful in his adaptation of Edith Wharton's grim novel. The play exhibits the same skillful characterization that was evident in his earlier realistic efforts, as well as a taut line of dramatic action which rises inevitably to the disastrous conclusion. Moreover, its immense theatricality and economy of dialogue serve to underline and clarify its somber and destructive events. The theme of man's hopelessness and alienation in a cruel universe is dramatically complete and overpowering in its impact. Ethan Frome earned for Davis his second Pulitzer Prize nomination.

After 1936 Davis' career continued to ebb. His eyesight began to fail, and he was plagued by a variety of internal ailments which made it difficult to work. In 1941 he wrote Mr. and Mrs. North, an
uneven but successful manners comedy, which became the fifteenth Davis play to run for more than one hundred performances on Broadway. But his last plays were failures. *No Way Out* is a reversion to melodrama more than thirty years behind its time. Following its collapse, Davis wrote only occasionally for the theatre, and his last two scripts—*All Blood is Red* and *No Pockets in Shrouds*—were not produced. He died in 1956 at the age of eighty-two.

In the Introduction I posed two questions concerning Davis' contributions to the American drama. The first was—What were the factors which accounted for his great success, particularly during the first three decades of the century? From an examination of his plays, several observations may be made. First, Davis had a sure and exact sense of what his audience wanted at any given time. His extreme popularity in the "mellers" was based on a demand for spectacular entertainment which he constantly fulfilled. But even after he left the "ten-twenty-third" drama, he continued to be an uncanny purveyor of the contemporaneous. The *Family Cupboard*, *Sinners*, and *Opportunity* all capitalize on the sensational subject matter which had been popularized by *The Easiest Way*. And *Forever After* takes advantage of the "war play" atmosphere as well as the cinematic techniques of *On Trial*. Moreover, Davis' shift to the new realism was a completely accurate appraisal of the tide that was beginning to flow in the drama. His numerous comedies also reveal the same gift for acute observation. *Easy Come, Easy Go* spoofs the Health Farm fad of the twenties; *Mile-A-Minute Kendall* capitalizes on current interest in prohibition and motor cars; and *The Nervous Wreck* and *The Haunted House* satirize, among other things, the
new Freudian psychology. This gift for analyzing audience taste is certainly one of his greatest strengths as a playwright, and one that other writers looked upon with envy. Montrose Moses was so impressed with Davis' repeated success that he wrote:

I do not take lightly this talent which he possesses for manufacturing popular plays. It is positive necromancy. . . . Others recognize it in him, and he could spend his days doing nothing more than laying hands on the dead plays of others, so successfully has he proved that his touch can set in action the wheels that have been clogged by those less expert.1

Second, Davis always wrote specifically for the stage. He never indulged in plays which did not utilize the entire theatrical milieu. From the "mellers" to Ethan Frome there is always an abundance of theatrical effects cleverly designed to captivate and sustain audience interest and attention. He was a consummate craftsman. Light, sound, and pantomime play as important a part in the majority of his plays as the actual dialogue. And one can trace throughout Davis' career, effects which he developed in the "mellers" and which he used repeatedly with great success. Consider, for example, the scene in which the stage is in complete darkness except for one eerie source of light which Davis used so frequently in the "ten-twenty-thirt." With only slight variations, this scene can be found in Sinners (1915), Icebound (1923), The Haunted House (1924), The Donovan Affair (1926), Ethan Frome (1936), and No Way Out (1944).

Third, Davis had a strong desire to write what he called "good plays," and his attempts to produce something above the level of the

merely contemporaneous was a constant impulse in his work. Thus, plays like The Detour and Icebound assured him of a critical success which raised him out of the ranks of a mere fad playwright. And unlike many strictly commercial authors, such as Winchell Smith, Avery Hopwood, and George Broadhurst, Davis achieved a substantial critical praise which bolstered his recognition and reception.

Fourth, Davis' versatility prevented his work from becoming rigidly classified within any one particular category of drama, and thus, each new play had the opportunity to survive or fail strictly on its own merits. He wrote with an almost equal degree of skill: farce comedy, realistic character studies, murder-mystery plays, and other kinds of melodrama.

In spite of all these advantages, however, Davis had been nearly forgotten by the time of his death, and this raises a second important question. Why has Davis been subsequently disregarded even though he continued to write until 1944? Again, several observations may be made. First, Davis' prolificacy was nurtured in an era when the only way a playwright could earn a living was by writing constantly. In the Frohman age there were no movie, television, or radio benefits for a hit play. And Davis' productivity carried over into his legitimate career. Thus, plays like The Triumphant Bachelor, Just to Remind You, and The Snark Was a Boojum were conceived in obvious haste and were forgotten almost as hastily.

Second, many of the Davis plays which were highly successful, such as Easy Come, Easy Go, Forever After, and The Family Cupboard, are so immediately contemporaneous that they cease to have any widespread
appeal beyond the time of their composition and production. This does not detract from their merit or impact when they were originally produced, but in subsequent generations, they appear dated and often trivial.

Third, with his intense interest in creating a drama of optimism in the late twenties and thirties, Davis lost touch with the theatre at a time when it was experiencing one of its most turbulent upheavals. And his sincere efforts to write a drama of optimism forced him into a series of plays which are highly artificial and which were both popular and critical failures. He seemed to rebel both emotionally and intellectually against the kind of plays with which he had made his greatest critical success. And one cannot help speculating that had he not given up his Icebounds, there might have been more Ethan Fromes.

Fourth, the Davis plays are so diverse both in subject and theme that he seems to have lacked any consistent philosophical point of view or any major social concern which demanded renewed expression. Unlike O'Neill, who experimented with a number of techniques and ideas before settling on a sweeping indictment of the gross materialism of American society, Davis had no consistently important theme or desire which his superb knowledge of the theatre could have clothed in compelling dramatic form. Even his sincere attempts to write an optimistic drama seem superficial because he was indicting the state of the drama and not the state of the society which the drama mirrored.

Unfortunately, Davis' prolificacy and his failure to follow through on his success in the twenties have caused most critics to neglect his important achievements. The tendency in dramatic criticism
has been to overlook Davis' works as merely the products of a skillful
craftsman who capitalized on current fads. As such, he is recognized
as a supreme purveyor of current tastes who contributed little, if
anything, of lasting value to the drama which he served for so long.
But such an evaluation is too hasty and inexact. And Davis did make
significant contributions which have not been completely recognized.

First, he was a pioneer in establishing the legitimacy of the
folk drama movement in America. There had been scattered attempts to
dramatize life in rural areas prior to Davis' efforts in the early
twenties (such as William Vaughn Moody's The Great Divide); but The
Detour and Icebound, along with Beyond the Horizon, had a tremendous
impact on the folk plays that flourished in the twenties and thirties.
The stark New England countryside that Davis returned to in Ethan Frome
was presented in vivid form by Eugene O'Neill in Desire under the Elms
(1924). And the far West provided the background for such plays as
Roadside (1930) and Green Grow the Lilacs (1931) by Lynn Riggs, Of Mice
and Men (1937) by John Steinbeck, and No More Frontier (1929) by Talbot
Jennings. One of the most prolific of the new folk dramatists was Paul
Green, who turned to the South for such plays as In Abraham's Bosom
(1926), The Field God (1927), and The House of Connelly (1931). The
South also became the background for Hatcher Hughes' Hell Bent for
Heaven (1924), Marc Connelly's Green Pastures (1930), and Dorothy and
DuBose Heyward's Porgy (1927). Although this type of drama began to
diminish after 1945, playwrights such as William Inge and Tennessee
Williams have continued to produce plays based on distinctly regional
aspects of American life.
Second, Davis played a substantial part in establishing the post-war realism in the legitimate theatre. Realistic treatment of character and theme in the American drama can be traced to the last decade of the nineteenth century with the plays of James Herne; but it was not until after World War I that realism began to gain a strong foothold in the legitimate commercial theatre. And it was not until the mid-twenties that the movement achieved some stature and maturity with such plays as Craig's Wife, They Knew What They Wanted, In Abraham's Bosom, and Street Scene. The Detour and Icebound, however, were produced prior to these Pulitzer Prize winning plays. And by the mid-twenties, Davis, along with Eugene O'Neill, was recognized as one of America's finest realistic playwrights. But because he rejected the pessimistic view of the new dramatists, Davis' early influence has been generally overlooked.

Third, in addition to these historical contributions, Davis wrote two plays--Icebound and Ethan Frome--which have gained a permanent place in the literature of the American theatre. Of the two, Ethan Frome is easily the finer script, and its frequent revivals, including a 1960 television production on the "DuPont Show of the Month," attest to its enduring popularity.

Of all his achievements, however, Davis continually pointed to one seemingly insignificant fact with great pride. He estimated that in the course of his long career he had personally provided jobs for over 3,000 actors. His pride in this fact is an indication of the extent of his commitment to the theatre; and it is completely characteristic of a man who devoted his entire adult life to writing plays.
APPENDIX

A CHRONOLOGICAL LIST OF THE PLAYS

BY OWEN DAVIS
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Play</th>
<th>Theatre(^1)</th>
<th>First Performance</th>
<th>Remarks</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1898</td>
<td>For the White Rose</td>
<td>Gem</td>
<td>July 11</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(Peaks Island, Me.)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>1899</td>
<td>Through the Breakers</td>
<td>Star</td>
<td>Jan. 30</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1900</td>
<td>Over the Fence</td>
<td>Grand</td>
<td>Apr. 9</td>
<td>Original Title: Abner White from Belfast</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>(Boston)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Reaping the Whirlwind</td>
<td>Star</td>
<td>Sept. 17</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1901</td>
<td>Lost in the Desert</td>
<td>Star</td>
<td>Jan. 14</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Under Two Flags</td>
<td>Baker</td>
<td>June 3</td>
<td>Several authors used this title. Most popular version was by Paul Potter.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(Rochester)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>The Gathering Storm</td>
<td>Baker</td>
<td>June 10</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(Rochester)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Circus Day</td>
<td>Metropolis</td>
<td>Oct. 4</td>
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<tr>
<td>1902</td>
<td>A Gambler's Daughter</td>
<td>Star</td>
<td>Apr. 14</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>My Old Kentucky Home</td>
<td>Baker</td>
<td>Apr. 14</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(Rochester)</td>
<td></td>
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\(^1\)All theatres are in New York City unless otherwise specified.
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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Play</th>
<th>Theatre</th>
<th>First Performance</th>
<th>Remarks</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1902</td>
<td>Between Love and Duty</td>
<td>Baker (Rochester)</td>
<td>May 12</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Her Marriage Vow</td>
<td>National (Syracuse)</td>
<td>June 16</td>
<td>First performed in New York on Oct. 7, 1904 at Third Ave.</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>My Lady Nell</td>
<td>Baker (Rochester)</td>
<td>June 23</td>
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<td></td>
<td>In the Hands of the Enemy</td>
<td>Baker (Rochester)</td>
<td>Aug. 15</td>
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<td>Lost at Sea</td>
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<td>Driven from Home</td>
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<td>Far Away</td>
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<td>The Lighthouse by the Sea</td>
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<td>First performed in New York on Aug. 31 at Fifty-Eighth St.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>A Great Temptation</td>
<td>Baker (Rochester)</td>
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<td>First performed in New York on Sept. 14 at Metropolis.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Her One False Step</td>
<td>Baker (Rochester)</td>
<td>May 11</td>
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<td>Over the Quarry Brink</td>
<td>Baker (Rochester)</td>
<td>Aug. 17</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Queen of the White Slaves</td>
<td>Grand</td>
<td>Nov. 23</td>
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<tr>
<td>1904</td>
<td>Dealers in White Women</td>
<td>New Star</td>
<td>Aug. 22</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Man Proposes</td>
<td>New Star</td>
<td>Mar. 11</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>On Thanksgiving Day</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Father of Her Child</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>When All the World Was Young</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Mutt and Jeff</td>
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<tr>
<td>1905</td>
<td>Confessions of a Wife</td>
<td>Fourteenth Street</td>
<td>Feb. 13</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Tracked Around the World</td>
<td>Fourteenth Street</td>
<td>May 5</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>How Baxter Butted In</td>
<td>Murray Hill</td>
<td>Mov. 13</td>
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<td></td>
<td>The White Caps</td>
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<td></td>
<td>A Corner in Coffee</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>A Double Life</td>
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<td>1906</td>
<td>At the World's Mercy</td>
<td>Star</td>
<td>Feb. 12</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Chinatown Charlie</td>
<td>American</td>
<td>Mar. 5</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Ruled Off the Turf</td>
<td>Fourteenth Street</td>
<td>Aug. 20</td>
<td>Pseudonym: John Oliver</td>
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Pseudonym: Martin Hurley

Play by this same title in the previous season was by Chs. Taylor.

The Dec. 24, 1906 production at the Bijou was by Rinehart Roberts.
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<td>The Power of Money</td>
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<td>Aug. 20</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Secrets of the Police</td>
<td>Thalia</td>
<td>Aug. 27</td>
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<td></td>
<td>The Burglar's Daughter</td>
<td>New Star</td>
<td>Sept. 17</td>
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<td></td>
<td>The Gambler of the West</td>
<td>West End</td>
<td>Oct. 6</td>
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<td></td>
<td>$10,000 Reward</td>
<td>American</td>
<td>Oct. 8</td>
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<td></td>
<td>A Marked Woman</td>
<td>West End</td>
<td>Dec. 10</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Nellie, The Beautiful Cloak Model</td>
<td>West End</td>
<td>Dec. 31</td>
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<td>1907</td>
<td>A Race Across the Continent</td>
<td>Thalia</td>
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<td></td>
<td>The King and Queen of Gamblers</td>
<td>American</td>
<td>July 27</td>
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<td>The Wire Tappers</td>
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<td>A Chorus Girl's Luck in New York</td>
<td>Fourteenth St.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Convict 999</td>
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<td>The Great Express Robbery</td>
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<td>Aug. 12</td>
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<td>Since Nellie Went Away</td>
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<td>Fallen by the Wayside</td>
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<td>Its Never Too Late to Mend</td>
<td>New Star</td>
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<td>At Yale</td>
<td>Yorkville</td>
<td>Oct. 7</td>
<td>Played the previous season on the road.</td>
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<td>Deadwood Dick's Last Shot</td>
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<td>Tony, The Bootblack</td>
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<td>What Did I Tell You</td>
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<td>At 9:45</td>
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<td>Peggy, Behave</td>
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<td>April 20</td>
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<td>Those Who Walk in Darkness</td>
<td>48th St.</td>
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<td>Page Mr. Cupid</td>
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<td>George M. Cohan</td>
<td>Sept. 2</td>
<td>103 Performances. Brief tryouts in 1919 and 1923 as Find the Woman</td>
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<td>With Rodgers and Hart</td>
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<td>1930</td>
<td><em>The Wife's Away</em></td>
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<td><em>Arm of the Law</em></td>
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<td><em>Spring Freshet</em></td>
<td>Plymouth</td>
<td>Oct. 4</td>
<td>12 Performances</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1934</td>
<td><em>Forever</em></td>
<td>Not produced</td>
<td></td>
<td><strong>Not produced</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><em>Back Again</em></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td><strong>Not produced</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td><strong>Written with O. Harback</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1935</td>
<td><em>Ten Mile Shanty</em></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td><strong>No production verified</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1936</td>
<td><em>Ethan Frome</em></td>
<td>National</td>
<td>Jan. 21</td>
<td>120 Performances. Written with Donald Davis.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Year</td>
<td>Play</td>
<td>Theatre</td>
<td>First Performance</td>
<td>Remarks</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>------</td>
<td>-----------------------------</td>
<td>--------------------------</td>
<td>-------------------</td>
<td>--------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1936</td>
<td>Starlight, Starbright</td>
<td>Lakewood (Skowhegan, Me.)</td>
<td>Aug. 10</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Mr. Tutt Comes Home</td>
<td>Not produced</td>
<td></td>
<td>Written with A. Train</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Beginners Luck</td>
<td>Not produced</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Yippi</td>
<td>Not produced</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>1937</td>
<td>Two Time Mary</td>
<td>Lakewood (Skowhegan, Me.)</td>
<td>Aug. 2</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Virginia</td>
<td>Center</td>
<td>Sept. 2</td>
<td>60 Performances</td>
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<td>1938</td>
<td>Let's Never Change</td>
<td>Lakewood (Skowhegan, Me.)</td>
<td>July 25</td>
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<td>1939</td>
<td>Indian Summer</td>
<td>Lakewood (Skowhegan, Me.)</td>
<td>July 24</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Love and All That</td>
<td>Lakewood (Skowhegan, Me.)</td>
<td>Aug. 16</td>
<td>Original title: Love and the Social Cause</td>
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<tr>
<td>1941</td>
<td>Mr. and Mrs. North</td>
<td>Belasco</td>
<td>Jan. 12</td>
<td>163 Performances</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Family Honeymoon</td>
<td>Lakewood (Skowhegan, Me.)</td>
<td>July 14</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>1942</td>
<td>Whistle Stop</td>
<td>Not produced</td>
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<td>1943</td>
<td>The Snark Was a Boojum</td>
<td>48th St.</td>
<td>Sept. 1</td>
<td>5 Performances</td>
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<tr>
<td>Year</td>
<td>Play</td>
<td>Theatre</td>
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<td>Remarks</td>
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<td>------</td>
<td>-----------------------</td>
<td>-------------</td>
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<tr>
<td>1943</td>
<td>Three Day Pass</td>
<td>Not produced</td>
<td></td>
<td>One-Act</td>
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<tr>
<td>1946</td>
<td>All Blood Is Red</td>
<td>Not produced</td>
<td></td>
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<td>1947</td>
<td>No Pockets in Shrouds</td>
<td>Not produced</td>
<td></td>
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________. "Jezebel." Unpublished typescript, Theatre Collection at Lincoln Center, 1933.

________. "The Lighthouse by the Sea." Unpublished typescript, Theatre Collection at Lincoln Center, 1903.


________. "No Way Out." Unpublished typescript, Theatre Collection at Lincoln Center, 1944. This script is also titled "A Perfect Crime."

________. "A Race Across the Continent." Unpublished typescript, Theatre Collection at Lincoln Center, 1907.

________. "Ruled Off the Turf." Unpublished typescript, Theatre Collection at Lincoln Center, 1906.


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Middleton, George. *Owen Davis.* A memorial pamphlet published by The Dramatists Guild of The Author's League of America, 1956.
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