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A HISTORY AND EVALUATION OF THE NEW DRAMATISTS COMMITTEE.

The Ohio State University, Ph.D., 1971
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A HISTORY AND EVALUATION OF
THE NEW DRAMATISTS COMMITTEE

DISSERTATION

Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for
the Degree Doctor of Philosophy in the Graduate
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By
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1971

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In 1949 Michaela O'Harr a was an aspiring young playwright and like many young writers she had a problem—she was hungry. Her talent was generally unrecognized and her plays were not being produced on Broadway. Michaela thought she had a solution to that problem, however, so on the evening of Tuesday, March 29, she walked crosstown to the Empire Theatre on Broadway and Fortieth Street to meet with Howard Lindsay in his dressing room as he applied his makeup for the evening's performance. (The date is easy to fix for Miss O'Harr a recalls Mr. Lindsay telling her it was his birthday.) From this meeting would develop the plans for establishment of the New Dramatists.

At the time of their meeting Howard Lindsay was sixty and playing in Life With Mother. He had his crowning achievements as a writer behind him. It had been almost ten years before that Lindsay had sat in this same dressing room before the opening of Life With Father, a show that he had co-adapted with Russel Crouse, which in the interim had become the longest running play in the history of the American theatre.

Within a few blocks of the Empire Theatre that night in 1949 the marquees were advertising such shows as A Streetcar Named Desire,
Mister Roberts, Ann of a Thousand Days, Born Yesterday, Kiss Me Kate, Where's Charley?, They Knew What They Wanted, The Silver Whistle, and South Pacific. Noticeably absent as far as Miss O'Harra was concerned was her own play Honor Bright for which she had held high hopes a few years before.

Like so many others Michaela had written a play that almost turned the corner to Broadway. She had thought Honor Bright, a play about a small high school, would be a hit. After all, it was produced out of town by the Shuberts and it received favorable notices. But the play closed short of Broadway. Disgruntled at having been burned so badly by her first play Miss O'Harra gave up her theatrical ambitions, at least temporarily, for a more stable job as a journalist. Originally a Californian, she returned to the Coast and accepted a position on a newspaper. From journalist she moved to a job in the editorial department at Paramount reading scripts for motion pictures. Then followed a few years as Michael Todd's play and story editor. When she went to work for Todd he had four plays running on Broadway in addition to his involvement in films. Michaela spent her time searching for play and film material for him all the while meeting and working with young writers. When she had returned from the West Coast in 1946 she had had hopes of meeting the "right" people, the people who would help her develop her writing talents. But by 1949 she had been in New York for three years without a job in the theatre and all she was meeting were other young writers who were hoping to meet the "right" people. "I came to know not only my own problems
at this particular stage of development but the fact that everyone else at the same stage had more or less the same problems and I began to think that something could be done."¹ This desire to do something concrete to help new playwrights made Michaela O'Harra unique among the young writers and led her to the meeting with Howard Lindsay.

Several weeks prior to this meeting with Mr. Lindsay Michaela had written him a rather lengthy letter outlining in great detail various things which she thought could be done to encourage young playwrights. Her letter was so meticulous and detailed in fact that Lindsay later described it as "designed to do everything just short of how to achieve world peace."²

But why was it Lindsay to whom she had turned? Why not some official agency? First, Howard Lindsay had long been regarded as one of the kindest, most helpful men in the theatre always open to appeals from the have-nots, a friend of all theatrical underdogs, or as Lindsay himself put it, "I'm a sucker for young people."³ It was no secret among those in the theatre world that Lindsay was one of the most generous men in the business when it came to giving of his time and talents.

The second and perhaps more immediate reason that Miss O'Harra sought out Lindsay was the result of Lindsay's attendance at an earlier

¹Interview with Michaela O'Harra, March 21, 1967.
³Interview with Howard Lindsay, March 22, 1967.
meeting of the Dramatists Guild of which Michaela was a member.
The Guild, as a branch of the Authors League of America, Inc., had for more than twenty years been involved with the fight to define, obtain, and protect the legal rights of the dramatists but for those twenty plus years it had avoided sponsoring any direct support for those striving to learn their craft. Miss O'Harrá, never one to be shy about expressing her opinions, had often complained to the Guild that they were not doing enough to aid the young playwright.

The Guild's attitude had been that the problem of establishing an effective program to aid the beginning playwright was just too complex for their organization to handle. "After all," quips Miss O'Harra, "anyone can be a member--whether they can write a play or not." The Guild at that time counted some three-hundred "writers" as members and just how could they select a workable group from that number? "This was the perennial question before the Guild," she complained.

Ultimately, partly due to Miss O'Harrá's insistence, outgoing President Robert Sherwood appointed a committee of about six of the younger playwrights in the Guild. This committee, Michaela O'Harrá among them, was to explore the possibility of the Guild's working out a concrete assistance program for beginning playwrights. "We had endless discussions," recalled Miss O'Harrá, "and finally came up with

4Interview.
5Ibid.
some ideas that we felt could be done, such as getting people into theatres so that they saw more plays, and arranging meetings with the more established playwrights.\textsuperscript{6}

Later, at a large meeting for the entire Guild membership at the Adelphi Theatre, Miss O'Harra speaking for the committee presented the ideas. Her recollections of this meeting are still a little vitriolic.

As is usual at this sort of meeting, all the crackpots rise up and have their say and nobody else ever gets a chance to say anything. This is inevitable. This is one of the reasons why the Guild had never attempted to do anything for the new playwrights. It's always a question of "Who is the New Playwright? How can you do anything about him? Any playwright at any stage of development?" The usual belief is that nothing can be done, that you are born with the ability or not born with the ability, and if you are, you are going to get to the top sooner or later regardless of the difficulties. And if you fall by the wayside, then it's an inherent lack of ability.\textsuperscript{7}

Michaela's accumulation of humiliations, frustrations, and concern finally boiled over that night at the Adelphi Theatre gathering. She accused the assembled membership of hedging in its responsibilities. She argued strongly that the Guild had a moral and professional duty to improve the conditions of the fledgling dramatists. For the Guild this was not a new criticism, nor was it a particularly easy one to discuss constructively. For years the group had been beset with the same problem and had responded with "what actually could the Guild do?"

\textsuperscript{6}Ibid.
\textsuperscript{7}Ibid.
"The room reeked with crackpot ideas," continues Miss O'Harra, "but out of the corner of my eye, I saw Howard Lindsay standing at the side of the room listening to all that was going on." It was an unusually vocal meeting for the Guild with Miss O'Harra leading the histrionics. She reflects:

I was impressed that day, that there were four or five elderly Guild members. I don't remember who else was on the platform except that Howard Lindsay was one of them. And for years after that, whenever I remembered this whole episode, I remembered that Howard sort of came out and, well if you've met him, you'll see that his appearance is rather stern and he speaks rather quickly and gives the impression that he's "Father" a good deal. I remembered him standing at the footlights peering down through his glasses at all those people talking and trying to listen to all of them and trying to cope with the questions that were raised, and they were all idiots—all of them.

This rather sympathetic impression of Lindsay was the only thing concrete that Michaela O'Harra received from this meeting of the Guild. This impression, however, remained with Michaela in 1949 and inspired her to go to Lindsay rather than some existing organization or agency for help in instituting her plans.

B. THE COMPLAINTS OF THE PLAYWRIGHTS

During the days immediately following this upheaval at the Guild Miss O'Harra was busy exchanging ideas with several other young writers—Theodore Apstein, Arnold Sundgaard, and Robert Anderson

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9Interview.
among them—all of whom became early members of the New Dramatists Committee. These writers found themselves with essentially the same problems and they were all willing to discuss possible remedies with this most ambitious and persistent young colleague.

Among the chief frustrations of the writers were the popular beliefs among critics, theatre people and the public that the country was no longer producing good playwrights—and the resignation with which everyone, dramatists included, seemed to accept that fact.

At Michaela O'Harra's "gripe sessions" the writers' complaints were centered around the seemingly universal query, "What in the hell am I knocking myself out for? Nobody cares!" This complaint led to one of Michaela O'Harra's primary ideas—anything that might be done to help alleviate the loneliness of the playwright's profession and give the young writer at least a semblance of a sense of identity would be to the writer's benefit. As Paddy Chayefsky, one of the early young writers in the New Dramatists, reflects:

Young writers must have this identity—of being young writers—for the young writer's theatrical image is a sketchy one at best. His actual contacts with the theatre are made through fitful acquaintances. He knows several actors and one or two actors' bars, an assistant stage manager whom he can visit backstage on occasion. Now and then, he gets a letter from an agent's secretary, has lunch with a not-very-well-known producer who is considering doing his play. He has an occasional lunch with his agent, and perhaps some established person in the theatre has taken an interest in him and takes him for a drink once or twice a year at the Plaza or Sardi's. This is the substance, really, of the young playwright's participation in the theatre, the acknowledgement of his identity. The young writer makes an
insubstantial figure—at least I did when I was a younger writer.  

There is little doubt that these dramatists felt estranged from the Broadway establishment and yet their objective was to become a part of that establishment. Audry Wood, agent and fairy godmother to a number of Broadway's leading playwrights, expressed concern about writers as yet unknown well remembering that it took seven years of encouragement and hard work to get Tennessee Williams to Broadway for the first time in 1945 with *The Glass Menagerie*. "The hardest thing is to keep people working when they are not produced, when you have to get up every morning and hit that typewriter, everything has to be done to help you."  

Another popular idea which these writer's considered patently foolish was the notion that playwriting talent could not be learned—it had to be born into a person. These young neophytes were well aware that there were vast though often subtle differences in writing for the stage and any other medium. The dramatist's work is meant to be performed and seen, they thought, but most likely it never would be unless the playwright knew the advantages and limitations of the stage for which he was writing. A playwright simply could not write in a void. Mastering the art and the mechanics of writing for the stage was a complicated business and a business that could be learned

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10 Paddy Chayefsky, untitled talk dated 1961, from the archives of the New Dramatists Committee.

in no better place than the confines of the theatre itself. This idea, that a program for beginning dramatists should operate within the existing bounds of the established professional Broadway theatre, became one of the major differences between the structure of the New Dramatists Committee and the format of most of the other existing groups to aid playwrights.

Another problem which Miss O'Harrra and her friends were constantly reminded of during these sessions was that although would-be playwrights should see as many plays as possible Broadway shows were expensive and novice playwrights were seldom wealthy if solvent. Seeing a lot of plays, they reasoned, would increase their working knowledge of the theatre, and seeing them on invitation of the producers would boost the writers' morale without hurting their pocketbooks. A play attendance program they agreed should be something to work towards.

But perhaps the biggest thorn in the side of the newcomer discussed by this group was, that unlike other literary artists the playwright must not only create a good product but he must also work as an integral member of a team in getting that product marketed. Mary K. Frank, successful Broadway producer (and president of the New Dramatists from 1961 to 1969), emphasizes that a play is never finished until the curtain goes up so that the playwright must function in a total set-up as part of a triumvirate of producer, director, and playwright.12 But these unproduced dramatists with Michaela O'Harrra

12Interview with Mary K. Frank, October 7, 1969.
did not know the lines of communication in the Broadway theatre.

When one of their plays was optioned, as had been the case with Miss O'Harra, the writers weren't familiar enough with the work of directors, actors, or designers suggested by the producer to know who had what capabilities or experience.

The thing that strongly irked Miss O'Harra was the fact that while producers, critics, agents, and theatre owners then as now were asking, "Where are the new playwrights?" no one would stand still for an introduction. Should some new playwright present himself script in hand as a possible answer to the problem of new blood, he would probably be met with bored disdain, if not outright hostility, by a magisterial receptionist. If, by some freak of nepotism, chance, or mistaken identity, he was permitted to leave his precious manuscript behind him, he could be sure that he had seen the last of the masterpiece for at least six months if not for eternity. More likely, however, he would be stopped at the switchboard. Even people like Miss O'Harra, who had achieved a certain measure of professional status as a playreader, story editor, and author of a produced play, found it next to impossible to break past the receptionist's desk. She comments:

The theatre treats the newcomer, the possibly talented individual trying to break in, in the most scurrilous way possible. Producers are completely dependent on scripts for their professional life, yet the unknown playwright is treated the most cruelly of all. When he does manage to plant a script in some office, it is gone for literally what may be years. When he does get it back, it will most likely have pages rumpled and torn, coffee stains spread like Rorschach blots across it, enigmatic doodles blackening its covers. If there is any covering note sent with the script it
will be a curt and hypocritical, "Thank You," or more often, there is no comment at all. It is the most humiliating experience in the world.  

Perhaps a few years earlier there had been many places where young playwrights hoping to have a hearing could go with their plays. The economy of the theatre had once been such that Broadway producers and stock companies would gamble on good scripts. But the theatre of the post-Second-World-War era was experiencing the bind of skyrocketing production costs to the extent that Broadway producers were forced to look for the safest thing that they could do—a hit or bust situation.

Frank Duane sums up the major problems of the beginning playwright this way:

For the playwright there is no area between "out" and "in." There are no half measures. There is no way of starting out as a walk-on. You have either achieved that executive capacity inherent in being the author of a show that's being done, or you're nowhere. You don't "work your way up," meeting people, making contacts, learning simple little gossipy facts about the business along the way in the manner of an actor. In theory you jump from one side of the void to the other. But nine times out of ten, the jump is too long. The void can't be sprung across, it can only be bridged.

C. "A PLAN FOR PLAYWRIGHTS"

So it was that Miss O'Hara approached Howard Lindsay on that evening in March in 1949 with a series of suggestions as to how that chasm between being an apprentice playwright and being a produced

\[13\text{Keating, loc. cit.}\]
\[14\text{Ibid., p. 17.}\]
playwright might be bridged. They sat in his dressing room for some time—the bright, slightly disillusioned young writer with an entire catalogue of problems and a handful of solutions and the veteran theatre dramatist, actor, and producer at the peak of his popularity. Howard Lindsay had already written several Broadway successes; she would never write her first. There was nothing to tell Lindsay that he had to listen, but he did. He was genuinely concerned with the fate of America's theatre and realized fully that the future of that institution depended upon the continuous emergence of maturing new playwrights. There can be no rich, vibrant theatre without a supply of rich, vibrant playwrights who know their craft.

With her Miss O'Harra had several typewritten pages labeled "A Plan for Playwrights." Most of the ideas in the plan were her own. Some of the concepts had come from her discussions with other young playwrights, primarily Robert Anderson. Anderson had one play (Come Marching Home) already produced in a small off-Broadway theatre, but more significantly he was teaching a course in playwriting at the American Theatre Wing.

During the War the Theatre Wing had established a series of Stage Door Canteens where professional actresses would come in and dance and serve coffee to the soldiers. At the conclusion of the War there was a desire to continue and as a result the American Theatre Wing established a Professional Training Program to retrain
returning theatre people. This type of veteran training program was being established by most of the trade unions—carpenters, plumbers, etc. An all-star cast was lined up to teach the courses. Alfred Lunt was enlisted to teach acting, Lee Strasberg consented to teach directing, and the then-unknown Robert Anderson became the playwriting teacher.

Anderson was hesitant when first approached by the Wing but he had been a teacher and he was a playwright so he consented to set up a course in which he lectured part of the time and brought in guests part of the time. People like Arthur Miller, Moss Hart, Elia Kazan, Tennessee Williams, Joshua Logan, and Howard Lindsay were brought in to lecture. Actors like Harry Belafonte, Eileen Heckert, and Lou Gilbert came to the classes and read the plays of the students aloud and Anderson rounded up tickets for the class to see the top Broadway plays free.

Michaela O'Hara knew about this class and discussed it in detail with Anderson. She believed that this type of program would work on a larger scale and could be made available to writers other than just veterans. Also, Anderson had reinforced her feelings about Lindsay: "Howard Lindsay has been the most faithful of all the lecturers," he informed her, "and he will come to talk if I have a blank space, or if someone else has disappointed us Howard will come."15

The plan she presented to Lindsay then was based in part upon these courses as taught by Robert Anderson as well as from the seminars at the Theatre Inc. which Theodore Apstein and Arnold Sundgaard had organized. Much of the plan, however, came from Michaela's own observations and convictions. "Young playwrights," she told Lindsay, "can so quickly grow cynical in this business and let cynicism lead to sterility. I believe that new playwrights can be inspired to turn out more and better plays if they receive a morale booster in the form of counsel and encouragement from successful craftsmen." ¹⁶

Her plan, supported by a proliferation of details, called for a five-point program:

1) Free tickets to Broadway productions, run-throughs and dress rehearsals. Her thinking was that whereas the embryo novelist is able to steep himself in the literature of the past and present at little or no cost to himself simply by joining a library the young dramatist has to come up with several dollars every time he wishes to see a play performed. Since it appeared to her that the great majority of young playwrights were hard-pressed for funds they would see very few produced plays and those that they did see would in all probability be ones that had been "haloed" by critical and popular success. She and most of her young playwright friends agreed that it was just as important, if not more so in some cases,

¹⁶Letter to Howard Lindsay, March, 1949.
to see the plays that didn't succeed. A program that would allow the new dramatists to see and study the majority of a season's offerings was essential.

2) Craft discussions. Of all the complaints echoed by Miss O'Hara and her friends the theme of loneliness perhaps rang the loudest. They felt themselves helpless amateurs cut off from any real contact with the field they are attempting to enter. "Like a domestic, with no recommendations, one has no affidavits,"17 New Dramatists James Goldman phrases it. The craft discussions program would bridge the gap Miss O'Hara felt, by letting the New Dramatists group under most informal conditions meet established playwrights, directors, designers, and other theatre craftsmen who would talk to them of practical matters and conditions in the theatre.

3) Production observations. Even though she was aware of the practical problems of this plan Miss O'Hara felt that it would be an invaluable aid to the young dramatist if he were able to observe, from start to finish, a Broadway creation. He would work closely with the director, the producer and the author, studying audience reaction, empathizing through the sweaty business of revisions. The writer would have a chance to become, in the words of Joe Masteroff who survived two such emersions, "vicariously, at least, an old-timer."18

17Keating, loc. cit., p. 20.
18Ibid., p. 65.
4) Sounding panels. These were meetings at which the aspiring playwright could hear a reading of his play by a cast of colleagues and then listen to his presumptively constructive peers as they discussed, analyzed, criticized, dissected, and evaluated it—often a harsh and harrowing experience no doubt, but assuredly a valuable one.

5) Rehearsed readings by Equity actors working with a professional director. This was not to be quite a production but rather the closest thing to a production, an opportunity for the young playwright to learn what his play would sound like "on its feet," and how an audience—sometimes a small closed group of friends and colleagues, sometimes a larger, general audience—would react to it.

This was the plan that Michaela O'Hara had worked out and presented to Howard Lindsay. With it she had included ideas on how members would be selected, how money might be found, etc. Her reasoning appeared sound, her complaints valid, and her suggestions workable. Lindsay listened at great length to her plan while he carefully applied his make-up for that night's performance. But he was a man with considerable intelligence and a man who would not rush into something like this without first thinking it through carefully.

The problems and complaints Miss O'Hara expounded certainly were not new to Lindsay. He later recalled that his first reaction
was to think of the myriad other programs which had been developed over the past few decades with the expressed purpose of assisting the beginning playwright in one way or another. Lindsay had been associated with the theatre for over thirty years and in that time had witnessed a great many plans for assistance to playwrights succumb to an assortment of ailments. Some of the plans, however, were still operating in 1949 as they are today. How would the program proposed by Michaela O'Hara differ from or supplant those already in operation? How would this plan have impact on the American Theatre? "It was so inclusive," recalled Lindsay, "I did not give it, as a whole, serious consideration." However, the obstinancy of this young would-be playwright with all the ideas was something Lindsay had not counted on. Out of this meeting came an organization which playwright James Goldman has called "The single most important source of growth and development that our theatre has today"—the New Dramatists Committee.

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20 Keating, loc. cit., p. 17.
CHAPTER II

THE SETTING

Granted that more grade school kids would rather be policemen than playwrights, there is, nevertheless, no shortage of those who aspire to the dramatist's profession. O. Henry was fond of saying, "Ask any stranger in the city how his second act is—and he'll tell you." If the American theatre can be attacked for a scarcity of great playwriting talent, there is little reason to claim that no one wants to write for the stage. Certainly, Michaela O'Harra did and she knew a score of others in the same position. The problem at the time Miss O'Harra was meeting with Howard Lindsay was not inspiring the creative artist to write for the stage, but rather finding a stage to test the creative product. From the peak years in 1929-30 when 233 shows were produced on Broadway, the number of productions decreased to ninety-one in 1939-40, and to fifty-seven in 1950. Today the number is below fifty.\(^1\) This great shift in the number of productions occurred after 1930. The theatre, at least the professional New York theatre, never really recovered from the twin blows of the Depression and the advent of the talking movies.

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\(^1\)Barrie Stavis, "Career: Broadway or the United States?" Drama Survey, IV, No. 1 (1965), p. 87.
Michaela and the other young playwrights were faced with a continually shrinking market. Fewer productions each year meant fewer playwrights needed. Coincidentally, scores of Broadway houses during this period were converted into movie theatres, or TV studios, or were torn down to make room for office buildings or parking lots.

During the decades immediately preceding the formation of the New Dramatists Committee a number of different projects, concepts, and organizations were devised to assist the theatre in one form or another. They were addressed to a variety of problems, some with the expressed idea of helping create a more favorable context in which the playwright could operate. Others benefited the playwright by less direct means.

A. 1920'S: THE PEAK YEARS

The 1920's, the years in which Howard Lindsay began his career as a writer, saw such playwrights as Eugene O'Neill, Owen Davis, Sidney Howard, George Kelly, Paul Green, and Elmer Rice establish themselves successfully in America's theatre. Compared with the years to follow the playwright in the twenties was well off. The American people were going to the theatre in record numbers which meant, of course, an abundance of opportunities for the playwright.

The era was rich in cooperative ventures, several with a particular interest to the dramatist. The Actors Theatre, created
in 1922, was an outgrowth of the actors' union, Equity. Although Actors Theatre survived for only three seasons, it did succeed in establishing high standards for new plays. During its initial season it produced ten plays including the first professional play by John Howard Lawson. Not content with its formal productions the Actors Theatre turned to presenting special matinees devoted entirely to experimental works, most by new authors.

Two other groups which developed in the twenties as an aid to the playwright were the Dramatists Theatre (later called the New Playwrights Company) formed in 1927 by John Howard Lawson, Michael Gold, Francis Farragoh, Em Jo Basshe, and John Dos Passos and the American Laboratory Theatre. The Dramatists Theatre, which was backed by the wealthy banker and capitalist Otto H. Kahn, dedicated itself to finding and producing new plays of social comment with a leftist viewpoint. Among the new plays which it produced in its short lifetime were *The Moon is a Gong* by John Dos Passos, *Fiesta* by Michael Gold, Upton Sinclair's *Singing Jailbirds*, and John Howard Lawson's *Loud Speaker*. As a producing group Dramatists Theatre gravitated strongly towards a role as spokesman for labor, the foreigner, and the Negro, while denouncing the dehumanization of workers on assembly lines and the shoddiness of an America dominated by slogans of "prosperity." As an outlet for the new playwright Dramatists Theatre courted only those who felt at home with the members' particular ideology. Disbanding in 1930 it was to become the direct forerunner of the powerful Theatre
Union of the thirties.

The second group, the American Laboratory Theatre, did not limit themselves to native plays. They also looked for and produced foreign plays that were not attempted by anyone else. Among their new productions was an early drama of poetic intent by Lynn Riggs, *Big Lake*.

One of the most significant developments during this period was the dramatic activity of the Labor movement which consisted largely of immigrant tradesmen whose language kept them from participating in the mainstream of American life. From this group came the Workers Drama League. Founded in 1929 its basic philosophy was to concern itself with the problems of the workers themselves rather than merely presenting stock plays that were remote from the workers' situation. Although the organization lasted only two years, it succeeded in creating an outlet for and encouraged the writing of a series of plays with their particular ideological bent.

It was during the twenties too that James L. Ford wrote an article expressing what would eventually become almost the philosophy of the New Dramatists Committee. Howard Lindsay would often remark that what was of prime importance insofar as the

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group was concerned was to produce repeating playwrights. Ford commented that once in a while a playwright

as likely to be an elevator boy as a college professor—hits upon a theme suited to the theater, works it out, perhaps with the assistance of a manager or actor, and secures a production that yields a comfortable sum of royalties.

These accidental successes, as they may be termed, do much to fill our theaters but it is seldom that an author is able to repeat the triumph. His usual course is to withdraw from all previous pursuits and devote himself to the writing of plays, two or three of which he is likely to have in his desk, with others in his mind. It needs but three or four fortunate productions in succession to enable him to emerge from the muck into a proud position as a dramatist with a living at his fingers' end. Otherwise, he remains a one-play man, with nothing before him but disillusionment and a wasted career. Among all those who fill the sidewalks of Broadway there is no more pathetic figure than that of the author of one successful play and nothing more.  

B. 1930'S: THE DEPRESSION AND THE TALKIES

Although the twenties were among the most prolific years for plays and playwrights, the cause for joy ended with the stock market crash of 1929. By the second half of the 1929-1930 season producers all along Broadway were announcing cutbacks in the number of new productions as their audience was shrinking almost daily.

At about this same time another occurrence was having a profound effect upon the future of the playwright. With the advent of the talking pictures Hollywood producing companies entered into a great competitive scramble which included the buying up of legitimate theatre playwrights. Scores of writers

were moving West to crank out screenplays to keep pace with a continually escalating demand for the talkies. In one respect the western migration of established writers would seem to open the door for the serious new playwright, but the concurrent strong cutback in the number of stage productions virtually eliminated any advantage to the scores of young playwrights trying to gain a foothold in the American theatre.

The serious playwright wishing to remain in the legitimate theatre faced increasing problems in developing his talents. Edith J. R. Isaacs commented, "In whole sections of the country today the playwright is the forgotten man. There is the motion picture on one side, the living actor on the other--but not the living playwright."^5

This became an acute issue for the theatre. Edith Isaacs continues:

Plays are the property of the playwright. They are what he lives by. If playwrights are to be encouraged to stay in the field of the theatre instead of departing for Hollywood and its by-ways, the best thing every friend of the theatre can do is encourage the profitable sale and production of good plays, not only on Broadway--for a few months' run--but in many places for a time as long as the play has vitality enough to make anybody pay for the opportunity of presenting it. That seems clear and obvious. Yet today, except for the work of pure genius which neither man or time can kill, the

length of a play's life is determined, largely, not by its worth but by the conditions of the contract governing its initial sale to a Broadway producer, to the movies, stock, and so forth.°

1. Theatre of Public Education

During the thirties there was a tendency to make the theatre an instrument of public education. As the intellectual tone of the times moved left of center, at least morally if not politically, so too did the theatre.

Typical of this trend was the workers' movement. In 1930, in order to reach the growing labor audience and in order to stimulate the growth of a large-scale workers' theatre movement, two amateur New York dramatic groups independently reviewed their methods.

One group, the German-speaking Prolet-Buehne, gave performances of a new, chanted type of play which they termed "agitprop" theatre. Members of the group would appear at labor meetings and rallies and in simple symbolic costumes they would perform their short didactic pieces. These were artistically primitive militant labor plays written or adapted by Prolet-Buehne members in the agitprop style.

At about the same time, the Workers Laboratory Theatre of New York was beginning a program closely resembling that of the

6Ibid., p. 343.
Prolet-Buehne in the simplicity and adaptability of staging short propagandistic plays written by its own members. Though lacking the rhythmic element of the pure "agitprop" form, these plays were aimed at achieving a pertinency for the labor audience. Moreover, the official organ of the movement, New Theatre, played a part in stimulating the writing of new social plays. The journal frequently printed complete short plays or selections from longer ones and initiated a series of contests for short social plays, the first of which was won by Clifford Odets' Waiting for Lefty. The magazine also sponsored a series of "New Theatre Nights"—special Sunday evening performances of what the movement considered an interesting new work which might otherwise not get an airing. Waiting for Lefty earned its pre-Broadway reputation at one of these special showings.

Numerous other producing organizations such as the Group Theatre and the Theatre Union developed during the thirties. With their sights set on producing plays dealing with important contemporary social themes, they lent a certain amount of impetus to the creativity of playwrights who otherwise would have had no vehicle for their works. These groups were welcome vitamins for a wilted market.

Perhaps the most influential of these production companies was the Group Theatre established in the summer of 1931 with a

membership of thirty-one—Lee Strasberg, Harold Clurman and Cheryl Crawford serving as directors. The Theatre Guild offered the initial support as it offered the Group its blessing plus a small capital 'fund and the rights to Paul Green's The House of Connelly for their first production. The Group Theatre was essentially an organization of actors and directors formed with the aims of creating a permanent acting company to maintain regular New York seasons. As Clurman stated: "We did not want backing for shows. We wanted our theatre to be supported. We did not propose to put on a series of single productions, but to build a theatre; develop actors, playwrights, scene-designers, directors."9

Although the Group Theatre's main concentration was on the actor's development, Clifford Odets arose from within its ranks and was encouraged when his playwriting talents were discovered. The Group also introduced Irwin Shaw, William Saroyan, and produced three of Robert Ardrey's plays. With the emphasis on making a theatre unit, Clurman wrote that:

... all distinction was to be embodied in the production as a whole. The writer himself was to be no star either, for his play, the focus of our attention, was simply the instrument for capturing an idea that was always greater than the instrument itself. The playwright too could be worked with, the power of his play could be enhanced by the joint creativity of the theatrical group as a whole, which saw in the play a vehicle to convey a motif fundamental to the theatre's main interest.10


10Ibid., p. 35.
However, most of the Group's prominent members, e.g., Stella and Luther Adler, Boris Aronson, Lee Cobb, Morris Carnovsky, John Garfield, Elia Kazan, Mordecai Gorelik, Robert Lewis, and Franchot Tone, were not of the playwriting ranks.

Of the countless theatre groups which developed during this century, it is the exceptional one indeed which survived more than a few seasons (the New Dramatists Committee being a major exception). The Group Theatre, although one of the most significant of these theatre experiments, only survived with intermittent success until 1939. When films and other more remunerative activities scattered its members the Group Theatre never formally reorganized. During its lifetime, however, it had served as a model for the more politically oriented "workers' theatres"—Theatre Union, Theatre Collective, The Theatre of Action.

By 1935 the economic situation was such that the Federal Theatre Project, a Works Progress Administration project, was set up to provide employment to theatre personnel. Five large units of the Federal Theatre were formed: the Living Newspaper, sponsored by the New York Newspaper Guild; the Negro Theatre; the try-out theatre, sponsored by the League of New York Theatres; the popular price theatre to present original plays by new authors; and the experimental theatre, for new plays and new manners of production.

The Federal Theatre was at least one new outlet for the playwright and several younger dramatists took advantage of its
existence. Before it was through the Federal Theatre had produced some seventy-seven new plays which were all performed in more than one city, including \textit{It Can't Happen Here} in twenty-five cities; \textit{Help Yourself} in twenty; \textit{Class of '29} in twelve; \textit{Chalk Dust} in eleven; \textit{Prologue to Glory} in eight; \textit{Pinocchio} in seven. Writers such as Orson Welles, St. John Ervine, Sean O'Casey, Stanley Young, Sinclair Lewis, George Sklar, Thornton Wilder, and Barrie Stavis had plays—new plays—produced by the Federal Theatre.\textsuperscript{11}

To Hallie Flanagan, in charge of the program, the Federal Theatre was a playwright's theatre. During a discussion on policy Francis Bosworth declared that the dramatist was the only important figure in the future of the Federal Theatre. Virgil Geddes then voiced the need for a playwright's theatre to which Hallie Flanagan replied, "What is the Federal Theatre if it isn't a playwright's theatre? Every one of our companies is clamoring for scripts."\textsuperscript{12}

However, by 1937, the political pressures had reached such proportions that the Federal Theatre was omitted from Congressional appropriations and dissolved. With its demise went what promised to be a major channel for the works of young playwrights.

Another project created by an Act of Congress was the \textit{ANTA} (American National Theatre and Academy) Experimental Theatre


\textsuperscript{12}\textit{Ibid.}, p. 196.
begun in 1935. In Michaela O'Hara's estimation it was never any real value to playwrights. "They did things here and there, but always on a spotty basis." Shortlived, it was soon overshadowed by the Federal Theatre Project.

In still one more governmental attempt in 1937 Robert Sherwood was appointed to an Advisory Committee which embraced playwrights and actors and offered a plan for a National People's Theatre to tour classics and outstanding modern plays, but the project was never realized.

2. Playwrights' Company

During these years playwrights would frequently write for a while in their own producing association, usually on the strengths of some common message or cause to which the regular channels of the theatre appeared closed. One of the most successful of this type of organization of playwrights was the Playwrights' Company. It was formed in 1938 by Maxwell Anderson, S. N. Behrman, Sidney Howard, Robert E. Sherwood, and Elmer Rice who believed that they possessed sufficient experience in the theatre to enable them to manage the productions of their own plays. All five playwrights were or became Pulitzer Prize winners. Later, Kurt Weil, Robert Anderson, and non-writers John Wharton and Roger L. Stevens became members. *(Robert Anderson, Wharton and Stevens later played an

13 Interview with Michaela O'Hara, March 21, 1967.
important role in the development of the New Dramatists Committee.)

Speaking of the concept behind the foundation of the Playwrights' Company Maxwell Anderson explained:

In this country a playwright has always been a bird of passage, selling his script where he could, or where his chances looked best. . . . Unless he produced his own play in daring isolation there was no office in which he could feel at home and his business arrangements were no less transient than the run of the play. . . . None of us wanted more money spent on his plays. But each of us wanted to be part of a company that thought more of the theatre than of immediate profit, and one which respected a writer's integrity quite as much as his ability to turn out successes. We wanted, too, to work with craftsmen whose work we respected, and whose advice was always worth considering because it came out of long experience in the craftsmanship of playwriting. We wanted, in essence, to create a local habitation pleasant enough to put an end to our migratory careers, and it seemed to us that fellow playwrights with common problems, common aims and common enthusiasms ought to be able to build a structure, even in that shifting cloud of achievement and disillusion known as the American theatre. 14

When one of the members felt that he had a script that was ready he submitted copies to the other members, a joint consultation was held, and a decision was made concerning a production. The counsel of his fellow playwrights during any revision and throughout production was always available to the playwright. The organization tried to create "an atmosphere in which the individual member could work freely and happily, and depend on the development of continuity and an increasingly efficient organization, equipped to provide him with the means of producing his play effectively." 15 By and large


their productions were well received critically.

Discussing the merits of the Company, Elmer Rice wrote:

These men were drawn together by their dissatisfaction with our anarchic theatre's failure to provide a continuity of professional relationships, and by the desire to avail themselves of each other's knowledge and experience in the solution of craft problems. In spite of the great dissimilarities in their backgrounds, philosophies and writings, they were united by the bands of mutual respect, enthusiasm for the art of the theatre, and a common desire to do the most honest and workmanlike job of which they were capable.16

However, although the members of the Company expressed a keen interest in developing the younger playwrights, they had difficulty in aligning them to the organization. Said Rice, "We watch eagerly for new playwrights, after all, we are not going to live forever. Yet, playable scripts are almost impossible to find. The age is too unsettled; young men cannot write for the stage under present conditions. We will have to wait."17 Six years later, Rice, who seems to have been the spokesman for the Company again complained:

...so far there has been no affiliation of younger writers with the Company itself, though the question has been often discussed. The chief deterrent has been, I think, the delicacy of the selective process, not only with respect to talent, but as to personality and the capacity of the individual to adjust himself to the give-and-take of cooperative enterprise. Yet, I am hopeful that these difficulties can be overcome and the Company will revitalize itself by an infusion of new blood.18

16Ibid.
17Beiswanger, loc. cit., p. 305. 18Rice, loc. cit.
Whatever its lack of appeal for the young aspiring writer, it is curious that almost at the same time Rice was voicing this lament the New Dramatists Committee was being born.

In one of its attempts to help the younger playwright, however, the Playwrights’ Company established the Sidney Howard Award (in memory of one of the founders who died in 1940). The award provided for a grant of $1500 to be made each year to a playwright without previous success, who produced what in the opinion of the members of the Company, was the best play of the year. When there was no general agreement no award was made; rather, on several occasions the money was given to organizations interested in advancing young writers.

Michaela O’Harra, ever alert to these details, was aware in 1949 that the Playwrights’ Company had not granted this award for the previous two years. This $3000 in the till was on her list of possible sources of funding for the New Dramatists that she presented to Lindsay in her original plan.

The entire capital of the Playwrights’ was required for its first two productions—Abe Lincoln in Illinois and Knickerbocker Holiday, but both productions were substantial financial successes and at the end of ten years the company was still solvent. While it did not stress money-making as its objective, the company, nevertheless, paid its own way as well as showing a profit.

While in the midst of plans for the second season of the company Sidney Howard met his accidental death. This cost the
group not only a dramatist but also perhaps their most theatre-wise member. Before the next year was up the War was on claiming an increasing amount of time and energy of the other playwrights.

Never being able to assure its continuity by the introduction of younger writers, the Playwrights' Company came to an end in 1960, not, however, before it indirectly aided many young playwrights through its support of the New Dramatists Committee.

C. 1940'S: THE WAR

During the years preceding the Second World War the drama reacted to the major events of the times by shifting its interests from the theme of private to that of public morality. By the forties the stage no longer fed on the manners and humors of the private ego but on the frustrations and ambitions of whole nations as well as of social groups and classes. Plays such as Desire Under the Elms, Craig's Wife, and The Silver Cord were characteristic of the twenties when the playwrights were concerned with the problem of personal relations and with the struggle of the individual to live his own life in the teeth of social taboos and family conventions. By the 1930's the significant concerns of the age were voiced by plays like Winterset, Awake and Sing and There Shall Be No Night which represented the fate of the individual in terms of the fate of society. The new morals of the theatre were the social morals. This was the trend which continued into the forties.

But these times were not considered by everyone to be conducive to quality in playwriting. Walter Eaton noted in 1941:
In all rich eras of the theatre, when the best plays were written, there was invariably a lively production of the backlog of prosperity. This was possible because in all such periods, including our own era of productivity, certain styles were set and accepted, certain themes were readily understood, certain emotional reactions could be relied upon from every audience to a given situation, and the lesser man could slide down the grooves of security and success. The grooves of custom have been broken to bits. The background of audience reaction is no longer to be relied upon. The well-tried themes which the lesser writers could handle because so many before them had ploughed the path are no longer practiced. No doubt the genius in any age will reach his audience, will make his audience understand and respond to whatever theme he feels deeply impelled to expound. But genius is a rare commodity always, and never more so than in the theatre. The ordinary dramatist today, so important to theatrical prosperity, is in a plight. He can no longer find the themes to raise that quick and sympathetic response from an audience which is the absolute necessity of acted drama. The themes this age offers him are too difficult or too bewildering for his grasp.19

With the coming of the War the playwright found himself confronted with new pressures and increased criticisms. George Jean Nathan decried the lack of love for the theatre:

The plain facts seem to be these. With small exception, our operating playwrights have utterly no pride in the theatre and, in the few cases where they have it, have not the competence to make it count. The great majority have no honorable respect for the theatre, and none for themselves. Like so many movie cuties, they are simply out to get a flashy fame and the collateral easy money and they are perfectly willing to surrender their virtue, such as it is, to the first plausible bidder. Outside of O'Neill, Sherwood, Behrman, Hellman, Anderson, Saroyan and maybe one or two others, the bulk of the men and women entrusted with supplying us with plays have none of them the integrity toward their job indicated by even a second-rate novelist, painter, composer, or ballet dancer. And even in instances where artistic integrity may exist a personal pretentiousness, a rank lack of skill in dramaturgical enterprise, or an inferior but vain mentality often invalidates good intention.20


As might be expected there was a noticeable lack of new plays being written during the War years. Commented J. H. Pollack:

The current world situation has afflicted American playwrights with stage fright. Even the handful safely ensconced in the Old Playwrights' Home and those (like O'Neill) wrapped in clerical arms have possibly been affected. Not long before Pearl Harbor, Robert Sherwood confessed, "I wish I could write a sparkling drawing room comedy, without a suggestion of international calamity or social significance or anything else of immediate importance." "Go ahead and write that comedy," a wise friend counselled, "and you'll find that international calamity and social significance right there in the drawing room." Small wonder that in a world of petrified forests Robert Sherwood prefers turning out overseas propaganda and collaborating on Presidential speeches to carpentering three-acters. 21

Those still writing plays often blacked out headline horror from their scripts. Many playwrights deserted the drama temporarily—they considered their typewriters less potent than hand grenades. Some, like Sidney Kingsley, were drafted while others enlisted. Irwin Shaw admitted: "I find it almost impossible to write now. I feel most writers feel the same way. It will be a boon to musicals and pretty girls and jugglers. I'm glad I won't be around Broadway to see the plays including two of my own" (he enlisted). 22

Perhaps the majority of America's most talented playwrights felt similarly. In an age when faiths, credos, ways of life were


22 Ibid., p. 4.
sharply challenged, the artist was as disturbed and distracted as the rest of his nation. As J. H. Pollack put it:

Why should an intelligent, conscientious playwright write plays nowadays? With a world going to pot, shall he rush to the typewriter to dash off that three-act epic? With a million Russian soldiers lying dead and many Americans possibly dying on a second and third front, shall he seek to enrich the American theatre with deathless poetry? With churches of all denominations being bombed mercilessly, shall he heroically proclaim that the theatre is sacred, an undefiled "religious" institution?23

Perhaps even a better question though, was for whom should he write?

... a capricious public whose tastes—now more than ever—whimsical, unpredictable? Broadway's mythical gold and glitter are hollow rewards for him today. Should he devote his evanescent leisure hours in creating a dramatic masterpiece and lean back to await the royalties? Broadway producers aren't exactly storming his apartment demanding production rights for his "smasharoos."

Furthermore, the Group Theatre was defunct, the ANTA Experimental Theatre had miscarried, and the Federal Theatre had been slain by a Congressional Axe.

Yet there must be playwrights who are writing plays today. The Mystery of Creation is perhaps easier to explain than why people write for the theatre. Some hacks would kill their grandmother for "good theatre;" while others think that the American Drama is advanced every time a laugh is gotten when the word "Brooklyn" is mentioned on a Broadway stage. Though often dormant for years, the playwriting bug has a way of erupting suddenly and without warning. Perhaps after the last march on to Berlin, the virus will re-appear and once again we will witness newer and more extravagant What Price Glories and Journey's Ends. Meanwhile . . .25

23 Ibid. 24 Ibid., p. 5. 25 Ibid., p. 6.
D. POST WAR: REBUILDING THE THEATRE

By the time the War was over the important playwrights of the pre-War theatre had virtually stopped producing effective material. O'Neill, Anderson, Rice, Sherwood, and Hellman never matched their previous output in quantity or quality. The theatre was just not getting plays.

The New York Theatre does not lack actors, directors or designers. Many of them are adequate. There is a fair number of good ones and a few who are excellent. But there are no plays worthy of their efforts; almost no plays to be on the safe side. Meanwhile all, or almost all, the theatres are occupied proving that the actors, directors and designers have an audience. Either the audience compromises in accepting the inferior play, or it simply lacks taste. In a measure both are true. The plays simply are not there.26

The theatre faced an ironic dilemma. The demand for scripts was strong, but the output lean. It became increasingly important to help the young O'Harras and Andersons whose technique might be weak but who showed a genuine talent for the theatre.

Edward Mabley, a playwriting instructor at the New School for Social Research, stated in 1946 that a survey undertaken a few years prior showed that there were over 40,000 manuscripts submitted annually to the various producers and play brokers in New York. Of these 40,000 only forty-five new dramatic plays were produced on Broadway.

Mr. Mabley questioned whether only one in 200 plays were worthy of staging. Twenty years prior, 218 new plays were produced

on Broadway (1926-1927), yet by 1946-1947, with far more new plays to choose from, Broadway absorbed less than one fourth of that number.

Let us assume, again conservatively, one in ten of these authors is, at least potentially, a genuine playwright. That's 15 playwrights a year, who might be the Andersons, Hellman, Wilders and Sherwoods of the next generation but who are denied the opportunity to develop. For one does not become a really first-rate playwright while seated at a desk, but working in a theatre. As a teacher of playwriting, I know more progress is made in a few weeks of rehearsals and performance than in months of classroom work.  

The 1940's saw a great many projects develop for the benefit of the new playwright. In 1945 with banners of good will flying an organization called Theatre Incorporated was formed. It was to be a non-profit, tax-exempt corporation committed to a sustained program of great plays of the past and outstanding plays of the present ... devoted to the continuation of such a program on a permanent basis; to the encouragement of young playwrights, directors and actors through a subsidiary experimental theatre; to the utilization of the stage as an educational force, and to the ultimate development of a true people's theatre. 

Among those on the membership roles of Theatre Incorporated were several of the young writers who would become members of the New Dramatists Committee, including Michaela O'Harra. Theatre Incorporated did grant Miss O'Harra a reading of one unproduced play she had written called Tomorrow May Be Fair but she quickly

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28 Taubman, op. cit., p. 262.
became discouraged with their program.

The only thing Theatre Incorporated did for us actually was give us a room in which we met . . . we met for a couple of seasons and read each other plays and discussed them, but it was not organized well— we would just bring in a script, read it, and discuss it. It was usually a half the night session and we never accomplished a great deal except that we sort of held each other's hands and heads . . . . We complained all the time that they could at least get us seats to the theatre, but this was never done. We could get in to see their productions, but that was it.29

In early 1947 Experimental Theatre, Inc. was reincarnated through the cooperative effort of Theatre, Inc., the Theatre Guild, the American Repertory Theatre, and the Playwrights' Company. During its first season it produced five new plays, none of which received much critical acclaim. The next season it produced seven new plays but ran into financial problems and folded.

1. National Theatre Conference

The National Theatre Conference which was active during the forties set up a New Plays Project which had two purposes: the first was to provide an outlet for playwrights who were not established in the professional field. Such authors were requested to submit scripts which were read by regularly appointed readers and then by a final committee. Those receiving the highest ratings by the various readers were distributed by the Conference. Cash awards amounting to $300 were given for scripts which the final committee regarded as sufficiently meritorious.

29Interview.
The second purpose of the Conference was to give financial aid to selected authors to enable them to be in residence during the first production of their plays and do any re-writing which they or the directors deemed necessary.

An additional facet of the project was the securing of a few new scripts from well-established and outstanding playwrights which were released prior to or simultaneously with Broadway openings. The policy was to give the widest possible distribution to the scripts and to secure as many productions as possible without any guarantee to the authors.

In 1945 the New Plays Project of the National Theatre Conference was divided into two sections. One was designated as The New Playwrights Project under the chairmanship of Hallie Flanagan Davis fresh from her forced retirement as administrator of the Federal Theatre Project. The aim of the Playwrights Project was to deal with the whole problem of discovering and launching the work of new playwrights on a nationwide scale. Provisions were made for royalties from the production of plays by new playwrights to be collected by the National Theatre Conference. This meant that NTC received a reasonable percentage of such royalties. The second section in the split retained the name of New Plays Project under the chairmanship of George Freedley. It was concerned with new plays by well-known playwrights released in advance of Broadway production, simultaneously with Broadway production or not produced on Broadway at all. A number of writers
such as George Best, who were later members of the New Dramatists, had their plays produced by this Project.

For the most part the only writers helped by the Project were writers who were fairly well along in the business of playwriting and had already completed scripts worthy of production. To some extent the Project was concerned more with productions than with playwrights. Many of the reports of the Committee note that a writer has talent—but his technique was faulty or his choice of subject was unfortunate leaving him without a good script. Often he got a reply thanking him for submitting the script and hoping that we would keep on writing. There were others for whom the Committee could do nothing—those who for one reason or another were unable to take advantage of a scholarship or fellowship when offered.

Through experience members of the Committee realized a need to offer additional services. As a result, the National Theatre Conference Writers' Service was devised to supplement the New Playwrights Committee. The Writers' Service was designed to cover the entire country by dividing it into as many regions as possible. Each region had as its center a theatre approved by the Conference. Each theatre would have one or more persons who would be capable of helping any writer considered to be worth the time and attention. When the Committee found a talented writer who could not be served by way of a grant, that writer would be
sent to the nearest theatre where he would be assured of a sympathetic, first-hand criticism of his script and methods. If it was deemed advisable by the regional center, the writer would then see some part of his script brought to life on a stage.

For example, if a script were sent to the Writers' Service at Yale, it would first be read to the class in playwriting with the author present. Class discussion would be followed by a conference of the author and some of the school faculty, then there would be a rehearsal performance (all lines learned) of two fifteen-minute segments of the play designed to illustrate both good and weak aspects of the writer's technique. Other conferences followed and if the writer were planning another play he would be advised to send the scenario on ahead.

This entire critique was to take place in a two or three day period with all the writer's personal expenses paid by NTC. It was designed to help the many playwrights on a material level who were not being helped by the New Playwrights Committee and at a comparatively modest cost.

The National Theatre Conference also operated a Fellowship Project for grants to beginning playwrights. While the mechanics of the project varied from time to time, it retained a singular framework. The grants were made on the basis of recommendations, submission of full-length plays and plans for other plays. The fellows received $200 a month for five months which was subject
to immediate cancellation should the writer abandon the project
or in the opinion of project directors make no progress by the
beginning of the third month. Any play written by a fellow was
made available to NTC, although this did not preclude selling the
script to Broadway, Hollywood, radio, or TV. If a script brought
the author $10,000 or more from sales he was required to return
the amount of the grant to NTC to be allocated to another beginning
playwright. A number of these fellowships (usually about four to
six) were awarded each year along with several smaller awards for
specific projects such as to attend initial productions of a
playwright's work.

2. The Playwright Off Broadway

There were in addition many theatres outside the confines
of Broadway which in a variety of ways encouraged new playwriting.
These included the experimental theatres at Dartmouth, Carnegie
Tech, and the Pittsburg Drama League; The Pittsburg Playhouse; the
experimental theatre in the Department of Dramatic Arts at
Pennsylvania State College; the University of Kentucky; Stanford
University; Vassar Experimental Theatre; Margo Jones at Dallas
Theatre, Inc.; Cleveland Playhouse; University Civic Theatre in
Denver, Colorado; The Dock Street Theatre in Charleston, South
Carolina; and Erie Playhouse in Erie, Pennsylvania.

Pasadena's Laboratory Theatre produced nothing but original
plays--several of which were sold to New York. Audiences were
skeptical of new plays, however, and these works never made any money. A Theatre of the Pasadena Playhouse called the Patio offered a season of original scripts after the tradition set by the old Laboratory Theatre in which authors could see their plays in work and sit in for the audience criticism which followed each performance. The Pasadena group tried to select eight out of about 300 new scripts submitted to them each year.

The New York State Plays Project of the Cornell University Theatre maintained various playwriting projects under the direction of A. M. Drummond. Most of these concerned the production of original dramas on "American heritage" or regional themes.

The Carolina Playmakers under Samuel Seldon produced over 400 new plays (by 1947) by student writers and many of those were toured over the state and through other parts of the country.

The Hedgerow Theater in twenty-four years of repertory up to 1947 had produced 156 plays including thirty-nine originals of which thirty-four were by American playwrights. Of these thirty-nine at least seventy-five per cent were the playwright's first production or at least very early in his career.

Albert McCleery at Fordham University experimented with a Lunchtime Theatre in which an audience of 500 got dessert, coffee, and a new play.

Daniel Itkin of DePaul University in Chicago assembled a voluntary gathering of students not connected with DePaul or the Goodman Theatre. They discussed new plays, read and acted out the
scripts in front of the playwrights, analyzed and pointed out the faults, and corrected the scripts.

At the University of Delaware Robert Kase tried to encourage new playwrights by doing one new full-length play each year. Walter Kerr at Catholic University Theatre held playwriting as the spearhead of his theatre. One-third of all major productions they did in the forties were originals.


Another source of encouragement for the new playwright has traditionally been the vast number of playwriting courses around the country. As of 1950 some 1500 students annually were enrolled in playwriting courses in college and university classrooms. Some schools were accepting original plays in lieu of a Master's Thesis and a few followed the lead of The University of Iowa in accepting them as Doctoral Dissertations.30

Prospective writers were enrolled in playwriting classes in adult education courses, home extension courses, and informal groups. These often brought forth new plays which were produced in theatres across the country.

Paul Baker compiled a list of plays done by member theatres

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of the National Theatre Conference during 1948-1949. Among
colleges and universities reporting only three failed to
list productions of new manuscript plays and only seven
community theatres produced no new plays. Of 414 major productions
listed by NTC seventy-one were called "original"—meaning
"manuscript" or "new" or "never published or produced on
Broadway." In addition there were twenty-seven studio productions
of original three-acts, and ninety-eight productions of original
one-acts.31

In spite of the considerable theatre activity all across
the country most of the youthful playwrights like Miss O'Harrar still
longed for that stamp "hit in New York" to be affixed to their plays.
It was, and still is, extremely difficult to persuade many beginning
playwrights that a theatre exists beyond the bounds of Broadway.

E. OBSTACLES TO GROWTH

Other obstacles continued to grow stronger despite the number
of projects, fellowship and organizations being designed to offer
assistance to the playwright. One such problem was the tendency
of managers to hold on to the rights of plays for extended lengths
of time. In a letter to Howard Lindsay Paul Green lamented:

They [the playwrights] want their plays to reach the people,
and the more and sooner, the better. Then the managers need
to be convinced. Certainly the managers are out to make money.
But at the same time a large number of them are sincerely and
intensely interested in the theatre at large. But their present

31Ibid., p. 49.
method of doing business is, I am convinced, not only robbing them in the long run but hindering the development of that very theatre which they claim—the best of them—to love... the manager is made the most powerful figure in the American theatre (by his ability to release the rights of a play). He has a corner on the playwriting market. How many managers are there? Not more than two or three dozen active ones. Shall they be allowed to continue their control over one of the most powerful mediums of our national welfare and life?  

To which Howard Lindsay replied:  

I agree with you thoroughly that when we say "the American theatre," we must think in terms of the little theatres and universities throughout the country. Broadway does seem to be the assembly line for plays but the assembly line is growing shorter and shorter and it should give all of us great concern. I know that the Council of the Dramatists' Guild is greatly concerned over the lack of fresh talent in the play-writing field. I wish I had stronger evidence that the universities and little theatres are feeding this talent. I wish I knew of some way that would more greatly encourage an increase of competent play-writing.  

Another problem of even greater consequence to the playwright was the growth and establishment of the "hit system," still in effect today. By the end of the forties the economics of Broadway were of fantastic proportions and thus set up standards for the playwright unlike those pertaining to similar craftsmen in painting, music, poetry, or even the novel.  

The level of a writer's accomplishment in the New York Theatre was not measured by artistic merit but rather by the ability

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of his play to support a production apparatus that required upwards of $15,000 a week to function.\textsuperscript{34} The playwright's problem became far more than a healthy one of adaptation to a market. Harold Clurman wrote:

> Writing plays becomes a maneuver, rather than an expression. We should never forget that Chekhov became a popular playwright in Russia only because the repertory system built up his audience. His plays were not immediate box-office successes even in the Moscow Art Theatre. The young playwright is overcome by a sense of fear, frequently followed by a sense of futility. He sometimes accommodates himself to the position of honored hack—he becomes a successful playwright—or he succumbs to some other form of depletion.\textsuperscript{35}

Under the "hit" system the writer's plays were judged by the critics as art objects and yet they had to sell like "hot" merchandise. The playwright was subjected to a stringent time element—his play had to succeed immediately or be economically unfeasible. Occasionally a playwright would find a producer willing to gamble funds and patience against the arbitrary time limit imposed by the system. As a rule, however, the success of a play was known on opening night. To the playwright who might very well have spent the better part of a year or more on his work, the "hit" system was often good reason to look for work in some other field.

Adding to his difficulties the playwright found that one of his chief enemies in New York was a law that prohibits theatres in commercial buildings so that the structure in which his play was exhibited must pay the same taxes and ground rent as a fifteen-


\textsuperscript{35}Ibid.
story office building. 36

Another factor for the playwright became the fear of an
unofficial censorship imposed in part by cultural styles or
traditional attitudes and in part by the sensitivity of various
institutions to anything that might be construed as criticism.

Subjects like war, religion and human weakness had to be portrayed carefully for fear of offending playgoers. Even New York's economic conditions were often taboo. A playwright might find renewed interest by officials in "fire violations" in buildings which housed his plays. 37 If the writer was not concerned about the sensitivity of his subject, his producer often was. The effort to produce not only good drama but also acceptable messages proved too inhibiting to many playwrights.

The fact is that many potential and proved playwrights have lost faith in the ability of the theatre to halt its economic decline. They are not fooled by the false courage of the producers who whistle when they pass the theatres' graveyard--those playhouses before which stand long lines of patrons waiting to be admitted to radio or television shows to receive trips to Bermuda, refrigerators or nylon stockings. 38

The period from the twenties through the forties saw a great many new challenges for the American playwright. From a peak


37 Ibid.

38 Ibid., p. 59.
period of production in the late twenties the record slipped
greatly in but two decades. The Depression, the advent of talkies,
the Second World War, television, and increased economic pressures,
all left their mark. Yet in spite of these problems, or perhaps
because of them, many and varied attempts were made to bring forth
more and better plays. By the time Miss O'Hara was trying to
launch her career with *Honor Bright*, however, the economic require-
ments of a professional production were so great that the odds
against success were constantly increasing. If a play could not
prove itself financially it would never get the chance to prove
itself artistically. Correspondingly, fewer talented writers were
following the path of the theatre. Of those who did, only a handful
at best did not have to resort to outside sources for income.
Clearly, Miss O'Hara lamented to Howard Lindsay, there was a need
for a more effective training ground for prospective playwrights
of talent and the professional theatre was limited in its ability
to perform this function.

By the very nature of theatre the dramatist must assume
central importance. To discuss the problems of the theatre in any
era is to discuss the playwright's problems; the theatre can only
be as good as the plays it presents. The plan which Miss O'Hara
proposed to Lindsay in 1949 called for an organization whose aim,
like so many of its predecessors, was to nurture the incipient
talents of aspiring Broadway playwrights. Its approach, however,
was unique.
CHAPTER III

THE CONCEPT

A. WORKING WITH ESTABLISHED THEATRE

Howard Lindsay was familiar with many of the organizations that had been set up to aid playwrights. He knew their achievements and their overall lack of success. Michaela O'Harra knew of these groups also and had been on the membership rolls of some of them. The question, then, was how would Miss O'Harra's proposed organization differ from the past attempts? Why bother to begin another group to encourage dramatists?

Michaela presented Lindsay with facts, figures and ideas. She knew that nearly everyone connected with show business in New York and elsewhere considered the theatre to be sickly. Scripts were scarce and more and more productions closed after only a few performances. Surely, reasoned Michaela to Lindsay, encouraging and assisting new playwrights should be beneficial to the theatre as a whole. This premise was the basis for her new group. Unlike other organizations that came before her's, Miss O'Harra intended her organization to operate within the existing theatre establishment and that, of course, meant Broadway. She had no desire to revamp the tastes of the audience, or the criteria for success. She did not intend to start a theatrical revolution. Instead, Michaela outlined to Lindsay an organization that would stimulate the
commercial theatre and then reap the benefits of a more healthy profession for the budding playwright. Certainly, she said, the single best aid to a playwright is to have his play produced. While Miss O'Harra wanted an organization that would be more than just a platform for new playwrights' works, she was adamant that the project be married to the producing professional theatre:

I wanted to create a facility within the theatre itself, which was to be run by, overseen by, and advised by people who knew what they were doing in the professional theatre, not people who were in the academic world. This is not the world of theatre and if you're going to succeed as a playwright you can't do it off in some closet somewhere or out in some university where you have none of the conditions of the commercial theatre to contend with.\(^1\)

She hoped that the profession would quickly see the value of her proposal and permit the new group to work within the commercial theatre. This general "establishment" view made the proposed organization unique.

A further original aspect was that unlike most of the other projects the operation of the new group would be totally divorced from the rigors of production. The organization would aid and encourage the young writer and enable him to increase his working knowledge of the craft. Beyond that, i.e., securing actual production, was the agent's business.

Unlike most of the other theatrical workshops, Michaela's group would be devoted more exclusively to the writer himself

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\(^1\)Interview with Michaela O'Harra, March 21, 1967.
than to his specific works. "We do not select plays," says Letha Nims, current executive director of the group, "we select playwrights."² As envisioned the organization would offer its members a free place to see their works performed with no strings attached—artistic or financial; it would offer the writers free tickets to any Broadway show regardless of its style or ideology. The group would arrange discussions for the playwrights with artists and businessmen from all facets of a production, but it would not produce their plays. "The organization loves them and leaves them alone,"³ Miss Nims says. Their interest in actors would extend only so far as the performer might help a playwright visualize his work.

Unlike the Group Theatre, Michaela O'Harra's group would not embrace a school of thought. In fact, it would be a completely selfless organization benefitting only the young writers and ultimately the professional theatre as a whole. Comments producer Mary K. Frank: "I know of no other agency which does things for playwrights that doesn't have some kind of a call on the playwright. the New Dramatists does not. It's an absolutely selfless organization."⁴

Quite a number of years later one of its early members,

⁴Interview with Mary K. Frank, October 7, 1969.
Paddy Chayefsky, reflected on this "freedom" to write without strings attached:

The New Dramatists Committee acknowledged me and assured me I was a significant fellow, and that the theatre demanded of me to be only what I was, a difficult and aspiring young man who found just about everything being written by the established playwrights—(and novelists, poets, and feuilletonistes, for that matter)—unimaginative, unimportant, and reactionary. I was asked only to come and grumble with other young writers, to talk far more than I wrote, and out of all this impatience to be provoked to write something better.

Writers in America do not seem to get together the way painters and poets do to argue about techniques and styles and to reaffirm for each other their ineffable purpose as artists. That is what the New Dramatists Committee was for me a sort of Deux Maggots or Mermaid Tavern where on every other Tuesday evening I fulfilled my ambitious and sometimes disagreeable role of a new dramatist.\(^5\)

Robert Anderson, who was an early believer in Michaela's plan, was certain that the role the proposed organization would play would be a vital one. Recalling his experiences as a member of the New Dramatists, he had this to offer:

When a person is first recognized as a talent, be it in New York, college or drama school, he may be, say twenty-three or twenty-four years old. It's usually a fair number of years before that recognized talent emerges as anything important enough to call a playwright. What happens to a person during that period? The New Dramatists Committee is a marvelous place that helps them during those years .... It's like a school except there are no courses, lectures or requirements as such. But it's a place to see theatre, and by God, it's a place to feel a little less lonely.\(^6\)

This type of organization was precisely what Miss O'Harra was striving for—a group in which, given all the profession's

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\(^5\)Paddy Chayefsky, untitled talk dated 1961, from archives of New Dramatists Committee.

\(^6\)Interview with Robert Anderson, October 4, 1969.
problems, the young playwright might feel a little less lonely.

My theory was based on a hot house arrangement for starting plants. You create an environment which will help to force the growth or approximate the conditions under which the plant can grow to maturity. During the cold spring you can start a plant in a hot house approximating the conditions of summer and then when it gets warm enough, move it out into the world.⁷

Foremost in Michaela's thinking, however, was a desire to see that the organization would be established on a thoroughly professional basis encompassing the broad scope of the professional theatre. "I don't like the word 'commercial,'" she says, "but you have to use it, because it's the only one we have."⁸ And it was toward the commercial theatre that the resultant group would be oriented. "You then begin to have theatre as we know it in our lifetime," she continues,

which is a theatre that has to make money, and if it makes money, the playwright makes money, and everyone involved with it makes a living. Either you have a theatre that is so healthy that it can support a sufficiently large audience to support these people or you have to get the money from somewhere else and this is artificial. The only way you can come close to a healthy theatre is where there are enough plays written and produced to have a sufficiently large proportion of them workable scripts which appeal to a sufficient number of people who will pay money to see them and thereby support the people who are involved in it.⁹

⁷Interview.
⁸Ibid.
⁹Ibid.
B. ORGANIZING

This was how Miss O'Harra's organization was to differ from and hopefully transcend the scores of others with which she and Lindsay were familiar. Lindsay's initial reaction as the two of them sat in his dressing room that evening was favorable but less than complete acceptance. "Her proposition as a whole I didn't entertain because I knew it would be too costly." He still listened carefully to her lengthy but persuasive arguments and asked her if he could meet the type of people she was referring to as the "young aspiring playwrights". He requested that she assemble some of these writers and bring them to see Life With Mother after which they would sit down and discuss why the show was not as successful as Life With Father. This she did quickly. Contacting a number of young writers she had known in Theatre Inc. and others she had met while working for Todd she arranged for them to attend a week-night performance of Life With Mother shortly before the play closed. Lindsay was impressed with the playwrights' reactions. "If we had this kind of discussion before the play went into rehearsal, maybe it would have been a success," Michaela recalls him saying. Lindsay asked questions about Michaela's plan. How was she going to select members? How was she going to support it? Where was she going to get the money?

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10 Interview with Howard Lindsay, March 22, 1967.

11 Interview.
Who was going to do the job? She was prepared with answers to all of these questions except for who was going to run the organization. She insisted that she could not possibly afford the time, "I was a playwright and I wasn't going to get sucked into something like this."12

This was not even the first time that Lindsay had been approached to become involved in a project of this kind. In the early forties, Robert Ardrey, the playwright, met with Lindsay and Russel Crouse in Lindsay's home. He, like Miss O'Hara, was particularly concerned that the theatre ignored the young playwright. When Lindsay asked what they could do, Ardrey suggested that they give a cocktail party and try to get some of the young playwrights together to see what might be done. "Well neither Buck Crouse nor I," explained Lindsay, "were the kind of people who gave cocktail parties. . . of course, I couldn't give any during Life With Father."13 That plan went no further but Miss O'Hara was more persuasive. "The least I could do," recalls Lindsay, "was to see that they (the young writers) saw plays and met the dramatists. The other programs, at least at that time, I was not ready to entertain."14

To this day, Michaela O'Hara contends that Lindsay did not really believe her proposal was workable, but he did believe

12 Interview.
13 Interview.
14 Ibid.
in people and he believed in himself to the extent that he ultimately devoted a great deal of time to seeing that her plan became a reality. Miss O'Harrà contends:

He didn't believe any more than I believe that these things would make a playwright out of someone who is not a playwright. But I believe, and this he believed also, that these things would encourage these people to stick to their typewriters—to continue to write plays. The minute anyone displays any talent, everyone except theatre people is interested. If you show you can write anything at all, the TV people want you, the magazine and newspaper people want you—everyone else wants you, but the theatre doesn't give a damn. We were creating an organization which gave a damn.15

"He can be singularly difficult to persuade," notes Miss O'Harrà, "but then again, I guess I was pretty stubborn, too."16

Once Lindsay had agreed to lend his services to helping these young writers create an organization to help themselves he was immediately faced with a pair of major problems. The first was to raise the necessary funds to put the plan into operation and the other was to select the dramatists who would participate in the program. Michaela had anticipated both of these obstacles and consequently had drawn up a plan for selecting members and a list of possible sources of income. For some time she had been keeping notes on various foundations and individuals who had been donating money to foster playwriting talent. These donations, she felt, had met with an obvious lack of results.

15Interview.
16Ibid.
She and Lindsay turned first to the Playwrights' Company. Michaela remembered that their annual award of $1500 honoring the late Sidney Howard had not been granted for the previous two years because the Company did not feel there was a worthy young playwright available. The $3000 was awarded to Michaela's proposed organization. Other funds came from Katherine Cornell who gave a check from her foundation for $500, and from producer John Golden who sent $2000, along with a letter that promised "if it works, there's more where that came from."

With funding begun, Lindsay began to corral a number of the big names in the industry to lend prestige and support to this ambitious project. Among those who volunteered their names, their time and often their money in this founding process were Lindsay's partner, Russel Crouse, Pulitzer Prize winning playwright Maxwell Anderson, Oscar Hammerstein II, Moss Hart, Richard Rogers, Elmer Rice, and Robert E. Sherwood.

Certainly, these names looked impressive on the letterhead. Then, early in 1950 Lindsay drew up a letter which went out to most of New York's producers and directors, stating the philosophy of the organization. "All of us in the theatre," the letter stated, have become increasingly aware of the paucity of produceable new play scripts. Comparative inactivity along Broadway at the present moment is alarming proof that the situation is not improving. We need new professional dramatists, authors who really know the theatre, who can write plays that make an audience feel rewarded for spending the price of the tickets.¹⁷

Louise Silcox, then the executive secretary of the Dramatists Guild, suggested the name New Dramatists Committee. "I remember talking to Miss Silcox," recalled Lindsay, "and I suggested calling it 'young dramatists.' She said, 'no, don't call it young dramatists, because not all of them are young.' And I realized that I was nearly forty before I got a first play on and I was in the theatre all my life as an actor and director."18

Concurrently with the fund-raising project, Miss O'Harra and Lindsay tackled the problem of who, among the seemingly endless list of "playwrights," would be invited to join the New Dramatists Committee. Michaela suggested, and Lindsay agreed, that they would design and circulate an application questionnaire. This long and detailed questionnaire was sent to all of the associate members of the Dramatists Guild and others whom Miss O'Harra suggested. The total number of questionnaires mailed came to over 3000. One thing they were trying to avoid was having to read large piles of scripts in the selection process. If plays had to be read who would do the reading? What criteria for evaluating them would be used? The questionnaire prepared by Michaela was designed to avoid this problem of "one playwright having to judge another." Miss O'Harra worked out a graph and point system based on such questions as: "What plays have you had under option? How old

18Interview.
are you? How do you make a living? Can you get time off to participate in the planned activities? Have you made money from writing other than dramatic pieces?" Each of these questions had a certain point value. For example, if an applicant had collaborated on a script he would have received fewer points than if he had written the play by himself. Close to 1000 applications were received for membership in this group. Lindsay and O'Harra had decided the group should be limited to thirty participants. Letters arrived from all over the United States from young and often not-so-young hopefuls.

Because of the great influx of applications the Committee was forced to clarify its function. They proposed to help neither the established playwrights—those who had already made great strides in the theatre, nor the rank beginner. They would concern themselves with the "journeyman" writer—he who had made some small but professional mark; he who had already written promising works and with guidance would write better ones. They would leave the "apprentice" to the colleges and universities and the "master" dramatist to the Internal Revenue Service.

It is easy to understand why the selection of members for the New Dramatists Committee was a difficult process. After all, anyone can call himself a "playwright"—all he has to do is to write a play. The play doesn't have to fit any given criteria;

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19 Based on Miss O'Harra's recollections during interview since no copies of original questionnaire can be located.
it doesn't even have to be stageable. There are no entrance exams required. There are no qualities which must be exhibited, no placards to place in your study window, no decals to affix to your car windshield. In short, anyone who wants to make even a minimal effort can call himself a playwright. No wonder then that there is such a high percentage of failures when success is measured on a scale of plays professionally produced. The simple fact is that many so-called playwrights simply do not have the capabilities for the very special type of creative process necessary to make a living in the professional theatre. The New Dramatists realized that most members would never earn a living writing for the stage but if within the large group they could reach out and help the talented few who might otherwise have let "cynicism lead to sterility" then their efforts would have been justified.

Thus on December 7, 1949, the papers in New York City printed the announcement of the group listing the following as a representative group of playwrights with whom to work during its first experimental season: James Allardyce, Robert Anderson, Dan Appell, Theodore Apstein, Arnold Auerbach, Paddy Chayefsky, Edward Eager, Lee Falk, Joseph Hayes, Philo Higley, Elma Huganir, William Inge, and Orin Jannings. Also Hignon and Robert McLaughlin, Sigmund Miller, Ralph Nelson, George Norford, Michaela O'Hara, Bernard Reines, William Rops, Arnold Schulman, A. B. Shiffrin, Robert Walston, Max Wilk, Eva Wolas, and Stanley Young.21

20Interview.
21New York Times, December 7, 1949, p. 44.
Michaela O'Harra and Howard Lindsay wanted to gain as much support as possible for the project, and consequently they presented their plans to the Council of the Dramatists Guild. The Council's approval of sponsorship was unanimous. Moss Hart, then president of the Guild, called it "the most progressive thing the Guild has done in ten years."

Although Lindsay still could not see the feasibility of all of Miss O'Harra's plans for the group they agreed to begin operation on two of her suggestions: a chance for playwrights to see more plays, and a chance for these young writers to meet with and discuss craft problems with established playwrights.

Behind the main stage on the ground floor of the Hudson Theatre, which Crouse and Lindsay were then managing, was a small office which they turned over to the new organization rent-free. No one really wanted to assume the responsibility for running the organization, "... but I found myself beating my breast and telling people that it could be done," remembers Miss O'Harra, "and eventually I found myself doing it to prove it could be done." By this time they had managed to raise between five and six thousand dollars and Michaela agreed to work half-time for forty dollars a week.

I was living in a cold-water flat so I could get by on this because I had a play under option and needed my mornings free to work. Of course, that was the pipe-dream of all times--there was never any time to write or eat or sleep or anything.

22Interview.
else and I ended up with butterflies on my stomach and I
damn near didn't live. But anyway that was the pipe-dream.23

The formation of the Committee went relatively unheralded
for as the group was developing the policy was to have as little
publicity as possible. Explaining Lindsay said, "There was no
fanfare to launch the enterprise. There was no assertion that
we could save the American Theatre. There were no predictions
of achievement. We wanted to let the results, if any, speak for us."24

23Ibid.

CHAPTER IV

THE IMPLEMENTATION

In the few years following the founding of the New Dramatists Committee all five of Michaela O’Harra’s original planned activities for the Committee gradually became part of the operational procedures of the organization. The first two programs to be activated were Craft Discussions and Theatre Admissions. Initially the group met on Tuesday evenings around a large table in a room above the Hudson Theatre. For the first of these meetings Howard Lindsay asked one of his close friends to come and talk of the problems he had encountered with a production he had mounted that season. The man was Joshua Logan—the play Mister Roberts. Free tickets for the show had been arranged prior to the meeting so that all of the members were familiar with the play. Lindsay remembered it as an “exacting and challenging evening.”\(^1\) In the past twenty-two years since the founding of the Committee the two programs put into effect that night have remained as integral aspects of the work of the group.

A. CRAFT DISCUSSIONS

The first Craft Discussions were under the personal

\(^1\)Interview with Howard Lindsay, March 22, 1967.
guidance of Howard Lindsay. He would sit at the head of the long
table and at his elbow would be the guest playwright for the
evening—someone like Robert Sherwood, Clifford Odets or Maxwell
Anderson. Several of the members delight in remembering that
it was not always a completely agreeable experience for the guest.

Paddy Chayefsky recalls:

The discussions were vigorous, sometimes agitated. We were
frequently rude to our guests, loudly critical of their
work. I especially remember the abuse we heaped upon
Samson Raphaelson and S. N. Behrman, two playwrights whose
particular kind of play we have never succeeded in replacing.²

The members were writers and their acuteness and critical sense
were active. But Howard Lindsay was always there to lend his
perspective to the issues at hand. Explains Chayefsky, "I
certainly don't want to present Howard as a benign headmaster of
a preparatory school. There was nothing paternalistic or under-
graduate about it at all. It was arrantly professional."³

There was much of the coffee-house Bohemian type of
attitude and an arrogant disaffection among the beginning writers,
but according to Chayefsky, "Writers, however, successful, must
remain Bohemian if they are to remain writers, and disaffected if
they are to remain artists. This communal Bohemianism, was, I think,
the real value of the New Dramatists Committee to me."⁴

²Paddy Chayefsky, untitled talk dated 1961, from archives of
New Dramatists Committee.

³Dramatists Guild Quarterly, Spring 1968, p. 28.

⁴Talk from archives.
years before, in his book *The Principles of Playmaking*, Brander Matthews had advocated this very approach to teaching playwriting. "If playwriting is to be taught with the same success that painting has been taught," said Professor Matthews, "this can be accomplished only by the older playwrights instructing the young and laying bare before them the art and mystery of the drama."\(^5\) This was the philosophy behind these Craft Meetings—an open exchange, a means by which the young writer could meet others of his kind, and by discussions of mutual problems gain a certain degree of practical knowledge of writing.

The Committee is careful to point out that these sessions were literally Craft Discussions, not to be confused with formal courses in playwriting. There was never any intention of having this organization operate as a school. As Robert Anderson has put it, "Playwriting can't be taught, but it can be learned."\(^6\) From the outset the organization was regarded as a facility, to use the word favored by Lindsay, to enable new playwrights to learn more about their craft. These two points assume critical proportions in the ideology of the Committee. First, the Committee is a facility which makes itself available to the beginning playwright without superimposing any single philosophy, ideology, or style of writing on the author; and second, it is assumed that playwriting is at


\(^6\)Interview with Robert Anderson, October 4, 1969.
least in part a craft that can be learned. This last idea is of course dependent on the basic assumption held by the organization that there is an element of artistry which has been demonstrated by each member prior to his admission into the group.

Through the years the Craft Discussion program has been expanded to include as guests, not only authors, but directors, designers, technicians and almost anyone else connected with the theatre. A list of the speakers who have participated in these gatherings literally reads like a "Who's Who?" of the post-war American theatre. Some of the more prominent include George Abbott, S. N. Behrman, Marc Connelly, Jose Ferrer, Peter Glenville, Lillian Hellman, Elia Kazan, Abe Burrows, Joshua Logan, Jo Mielziner, Arthur Miller, Clifford Odets, Arthur Schwartz, Herman Schumlin, Maurice Valency, Tennessee Williams, Harold Clurman, Mordecai Gorelik, Walter Kerr, Moss Hart, Howard Bay, Eric Bentley, Francis Fergusson, John Gassner, Stark Young, Arthur Laurants, Louis Kronenberger, Michel Saint-Denis, and Tyrone Guthrie. Certainly, each of these famous people spoke as an expert, not only in some area of plays and stagecraft, but also on "How to Succeed in the Professional New York Theatre." The topics for these hundreds of Craft meetings over the years span many areas of the producing theatre. Among them: "You and Your Agent," "Is My Subject Worth a Play?" "Common Faults in Scripts," "Re-Writes," and "General Discussion Sessions."
Generally these discussions fell into one of two types. In the first type the guest would be someone like Robert Sherwood, and the group would sit around a table and fire questions at him. "Why did you take this scene out of your play? Why did you add this scene? What was the point of that? How did it heighten the dramatic climax?" The second type of discussion was specifically oriented around a given play. All of the members would see a play, Tea and Sympathy for example, and then would meet with the author, Robert Anderson, and hash out the details of construction with him.

Without question these meetings in the early fifties were strongly under the dominant influence of one man—Howard Lindsay. In talking with the playwrights today who participated in these meetings one quickly realizes that Lindsay did much to elevate the professional attitude of these new writers. He was genuinely concerned with the craft, the technique, the architecture, the manufacturing of art, the actual writing and performance of the play. He conceived of drama as an art and anyone affecting to its practice as an artist; but no matter how inspired or brilliant a writer might be, Lindsay considered the demands of the craft to be no less rigorous.

Howard Lindsay had several especially utilizable writing rules, such as: "If you're writing a comedy, all your curtains should be funny ones" or "wherever your biggest laugh comes, take it out and make it your second act curtain." Josh Logan suggested a rule he apprehended from his days
making films for Hal Roach, who always used to demand of his writers: "When does the villain kick the dog?" There were so many of these axiomatic suggestions— "The best rule for cutting is if you feel like it, cut it;" "If you're hung up in the third act, the first thing to do is take some dialogue you have given to secondary characters and give it to your leads;" "At the beginning of each act, re-orient the audience as to whom they're for and whom they're against;" etc. I could list a long pedigree of similar rules that were winnowed out of those meetings, but they are not really to the point in themselves.\(^7\)

To Lindsay, the practice of playwriting was the art and he spent years trying to instill this idea in the young writers. Lindsay was a veritable fountain of these "Craft-dicta," these short pragmatic rules. "They may sound 'claptrappy' but they were standard rules of orthodox architecture,"\(^8\) asserts Chayefsky.

Superimposed over all of these Craft sessions, however, was a type of atmosphere which may have been as valuable as the lessons in Craft. Chayefsky goes on:

It was the climate. It was a place where young writers met and bitched and complained and aspired and figured out that they could do better than anything around. It was something that equates with the Left Bank. We don't really have an intellectual community in this country—writers don't mingle— but you need a constant stimulation in order to be really productive and it was this type of climate which was fostered by these Craft meetings.\(^9\)

\(^7\)Chayefsky's talk from archives.

\(^8\)Ibid.

\(^9\)Ibid.
The playwrights generally agree that the Craft Discussions were of value to them, particularly to those who had not been close to the professional theatre for much of their lives. Above all, these meetings were designed to enable them to identify and maintain their strengths as writers, while upholstering some of their weaknesses. In more recent years many of the Dramatists Committee members have been writers who have just recently graduated from college and migrated to Broadway. Those who were able to get into the New Dramatists were immediately given the chance not only to see practically every show in New York but also to meet with and hear a man like Clifford Odets talk about the problems he was having with his second act. "He has problems?" Robert Anderson mused. "You figured gee whiz! Clifford Odets, Max Anderson, Sam Behrman et al. have problems, and you felt you were sharing. It wasn't 'those guys there,' and 'yuz guys here.'"10

Like any other project of a similar nature, these Craft meetings were not uniformly successful and rewarding. It was strictly left to the members, however, to separate the meager from the meaty. Chayefsky sums up his impressions of these early Craft Discussions:

This sort of discussion group usually falls into gossip and prattle, and, indeed, ours sometimes did; or else it becomes a kind of lecture seminar, this I cannot recall ever happening in our group. They were curiously professional gatherings, and I remember them with vivid satisfaction.

10 Interview.
Although there was no didactic quality about them, I still remember and find useful many things of craft that I learned at these meetings.11

B. THEATRE ADMISSIONS

The second of Miss O'Harra's five points to be undertaken by the New Dramatists Committee (and one of the most active parts of the program since their founding) was the Theatre Admissions Program. Lindsay knew at the start that this was one way in which he could be of direct assistance to the members. He immediately initiated a program in which he obtained for the group free tickets to any show that was playing to less than full capacity. This meant tickets to most shows were (and are) available to the playwright members since, contrary to myth, even the top shows on Broadway almost never play consistently to a full house.

There was another source of play-going too which the group quickly tapped—run-throughs. Most productions schedule a run-through of the complete show, often minus make-up and costumes, etc., before they go "out of town." The show companies often welcome a live audience on which to test their wares. Lindsay had a perfect audience.

Producers and directors responded willingly to the Committee's request for cooperation. During the group's initial season members were asked to more than forty Broadway presentations

11Talk from archives.
in various stages of production "free of charge." It is estimated that since the program's inception the Committee has distributed well over 50,000 free ducats worth well into the hundreds of thousands of dollars. Almost every professional play to open and run at all on Broadway (and many off-Broadway) has served as a "practical classroom" to the New Dramatists Committee.

Robert Guy Barrows, a member of the Committee for several years, considers the Theatre Admissions to be the most valuable of the organization's services.

I've seen more than two hundred productions since I got to New York three years ago. All of them free. I have seen far more failures on Broadway than hits and I should say that I learned more from them than from the successes. Not too many people see the failures, but they are very important for a playwright. Great lessons in playwriting can be learned from them.12

During the period in which Michaela O'Harra was running the organization she expanded this program to the point where she had a pool group of alternate members (at various times known by different names) who were also eligible for these free tickets. This became a sore spot with the Committee. Some felt that there couldn't possibly be one hundred promising playwrights in New York as Miss O'Harra's membership lists implied. "Well the point is, nobody knows," contends Miss O'Harra, "Who knows if there isn't another Bill Gibson or Paddy Chayefsky in the group?"

12Keating, loc. cit., p. 67.
Hell, you can't tell in the early stages, and you don't want to throw any of them out." The Committee has been criticized from time to time by those who say that some members take advantage of these free tickets and therefore continue their membership in the group beyond the period of active involvement. Says Miss O'Harra: "So what!"

C. PRODUCTION OBSERVANCE

During its third year of operation the organization initiated another of Miss O'Harra's projects. Known as the Production Observance system it was and is a program implemented through the cooperation of certain managements whereby a member would be assigned as an observer to a new production as it first went into rehearsal. The idea was for the member to be able to follow the play from its first readings, through every rehearsal, to the show's out of town run, its previews, and its opening curtain on Broadway. During this period the observer was given the chance to gauge audience reaction to the play and observe alterations made from beginning to final performance version. He had been able to sit with the producer, the director and the writer as they discussed the play's merits and problems. The thinking behind this program was that the observer would gain outstanding production experience that would be more meaningful

13Interview with Michaela O'Harra, March 21, 1967.
than anything except production of the member's own play. Wherever possible the observer was given employment on the production staff for, needless to say, this was a full-time activity for the observer thus nullifying any possibilities for outside employment while he was involved with this project.

As Lindsay had said, the art of playwriting couldn't be separated from the craft. Although the writer could gain immeasurable knowledge about pleasing an audience from watching plays, it took actual production experience to discover how the written play had arrived at that "audience-pleasing" state. Only practical theatre work could teach the dramatist how to work with directors, producers, actors, and technicians and how to make his play come alive. The complex expensive Broadway theatre wouldn't allow the playwright to "practice" on his own plays, so the Committee's Production Observance program let him sit-in on every phase of someone else's production. Since the beginning of this program, over one hundred writers have had the opportunity to participate.

According to former New Dramatists member Joe Masteroff (Cabaret, She Loves Me, Warm Peninsula), "I went out twice with In Any Language and The Prescott Proposal and I don't know if I ever could have really written a play without the experience of seeing all that goes into a Broadway show."14 Although Michaela O'Harra

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14*Newsday*, May 23, 1961, p. 3c.
contends that at the beginning Howard Lindsay did not really believe the program would work ("He just didn't believe that directors and producers and actors would let a playwright go in and just sit, around and watch"15), for years Lindsay considered this the most beneficial aspect in their repertoire of programs. In his own words,

I think the Production Observer program is terribly important, perhaps the single most important part of our program. Mind you, that doesn't mean that all Production Observers have succeeded in writing plays, but I think that's as good a practical education as you can get.16

Generally, the Production Observance system has been among the most lauded of all the New Dramatists programs, but it has not been without its moments of frustration. In order to assure the effective operation of this type of program each of the observers has been virtually sworn to secrecy. The directors and producers knew that neophytes would be privileged parties to all the details of a production including the cursing, shouting and name-calling that often accompany "artistic policy-making." A producer trying to protect his investment would not be pleased with bad publicity about "in-house" events. The program operated efficiently when the confidence was kept but once in the early 1960's an observer violated the trust and wrote an article for

15Interview.
16Interview.
Esquire capitalizing on some of the more sensational aspects of his observership experience. Producers up and down Broadway were quick to shout "that's it." For several years after that the program was sluggish, if not virtually dormant. Gradually, however, peace was restored and the mutual trust between the writers and the producers was reinstated.

D. SOUNDING PANELS

The fourth of Miss O'Hara's five programs for the New Dramatists was the concept of Sounding Panels in which the playwright would hear a reading of one of his plays by a cast of colleagues. A critique session would follow the reading. The first few panels in this program were almost ridiculous. Comments Miss O'Hara:

Several people were completely annihilated by these discussions . . . some of the most talented because it seemed that fellow writers just waded in there with their hatchets. This is the way it feels to you when you bring your scripts in—here is your baby, newly born, and you think it's just beautiful until somebody starts saying it's cross-eyed and clubfooted and pot-bellied and bald. 17

Miss O'Hara was moved to set up a standard procedure for the critique in which members began with positive thoughts on the best aspects of the script. In the last twenty-two years the Sounding Panel program has undergone a series of alterations in procedural details, but basically the plan works like this:

17Interview.
a playwright who has a play ready for a reading selects a panel of three to five other members to study the play and then meet with him to voice opinions of the script. This is often followed by a reading and additional round-table critiques.

The Sounding Panel concept in which members read one another's scripts aloud and critiqued them was not a new idea. Michaela O'Harra had participated in just such a program at Theatre Inc. She felt that the panels gave the playwrights a chance to hear opinions and advice from professionals, rather than the usual "family and friends" audience.

Obviously, differences of opinion among members are what made the Sounding Panels vital and meaningful. These differences, however, also could lead to confusion on the part of the writer being criticized. Robert Anderson admitted:

It can lead a playwright up a blind alley or it can cause him to distort his play. But one of the most important things a playwright must learn is to discriminate among conflicting bits of advice from stars, director, producer, friends and stagehands. I think a man who has survived the panel discussions of the New Dramatists is less likely to panic when all the helpful Harrys begin telling him how to rewrite his play out of town.¹⁸

Different members of the New Dramatists apparently have sought different types of aid from the organization and accordingly have found different aspects of the program the most beneficial.

¹⁸Interview.
A number of members, like Ferdinand Monjo, consider these Sounding Panels to be the most important specific function of the organization.

I have never yet attended a panel in which the sound achievements, as well as the crucial flaws of the play in question, were not detected, described and brought into very sharp focus indeed. To see one's play as others see it in this manner is tremendously revelatory, painful and salutary. To a lesser extent, for me, the rehearsed readings perform the same function—revealing relationships and resonances in performance which were not patent in the script. 19

And Joe Masteroff declared:

As far as I'm concerned, the New York critics are no more difficult than my colleagues in the New Dramatists. When they're through with you, you feel temporarily crushed—for about five minutes. Then you rise, brush yourself off, and write a better play. Or a better version of the same one. 20

E. WORKSHOP PROGRAM

The final portion of Miss O'Harra's plan was the Workshop Program which often operated in conjunction with the Sounding Panels. The Workshop was the place where the New Dramatists would see their plays in performance (often after first going through a Sounding Panel) with a selected Equity cast and under an experienced stage director. Most of the plays were rehearsed for several weeks or to the point where a play in the commercial theatre would be judged ready to meet an audience. The play was

19Keating, loc. cit., p. 66.
20Ibid.
then performed before an invited audience, usually without benefit of scenery or costumes.

It was in 1951 that this aspect of Miss O'Harra's plan was added to the existing programs. This plan presented a sticky problem: money. "She kept pressing and pressing," remembered Lindsay, "until, to make life easier on all of us, we managed to come up with some money to finance a Workshop." The money came from the family of the late Mrs. Elinor Morgenthau, wife of Henry C. Morgenthau, Jr., former Secretary of the Treasury, and supporter of the theatre. The funds were donated by the family as a memorial to Mrs. Morgenthau who died in September 1949. Mrs. Morgenthau had been a member of the Board of Directors of The City Center in New York and had wished to establish an independent laboratory in which actors, dramatists, and directors could work in conjunction. The money, therefore, had been earmarked for the establishment of the Elinor Morgenthau Players and Playwrights Workshop. However, in a news release in September 1951, it was announced that the New Dramatists Committee's work "led the ... Morgenthau family to decide last week that the Committee was the only organization in the profession really qualified" to administer the project.22 The final details

21Interview.

of the plan were worked out by Maurice Evans, then artistic supervisor for the Center's theatre company and by Howard Lindsay.

The Workshop, once in effect, was known as the Elinor Morgenthau New Dramatists Workshop. In return for administering the project, the City Center made available to the group, rent-free, office space on the second and third and fifth floors of its building on West Fifty-Sixth Street. The quarters, which included a rehearsal hall, executive and administrative offices, and a seminar room, served as the home of the New Dramatists for most of their existence.

Lindsay solicited and received the cooperation of the various theatre unions in organizing the project. Actors Equity, the actors' bargaining unit, gave their permission to use Equity actors for a maximum of two readings at a rate of five dollars for the first reading and ten dollars for the second.

"I was sure the project would work," recalled Michaela O'Harra, if we did it on a theatre-wide basis. It had to be this way, so that Equity didn't think that a specific producer would benefit by this type of thing. Whoever bought the play would in the long run benefit if it had gone through a workshop production, but this would not be a specific producer who was trying out a play. You couldn't do it if it were a private group, in other words, but if it were supported by the Dramatists Guild and it were backed by all of the various elements in the theatre, then I thought it would work.23

23Interview.
On October 22, 1951, the Workshop was dedicated with Eleanor Roosevelt accepting the Honorary Chairmanship of the Advisory Committee. Since that time scores of plays, written by scores of would-be playwrights, have been produced under the aegis of the Elinor Morgenthau Workshop Program. Countless Equity Actors and professional directors have donated their time to these workshops, since the Committee is as dependent upon the donation of talent as it is upon the financial support of its donors. Through the years the Committee has had a good working agreement with many of the guilds and unions which constitute the working structure of the professional theatre--groups such as Actors Equity Association, Association of Theatrical Press Agents and Managers, Association of Theatre Benefit Agents, Broadcast Music Industries, Dramatists Guild, League of New York Theatres, Screen Actors Guild, Society of Authors' Representatives, Society of Stage Directors and Choreographers, United Scenic Artists and Writers Guild of America.

Like the Sounding Panel readings, the details of Workshop operation have undergone many alterations. However, generally the small invited audience has been asked to remain after the show to express opinions on a series of questions like these:

1) Has this been, for you, a rewarding and well-spent evening? A mildly entertaining one? A wasted one?
2) Was the play interesting to you from beginning to end? If you lost interest at any point, can you say where this happened?

3) Does this play end as you think it should? If not, how should it end?

4) What do you think of the characters? In terms of the play, do they behave believably? Behave unbelievably?

5) Do you think this play has commercial possibilities as it is? With minor revisions? With major revisions? None at all?

6) Do you have any additional comment on the play for its author?

The playwright who feels he has a play ready for a Workshop generally is free to pick the director he thinks could best stage his script. Working with the director, he casts the show from the files of those actors who have registered with the Committee. The play is probably rehearsed for about three weeks during which time several of the rehearsals are open to any member of the New Dramatists group who wants to come and observe. All of the members of the Committee are invited to the final "dress" rehearsal. Throughout the entire rehearsal period pains are taken to see that the playwright is given free rein. Of this process Mr. Lindsay has said, "it is amazing what it does for a playwright to see his play before an audience. He recaptures the impersonal point of view. The line you were willing to die for, the scene you thought perfect, is suddenly seen in a new perspective."24

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Often the performers in these workshops are quite well-known in theatre, films and television but for these sessions they are present as unpaid volunteers lending their talent and stature to the plays of the members.

June Havoc the actress is now concerned with becoming June Havoc the playwright. When asked why she became a New Dramatist she responded:

Though I've been an actor since I was two years old, I've only been a playwright for eight years and I'm still learning the craft. The New Dramatists provides me with a Workshop where I can see my play begin to live and breathe. From the other members I can get sensitive, knowledgeable criticism—the kind of honesty you can't get from your best friends. Besides, it's such a lovely way to be born... no bells ringing or sirens clanging, only people speaking in respectful tones, everyone in love with the craft, everyone sharing one dream.25

Occasionally, as might be expected, the response from a playwright to the critique of the Committee members is something less than ecstasy. Sol Stein, a member for several seasons, has said:

My only regret in regard to the New Dramatists is that I invited the group to attend a run-through of my play A Shadow of My Enemy before it went out of town. The written reactions of the group were at great variance, and I found several of them quite intimidating. As a consequence of this, I cut one large and very important scene from the play, which everyone regretted once we were out of town, and most of our effort in that out of town tryout was to replace parts of that scene piecemeal. The blame is mine, of course,

not the New Dramatists, inasmuch as I let myself be intimidatd by the expert opinion of my colleagues, even though what I wanted was a far cry from what several of them wanted to see this play be.26

Such is the danger of this type of overt criticism, but the overwhelming response to the project has been positive. Certainly, a playwright can't truly judge his work until he sees his work played by actors on the stage. This is the purpose of the Workshop.

By the end of the fifties the Morgenthau family had grown disenchanted with the small number of "famous" playwrights being produced by the program. Their supply of money eventually ceased. The Workshop, however, continued without the support of the Morgenthau family.

F. PLAY CIRCULATION

One other aspect was included in Miss O'Harra's initial plans for the New Dramatists Committee. While it was obvious at the time that the American Theatre had shrunk in New York City, it was also apparent that theatre had to some degree prospered throughout the country. In some instances professional theatres were finding this success but more often it was non-professional theatre that was active and growing. Interest in the writing and production of plays was on the increase outside of New York as the number of drama departments throughout the country would

26 Keating, _loc. cit._, p. 18.
indicate. In order to serve this expanding market the New Dramatists Committee established a Play Circulation plan which would attempt to provide scripts from their members to these regional theatres. The main goal of the Committee was still Broadway, but they recognized the value of a regional production to any burgeoning playwright.

The Committee realized that no workable liaison had ever really existed between the commercial theatre and the educational, community, and Off-Broadway professional theatre (ANTA was at one time a possible exception but is now nearly defunct). Numerous attempts had been made, but the disparate interests of the various theatres had meant that there never had been a successful program for the discovery and development of playwrights, or the discovery and distribution of producible new plays throughout the nation. The Committee established a program to do just that.

During its lifespan (1954-1960), the Play Distribution program was operated in association with the American Educational Theatre Association whose membership included over 1,800 members. To these and other semi-professional and amateur groups the Committee sent selected scripts upon request. The Committee instituted a bulletin, the first of which (in 1954) contained a synopsis of nine plays written by members. As the brochure that accompanied the descriptions of the scripts stated, "The aim is
for both quality and variety. The hope of the play circulation project for the New Dramatists Committee is to provide scripts with appeal for many kinds of audience. Each play came complete with a $25 royalty charge for each performance.

Many plays from this project did circulate and receive regional productions. In one of its first applications Charles Best's The Kids, a drama about the Hungarian freedom fighters, was produced by over a hundred member groups of the South Eastern Theatre Conference. The administrative demands of the plan, however, became a burden to the administrative "staff" of the Committee which consisted basically of Miss O'H Harra. Some of the members felt the program was a needless waste of time and effort. "There was some value in it I'm sure," commented Robert Anderson, "but most of the playwrights, by the time they get to be New Dramatists have their own agents and that is their job. It's fine to be a referral service, but I thought it was going too far for us to run the entire service." In time Michael O'H Harra became frustrated with the project herself.

This is one of the beefs I have about the college and community theatres. They talk an awful lot about wanting to help the development of the new playwriting talent, but when it comes down to producing and working out a system whereby new plays could be produced successfully in the academic theatre they balk. They profess to have the utmost scorn for the commercial theatre, but what do they produce? They produce something that has been produced on Broadway. Even if it was a flop it has to be done.

27 Interview.
They have to have that seal of approval that it's been done in the commercial theatre. It's not a nut that can't be cracked. There are a lot of people who would like to produce new scripts, but they don't know how to recognize a good script if they see one.28 Consequently, the project ended in 1960.

A few other smaller projects were undertaken by the Committee. For example a play contest for members was held with the winner receiving a cash award of $750 and a production at the Adelphi Theatre in New York. By and large, however, the five major projects as detailed above have served as the platform of the organization for its first twenty years of operation.

G. REORGANIZATION

The group was not without its share of problems during this twenty year period. As one might expect, the major concern was finances. The projects described above as a whole were costly—very costly. In fact in late 1959 word was out that the Committee was in serious financial trouble and was about to disband. While the Committee immediately denied the rumors, the gossip was true; finances had nearly run out. The sources of income that had sustained the group for their first decade were beginning to dry up. Many on the Board of Directors felt it was time to lock the doors and be relegated to the long list of abortive twentieth-century attempts to aid the American Theatre.

28 Interview.
At a Board meeting held December 17, 1959, a formal proposal was made to "wind up" the organization. Anderson argued against it. Others supported the proposal. Michaela suggested a "creative volunteer" arrangement designed to cut down on the expenses which were announced at that meeting to be $650 a month exclusive of salaries. A majority of members were not willing to let the organization just fade away. They were convinced of its worth and pushed to see that it remained alive.

A major impetus to the "rebirth" of the organization was the election on October 25, 1960 of Mary K. Frank as President. She succeeded Robert Anderson whose term had expired. Anderson was a dedicated playwright and teacher; Frank was a dedicated producer and fund-raiser. Mrs. Frank had been a Broadway producer responsible for such shows as *Tea and Sympathy*, *Too Late the Phalarope*, and *One More River*. Concurrent with her election came the resignation of the "old guard" of the group--Howard Lindsay, Robert Anderson, Russel Crouse, Joseph Kramm, Elmer Rice, Roger Stevens, and John Wharton.

As a group they were weary of the constant struggle for financial security. It was obvious to them that a major reorganization was essential. In order to facilitate such a major change they all

\footnote{From notes extracted by Letha Nims from Minutes of Board of Directors' meetings, as the author was not privileged to firsthand inspection.}
resigned leaving the fate of the Committee up to its author-members. It was the decision of these author-members to revitalize the organization and to restore the Committee to sound financial footing so that it could carry on its projects again on a relatively secure basis.

Mary K. Frank proved to be an excellent fund-raiser. When the books were handed to her they showed only $440 in funds on hand and October commitments of $1660 outstanding. She quickly dispatched telegrams to anyone she could find in the books who had previously donated money to the group. The John Golden fund came up with a $1000 check on the spot, but beyond that there was no response. Mrs. Frank's next move was to analyze the finances as they had been up to that time. "There had been a handful of people who had cared deeply," she found, "who had conceived the idea and who had literally dug into their own pockets." For years there had been no formal budget, rather they had been cutting the suit to meet the cloth. For one of the early budgets Michaela O'Harra and Howard Lindsay had worked up a balance sheet to submit to the various foundations which they thought might be a possible source of income. "I worked up a budget," Miss O'Harra recalled, "and Howard kept saying, 'Don't ask them for too much money,"

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30 Interview with Mary K. Frank, October 7, 1969.

31 Ibid.
because you won't get it. You mustn't do this. You can't do that.'

When the time came for us to present the budget, Howard had to be out of town, so I just added zeroes to all our figures and we got the money!"32 This is about as organized as the finances got during those first ten years. Michaela saw herself as a playwright first, as an administrator second, and as an accountant a distant third.

"It's a strange kind of organization," remarked Mrs. Frank, "and the only fruits we have are the successful playwrights who go on and outgrow it. We never had any sense of being a self-supporting organization."33 Upon looking at the books she was faced with the fact that the first decade of the New Dramatists Committee had cost over half a million dollars, or about fifty thousand dollars a year. This money which had been remarkably raised by Michaela O'Harrar and others, albeit in somewhat haphazard fashion, had come essentially from two sources: foundations, and generous individual contributors. The Rockefeller and Ford Foundations alone contributed roughly half of this figure, while the Morgenthau family had given more than fifty thousand dollars over the years. A number of individuals and organizations had given from five thousand to twenty thousand dollars. Particularly generous had been Roger

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32Interview.

33Interview.
Stevens, Rogers and Hammerstein, the John Golden Fund, Playwrights Producing Company, the Peter Scheitzer Fund, Alfred Glancy, and Eleanor Roosevelt. There were times, too, when Lindsay and others had dipped into their own pockets and sometimes rather deeply.

Mary Frank's next task was to make up a budget that was practical for minimum operation. The result totaled $121,816 which she felt was necessary for the organization to exist. In order to realize this projected budget, she established a quota to be raised from the industry as a whole. The figure she arrived at was $40,000, one-tenth of one per cent of the gross income of the Broadway theatre the previous season. She believed that one-tenth of one per cent was not an extreme amount to ask from such a large business if everyone gave a little. The presentation to the profession would be that it was practical self-interest to make an investment in their own future business. Never one to miss a possible source of a dollar, Mrs. Frank also arranged to approach people in fields allied to the theatre: the investors, newspapers, magazines, restaurants, night clubs, book publishers, radio and TV stations, recording companies, railroads, hotels, motion picture companies, and legal and accounting firms. All these groups were vulnerable to her financial thrusts as they would gain if the theatre were doing well.

To initiate this "infant UJA (United Jewish Appeal) approach" as she termed it, she set up a trial dry-run with a luncheon at Sardi's to which she invited the backstage suppliers and the companies that build the sets and supply the costumes. The event was a tremendous success and these annual New Dramatist Committee fund-raising luncheons have been a regular part of the theatre season ever since. The approach has remained the same, "Tell them it's in their interest and hold out your hand," but the dollar figures have changed considerably. The 1969 fund-raising campaign for example, under the overall chairmanship of David Merrick, had a goal of $80,000.

To increase the stature of the campaign as many well-known personalities as possible are involved in the fund raising. Among those who have been involved in these fund drives in the past few years have been Mary Martin, Ralph Bellamy, Helen Hayes, Molly Picon, Henry Fonda, Fredrick March, Jo Mielziner, Alexander Cohen, Hermione Gingold, Lehman Engel, Robert Preston, Richard Rogers, Harold Prince, Hal Holbrook, Leland Haywood, Jean Kerr, Stephen Sondheim, and Abe Burroughs. Together they have helped raise well over half a million dollars for the organization.

Howard Lindsay, until his death, played a part in the luncheons. He would often begin with a short speech emphasizing the mutual benefits which would accrue to the entire profession
from helping the Committee. At the 1961 luncheon he prefaced his speech by hailing the success of Carnival (book by New Dramatist Michael Stewart) earlier that season. "Okay, so it's David Merrick's," he quipped, "but it's still wonderful." Then he got down to business. "We want to keep young playwrights at their typewriters. Without the playwright there would be no plays. Without plays there would be no producers. No producers, no actors. And I know this will twist your hearts, no actors, no critics to criticize." He went on to paint a less than glittering picture of the status of the commercial theatre. He predicted that New York could wind up with a weekend theatre. This prediction was joined to a warning that the "fabulous invalid" was in worsening condition. "She is sick and there is a question as to her convalescence," he told an audience of ticket printers and sellers, carpet-makers, seat-makers, providers of soap for the restrooms, light fixture manufacturers, and people whose work more traditionally associated them with the theatre. "We badly need more plays," Lindsay added, "better plays and repeating playwrights. This goes to the very core of the theatre dilemma. Do you want to see a weekend theatre in New York? If young playwrights are not stimulated, the next time we meet will be at the autopsy."  

Virtually everyone who has ever made a dollar from the theatre business in any connection ends up in Mary K. Frank's little book and that means at one of these luncheons. "Help yourselves by helping us," has become the unofficial slogan of the fund-raising drives. Agent Audry Wood went so far as to suggest support from the audience. "If every person who attended a Broadway show would just send one dollar to them ... they would be insuring the quality of their future entertainment."37

In 1966 the Committee received another form of financial boost. In January of that year producer Stanley Gordon announced that he was assigning ten per cent of his equity from New Dramatist Arthur Pittman's play, Possibilities (Anne's Life), to the Committee. Unfortunately for the Committee, Possibilities never made it to the profit-making stage. However, the gesture did set a precedent that some playwrights have followed—a few on money-making plays.

In 1964 the fund-raising project was aided when New York City's Mayor Robert Wagner announced:

Whereas, the New Dramatists Committee has had the confident support of the leading cultural foundations and the complete cooperation of other organizations, unions, associations of, or allied to the theatre industry, and because the president of the New Dramatists Committee has embarked upon a campaign for the purpose of raising funds to insure the continuity of this important work,

Now, therefore, I, Robert F. Wagner, Mayor of the City

37Playbill, (The Miracle Worker), p. 35.
of New York do hereby proclaim the week of April 5-11, 1964, as New Dramatists Week in New York City and request the citizens to support this worthy endeavor in recognition of the fact that the theatre and those engaged in the performing arts are a cultural force of great and lasting importance to society.38

There is no question that Mary K. Frank has succeeded in making the organization sound financially, an "unartistic" but necessary prerequisite for maintaining an effective program. As Robert Anderson explained it, "... some people might say it is healthy to have to keep continually fighting for your very existence, but it is just too wearying."39 Howard Lindsay echoed that view. "... I was always fearful of running up the budget to the extent that we couldn't raise the money. I have no gift for raising money. I hate it, I keep away from it."40 Likewise, Michaela O'Hara speaking of Mary K. Frank—"She is able to ask people for money where neither Howard nor I could ... . It was difficult for me because in the first place I didn't want to be doing it myself. I wanted to be writing. And in the second place, it's very difficult to ask people for money when it's for your salary."41

Along with greater financial security came improvements in the physical plant of the organization. Initially the group

39 Interview.
40 Interview.
41 Interview.
was housed in a room above the Hudson Theatre and then the offices were moved to the City Center rent-free when the Morgenthau family interests became involved. However, during the time at City Center studio and rehearsal space had to be rented. The permanent housing for the Committee, acquired in 1969, is a converted Lutheran church located on Forty-Fourth Street. The building, purchased with grants from the Sam S. Shubert Foundation and the John Golden Fund, contains its own theatre workshop, rehearsal hall, library, and abundant office space. Mrs. Letha Nims, the present executive director of the group, hopes that the new quarters will provide a long needed unifying ingredient to the membership—a place for the group to gather and talk. "... with a permanent home, the New Dramatists have room to write, room to experiment with staging, lighting, seating; a place to read, talk, brood, see actors, run off a script, play the piano or take the sun."42

H. ADMINISTRATORS

Over the years relatively few people have been responsible for the actual operation of the New Dramatists Committee. For the first six years it was Lindsay and O'Harra—she the writer who vowed she wouldn't become involved in administration; and he, the

writer who wasn't sure the project was possible. Lindsay's initial promise to Michaela was that he would give the organization five years of his time; he did serve that time as president, but as an advisor and speaker he ended up giving the group the remainder of his life. In fact, Lindsay continued to work with the Committee after his doctors advised him to cut down on his activities. The New Dramatists, until the day he died in 1968, remained one of his favorite topics of conversation. He gave a great deal to the organization: his time, his energy, his money, his theatre, and above all he gave those qualities that made him one of the most respected men of the American Theatre—his substance, his self-respect, and his integrity. He worked hard for the Committee, expecting nothing—in fact embarrassed by any efforts to reward him. Sidney Kingsley, in eulogizing Lindsay, related that when his fellow actors wanted to name a room at The Players after him Lindsay insisted they take down the sign because he said "he had no experience as a room." 43 The fact that there is a New Dramatists Committee now, twenty-one years after its inception, is in no small way a product of Howard Lindsay's efforts.

Michaela O'Hara's frustrations as a playwright were almost equaled by those of the New Dramatists Committee. She gave her time and energy to alleviate the problems of the neophyte playwright, and yet she has never written a successful Broadway play. The

possibility remains that she might have been a successful playwright had she not spent so many years working as secretary and driving force behind the Committee. "It's a shame," remarks Robert Anderson, "but the younger writers seem to completely ignore her. They seem to forget that the New Dramatists Committee was her baby." 44

Certainly the newer members' neglect of Michaela is more the natural consequence of her absence from the scene in later years than of any calculated ingratitude. Nevertheless, she deserves much credit for the creation and success of the New Dramatists Committee.

In 1955 Lindsay became Chairman of the Board and turned over the presidency of the organization to Roger Stevens. Stevens had one of the most respected minds on Broadway and one of the busiest schedules. He was wrapped up with the diverse responsibilities of a partner of The Playwrights' Company and Producers Theatre, as well as those of a politician and realtor with widespread holdings. Perhaps Stevens had too many allegiances for it was during his presidency that the organization experienced its financial doldrums. To run the group and to replace the ailing Michaela O'Harra as Executive Secretary of the organization, Stevens brought in George Hamlin. Hamlin was the former managing director of the Dock Street Theatre in Charleston, South Carolina and was, unfortunately, more familiar with producing than administering.

44Interview.
Four years and one scandal later (some money was unaccounted for), Hamlin was replaced by Rhea Warg. In 1959, Robert Anderson, who was one of the group's more illustrious alumni and founding members, became president of the group. He spent a year as president, a term which he describes as "undistinguished." The long presidency of Mary K. Frank began in 1960.

The job of finding suitable administrators for the Committee has proved to be a difficult process. Recalling that she balked at facing the position initially, Michaela O'Hara explains:

The problem is to get someone who really wants to do that job—not a writer, not somebody who wants to be writing plays, not somebody who wants to be directing plays, not somebody who wants to be a producer, but somebody who wants to do that job. This is very difficult. There's no precedent in training because this is a completely unique organization unlike anything else that I've known anything about.45

Mary K. Frank restored a great deal of solidarity to the organization when she became president in 1960. Among her most important actions was the appointment of Letha Nims as Executive Secretary. Mrs. Nims, an able and experienced administrator, has been running the organization since 1962. She came from a background of fund-raising and public relations, and she did not want to be a writer. Administration was finally in the hands of the administrators and the New Dramatists Committee was running smoothly.

45Interview.
CHAPTER V

THE PLAYWRIGHTS

It is unlikely that any university will ever conduct a seminar on the works of Seymour Simkes. Chances are, no Broadway theatres will be named after Milton Subotsky or Eric Elspeth. But these people were members of the New Dramatists Committee, and they were trying to become professional playwrights. In its first twenty years the Committee had close to 500 members few of whom are practicing playwrights today. Most of the members of the group never did or will earn a living as a playwright—the Committee knows this. But if the Committee must nurture fifty aspiring dramatists to find one William Inge, then the New Dramatists consider the work well worth it.

Prominently displayed on the wall of the Committee’s offices are posters from successful Broadway plays written by members. Among these “hits” are the Pulitzer Prize winning play Picnic by William Inge, and Michael Stewart’s Carnival and Hello, Dolly! winners of the New York Drama Critic’s Award. From the Ten Best Plays lists, works by Committee members include Paddy Chayefsky’s Gideon and The Tenth Man, Robert Anderson’s Tea and Sympathy, James Goldman’s Lion In Winter and many dozens of other top-drawing plays. Was the New Dramatists Committee responsible for these excellent plays? Certainly not. Would these plays have been as
excellent, as successful, or even have had the chance to be written if their authors had never belonged to the Committee? It's difficult to answer, but many of the playwrights would say "no."

A. THE ORIGINAL MEMBERS

The first major recognition of a play written by a member of the Committee was the prestigious Pulitzer Prize awarded to Joseph Kramm's work *The Shrike* in 1952. The play dealt with the disastrous failure of mental therapy to distinguish between temporary despair and permanent lunacy. While *The Shrike* is little remembered today, its achievement in 1952 helped bring recognition to the New Dramatists and acted as a catalyst to help propel the infant organization forward. Upon receiving the award Kramm sent a check to the Committee for half of his prize along with this letter:

The enclosed check will back up my belief in the tremendous value of your committee's work. It is encouraging gifted people who've been on the verge of quitting; its guidance is not only keeping alive but developing talent that would otherwise be lost to the theatre. I hope all of next season's list of the "Ten Best" will be written by New Dramatists--but even if they're not, the work's eventual results are certain. So--it is with great joy I share with the New Dramatists Committee the reward of the Pulitzer Prize.¹

Although Joseph Kramm wrote several other plays--*The Gypsies Wore High Hats*, *Build With One Hand*, *Giant*, *Sons of Giants*--he never again received such lofty recognition.

The group of original Committee members to which Joseph Kramm belonged was unusual in the number of famous playwrights it produced. Certainly, any gathering of dramatists in which you find

¹Lindsay, "The New Dramatists Committee--A Progress Report," p.65
William Inge and Robert Anderson is an exceptional group. And yet, when these first members were selected by Michaela O'Harra and Howard Lindsay most of them had very limited experience with the professional theatre. One of the most experienced, Robert Walsten, was the author of four plays the most successful of which was Eight O'Clock Tuesday which had run for five weeks on Broadway in 1939. Another of the more experienced writers was A. B. Shiffrin. Out of ten plays written and eight under option he came to the group with only one Broadway production, I Like It Here, which had run for two months in 1946.

Eva Wolas was one of the women chosen for the first group. Besides the successful adaptation of Sartre's The Respectful Prostitute, her only other success had been an original comedy produced by New Stages. Other initial members included Arnold Auerbach who had written sketches for Call Me Madam and Inside U.S.A.; James Allardyce, author of At War With the Army; Robert Anderson and Ralph Nelson, each of whom had been the winner of an Army-Navy Playwriting contest sponsored by the National Theatre Conference and had been fleetingly represented on Broadway; Philo Higley whose Remember the Day had been produced in 1936; Stanley Young who had had several Broadway productions; and William Inge whose Come Back Little Sheba opened at just about the time the group was getting started. Oddly enough, Michaela O'Harra did not officially become a member of the Committee until a number of years later when
she gave up her duties as administrator. As has been the case with every group since then, a number of these original members turned to writing novels or TV and movie scripts. Enough of the membership became playwrights, however, to ensure the continuation of the Committee.

B. THE NEW MEMBERS

There is a constant demand for admission to the New Dramatists Committee. The magic names of famous playwright members—Inge, Chayefsky, Anderson, Sidney Michaels, Joe Masteroff, Michael Stewart, James Baldwin, Arnold Schulman and others—help attract over 300 applications for membership in the Committee each year. Of these 300 no more than three or four are selected for the New Dramatists.

Over the years the character of the membership has changed somewhat. Traditionally the members have been quite young, but in recent years a larger number of the writers are over thirty. "The young people just out of college have not yet mastered playwriting techniques," offers Mary K. Frank. Many of the members too, write not only for the theatre but also for television and the motion pictures, e.g., Israel Horovitz Strawberry Statement, as more immediate sources of income. This lack of concentration on writing for theatre may slow the development of these members as playwrights.

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Roger O. Hixon, one of the more successful writers for television, discovered that the changes in the TV medium over the past decade have been such that he has been forced to concentrate on other aspects of his craft.

At one time you could write plays for television. Today they want B movies. I started out to be a playwright but I feel I'm getting further and further away from the stage because of my involvement in television. I've written four plays in the last five years and not one has gotten on. That worries me. For years everything I wrote for television got on. I began thinking I'm an established writer. I don't need training, and that's a mistake.³

He joined the New Dramatists to redevelop his talent for playwriting.

The trend lately has been for many of the members of the Committee to come from backgrounds in the educational theatre. Seyril Schocken, represented on Broadway by Tiger Rag and The Moon Besieged, is typical of many of the young writers in the group. She began her career as a frustrated actress in college plays at Ohio State University, later moving to New York to try to succeed as a playwright. The Committee has helped many of the other writers such as Jerome Max, Paul Foster and Megan Terry, to finish their college degrees by obtaining fellowships for them to various universities. More and more, the young men and women are choosing formal education as a background to writing. The dramatists choose writing as their profession and then go on to study it as diligently as one would study law or medicine.

Generally, members drop from the active role of the Committee once they have succeeded in breaking into the Broadway production schedule. "From Broadway a writer can get real sunshine. We give him a sun lamp," muses Elsa Raven, past workshop coordinator for the Committee. However, occasionally a writer such as William Inge will continue to participate in the programs well past the period in which he first establishes himself as a successful professional playwright.

Recently, a number of the younger writer-members have been receiving considerable attention particularly in the Off-Broadway theatres. Ed Bullins, author of The Electronic Nigger and It Has No Choice, has become a spokesman for the "new underground" theatre in America. Others who have been widely noticed and praised are Lewis John Carlino for his Telemachus Clay and Doubletalk; Rosalyn Drexler for Home Movies in 1964; Paul Foster for his experimental pieces Balls and Tom Paine; and Jack Gelber's works The Connection, The Apple, Square In The Eye and The Cuban Thing. Also receiving more than a glance have been Israel Horovitz for The Indian Wants The Bronx and Morning; Ron Cowen for Summertree; Rochelle Owens for Futz and Belch; and Megan Terry for Viet Rock, Keep Tightly Closed In A Cool Dry Place, Massachusetts Trust, and The People Vs. Ranchman.

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C. THE PLAYWRIGHTS AND THE COMMITTEE

One subject on which most of the new members and "old guard" agree is the value of the New Dramatists Committee to the aspiring playwright. It is difficult to find a member who does not support the organization with great enthusiasm. "Like a post-graduate course toward a highly specialized Ph.D. with complex field training," is the description of the group given by former New Dramatist Robert Guy Barrows. Paddy Chayefsky, by far the most vocal and articulate champion of the organization is even more emphatic: "I've said this before, and I'll say it again. I never would have written a play if it weren't for the New Dramatists."

Some members will criticize one program as not being as personally valuable as another, but invariably these critics will preface their remarks with something like, "I've gotten a great deal from my membership." Robert Anderson was critical of the size of the group at a time when the membership lists ballooned. He felt that Michaela O'Harra, in her zealous determination as director of the group, became too protective.

The beauty of the first group was that it was smallish—twenty to twenty-five /thirty/—so that we all knew each other and we could talk to each other. It got to be an enormous group later and I think it was largely based on Michaela's feeling—she just hated to have anybody "arrive" who hadn't been through her mill.

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5Keating, _loc. cit._, p. 21.
7Interview with Paddy Chayefsky, October 7, 1969.
Despite this one disagreement, Robert Anderson remains enthusiastic about the organization.

There was the most marvelous new sense of being part of the theatre. You would go to one of the meetings... and hear someone of the stature of Robert E. Sherwood or Gar Kanin talking about third-act problems, and you really felt you were engaged in the same business they were. And there was a tremendous stimulation, almost a sense of competition, in hearing that Paddy say, had finished a play, or one of the others had just had an option taken on something you had all discussed a few weeks back.8

The Committee even garnered a printed nod from at least one theatre critic. Norman Nadel in the now defunct New York World Telegram and Sun wrote: "I write about the Committee out of enthusiasm not duty because no one is making a more selfless or potentially rewarding investment in the future of the American theatre than they are."9

The "reward" for the New Dramatists investment mentioned by Nadel is, of course, new plays. As many and as varied as the theatre's requirements might be, no need is more urgent or basic than the need for good new plays. Consequently, almost everything in theatre is dependent on the playwright and, despite the recent resurgence of improvisational theatre with such groups as New York's Living Theatre, theatre will continue to rely on its writers.

Members of the New Dramatists Committee do create new good

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8 Keating, loc. cit., p.17.

9 April 13, 1964.
plays. Since 1949, present or former members of the group have had over 150 plays produced either on Broadway or Off-Broadway, and hundreds of plays produced in regional theatres. These plays scan the broadest scope imaginable—there have been no major recurrent themes, no special preoccupation with war or urban strife, social action or religious evangelism. The subject matter of the plays is as varied as the diversity of the backgrounds of the writers. In style and content the plays range from Ronald Alexander's *Time Out for Ginger* to John Guare's *Cop-Out*, from Lanford Wilson's *The Gingham Dog* to Michael Stewart's *George M*. The Committee has in no way tried to impress any writing style or content on any of its members. In fact, it's virtually impossible to determine objectively the degree to which the Committee influences any writer or to state how much "credit" the group can take for the success of its members. Many of the writers at whom the New Dramatists point with pride have actually had little to do with the organization. And yet a playwright cannot just go to school, get a degree in dramaturgy and be in business. Perhaps the only people who know "all there is to know" about the theatre are dramatists and directors after their first successes. As writers continue in the theatre they become aware that in fact they do not have all the answers and even more distressingly, they find they make the same mistakes again and again. There are no rules in the theatre which the writer can't break, no iron-clad definitive positions of strength that must not be attacked, except possibly the rule against boring an audience.
Lindsay was fond of telling the young writers that there is no rule that can't be broken.

You can break them all. If you do break them, you must break them, however, deliberately and with full knowledge that you are doing it, and that you are taking a chance and running a risk, and you had better be sure you can write very far above the average before you break them.  

So the maturing playwright does not need hard rules which are at best the working guides for a particular teacher or playwright so much as he requires an environment that is healthy for the nurturing of playwriting talent. He may need a laboratory for the reading or staging of his work. It is often to his advantage to be offered an apprenticeship where he can watch and participate in the production of others' works. Frequently, the writer can be aided by the guidance of the relatively few men and women who are truly expert in the theatre, who can identify his weaknesses and help give direction to his talents. Obviously, the New Dramatists Committee does these things.

Some members have not needed or wanted all of the services of the Committee. "I don't like to have anybody read my play until it's finished and it's been presented," comments Robert Anderson. Other writers will shy away from sounding panels or other programs. The Committee makes no effort to deluge a playwright with more than

10 Howard Lindsay, "Talk on Playwriting," n.d., from his personal files.

11 Interview with Robert Anderson, October 4, 1969.
he cares to handle. Virtually all members have taken advantage of the theatre admissions plan. The theatre, after all, is the playwright's art museum.

In many respects, the writer who envisions entering the professional theatre today faces problems equally challenging if not more difficult than those faced by the young Miss O'Hara in 1949. There are fewer productions of new plays in New York now than there have been for years. And yet, young people still seem to want to become playwrights. Today, as in 1949, the Committee is flooded each year with applications for membership. This clamor for admission speaks loudly to the present need for the New Dramatists Committee.
CHAPTER VI

THE COMPETITION AND THE CONTRIBUTIONS

A. ORGANIZATIONS FOR PLAYWRIGHTS

Today in New York there are many organizations for playwrights, each one with its own claim to uniqueness. Since the New Dramatists founding in 1949 the small experimental workshop theatres have broken out like a rash. Most have the somewhat tenuous right to claim that they aid the beginning playwright. In Greenwich Village lofts, in basements, in small coffeehouses, and church auditoriums, in workshops and experimental theatres, works of new playwrights are given hearings, often with professional casts and directors. Beyond a doubt, these are concerted, vigorous, occasionally formalized, and frequently well-financed efforts to discover and nurture new writing talent for the theatre. Too, reputable publishers are issuing collections of experimental plays by relative unknowns and in what may prove to be the most significant development foundations and the federal government are beginning to show signs of spending money to hasten the emergence of new theatre voices. Amidst these efforts the New Dramatists Committee can claim a certain exclusivity of approach which is as unique today as it was in 1949, because the Committee is an industry-wide organization espousing no particular ideology in either form or content, and as such, concentrates on the playwright rather than the box office.
In addition, the New Dramatists Committee is one of the most diversified, and one of the oldest of all the organized attempts to aid the new playwright. In fact there is only one other group active today that originated earlier than the 1960's—the Playwrights Unit of the Actors Studio. A number of other attempts at playwright salvation have been undertaken during the lifespan of the Committee but have been subsequently abandoned. The well-known Phoenix Theatre, founded by the producing team of Norris Houghton and T. Edward Hambleton was based on the idea of a "popular-priced theatre . . . where plays can be done out of enthusiasm for the theatre as an art and where professional actors can venture off the beaten track." The Circle-in-the-Square was another group oriented towards the new playwright. Headed by Jose Quintero, it was extremely active in the fifties, and presented numerous new works. New Playwrights, the Playwrights Educational Theatre, and the Cricket Theatre were all founded during the fifties and all were intended, at least in part, to help foster new playwriting talent. All of these groups since have succumbed to production and/or financial pressures.

The Playwrights Unit of the Actors Studio is a group which first received recognition for its production of Edward Albee's *Zoo Story and Death of Bessie Smith* during the 1959-60 season. Today it is the only project whose resources consist entirely of a

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private developmental workshop. Another active agency in this respect is the Playwrights Unit of Theatre 63 (now 70) which was founded by Edward Albee and his producers Richard Barr and Charles Woodward in the hopes of locating and producing other promising talents like Albee. In 1969 this group took over the building which had served as the workshop for the New Dramatists for years. Unlike the New Dramatists, however, the Theatre 70 Unit did and does function as a producing theatre rather than as a workshop, and their shows are essentially professional showcases where finished works by unestablished writers can be seen by the members of the commercial establishment. The end result is geared to aid the producers who operate the Unit. "Essentially," says Richard Barr, "we're giving them [new writers] something of the taste of how a play is put together from a physical point of view. And then, there is a great value in seeing your own work on the stage from an artistic point of view."² Barr, as much as anyone, has been at the forefront of this somewhat amorphous movement to assist the budding playwright in the sixties. "I don't think there's any doubt that Broadway producers have paid far too little attention to new playwrights. I haven't seen them do anything to go out and feed them."³

Barr concedes that if producers were to visit many of the


³Ibid.
experimental theatre workshops in New York they would find that ninety-five per cent of the material is terrible, but he contends that the new playwrights of the future are going to come from the other five per cent. At an Off-Broadway coffeehouse like the Cafe La Mama on Second Avenue there is little of the polish of an uptown production but when Ellen Stewart, La Mama's indefatigable proprietress, tinkles a bell to announce a new work, the audience puts down its paper cups filled with instant coffee and listens. This type of presentation is repeated frequently throughout the city at places like Theatre Genesis and the Judson Poets' Theatre—both church-sponsored, The Playbox, the Off-Center Theatre, the Chelsea Theatre Center, the Playhouse of the Ridiculous, the Playwrights Workshop Club, the Troupe Theatre, the Old Reliable Theatre Tavern, The Extension, and the Cooper Square Arts Theatre. Then too, there are producing units attached to acting schools such as HB Playwrights Foundation and the Mannhardt Theatre Foundation.

Another group which has experienced some success in recent years is the Open Theatre. This was begun by Joseph Chaikin as an acting workshop. Based largely on improvisational techniques, the Open Theatre has become particularly well-known for one of these devices—transformations. A transformation is a situation in which with no formal transition the actor becomes a new character in a new situation or a new time. The assumption is that a character is defined not by the social and psychological information
fed us through exposition but by his visible acts; the device has become a direct attack on conventional plot and characterization. Out of this technique have come a kind of ensemble playing that depends on the quick transformational response, and a play built of dramatic images which are not held together by conventional linear devices. Playwrights such as Jean-Claude van Itallie and the New Dramatists' Megan Terry have had considerable success working directly with Chaikin, and testimony to the strength (or, at least newness) of the form can be found in the fact that such plays have begun to create a strong following from campus and little theatre groups across the country. Indeed, there are those who believe that it is just this type of antithesis to the conformity of the commercial Broadway offering that in fact will become the "remedy" for our invalid professional theatre.

Unquestionably these and other groups like them have produced scores of new works by playwrights who might otherwise have found it extremely difficult if not impossible to secure outlets for their creations. The major difference, however, between these types of projects and the work of the New Dramatists Committee is that these theatres do not function primarily as workshops and they are showcases only incidentally. Their prime function lies either in dispensing a certain ideology, selling tickets, or both.

Writing in The Drama Review specifically about the Off-off-Broadway theatre laboratory projects, Robert Pasolli arrives at this conclusion:
Even though the recent professionalization of Off-off-Broadway has been blurring the lines which separated it from other projects, the notion persists that it is a scene for playfulness, amateurism, irresponsibility, incompetence; yet the Off-off-Broadway projects are public theatres and hence have done more to stand the new playwright of the decade on his feet than have the workshops and showcases.  

This may be so when one considers that these laboratory projects are much less of a financial burden than the organized workshop program and consequently there are many more of them. Because of the large numbers of these theatres, and because Broadway has been relying heavily on familiar names and tested products, these Off-off-Broadway theatres have indeed presented much of the new playwriting talent which has emerged in the past few years.

One of the more professional efforts to discover and encourage new playwrights is the American Place Theatre. Founded in 1964 and situated on West Forty-Sixth Street the American Place has won critical acclaim for its productions of Robert Lowell's *The Old Glory*, William Alfred's *Hogan's Goat*, and Ronald Ribman's *Journey of the Fifth Horse*. Their workshop runs the gamut from informal readings to professionally mounted productions designed to permit the author to view his creation under actual theatre conditions. Supported largely by Rockefeller and Ford Foundation grants, the American Place has attracted a number of prominent men

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with impressive reputations in other disciplines—poet Lowell, social critic Paul Goodman, and novelist-short-story writer Philip Roth. "What we are mainly looking for," said its artistic director Wynn Handman, "is the quality of the talent. Is this writer of consequence? Can this writer make a difference? Where we differ from similar enterprises is that we are eclectic." The American Place does provide a platform, and usually a good one, but unlike the Committee the group is not greatly concerned with specific problems involved in the craft of playwriting.

The mixing of new playwrights and writers from other fields is not unique to the American Place Theatre. The use of this technique by American Place is antedated by the HB Playwrights Foundation formed by actor-director Herbert Bergoff, his wife, Uta Hagen, the actress and teacher, and such figures in the arts as novelist Saul Bellow and conductor-composer Leonard Bernstein. Like so many of the other groups HB stages productions in its workshop theatre, but it goes further. The dozen or so playwrights belonging to the workshop hold weekly seminars to which they bring a scene from a play for criticism. In addition, the playwrights may submit longer plays and sketches for criticism and as participating members are eligible for study and financial grants awarded by the HB Foundation. The approach of the Foundation to playwriting is more comprehensive than many of the other groups and its technique is based on that

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5Wallach, loc. cit.
of the classroom—very unlike the New Dramatists. An outgrowth of the older more well-known HB Studio for Actors, the HB Foundation was formed after Berghoff began teaching a small class for playwrights. "Out of his class," Miss Hagen said, "emerged a handful of young and very interesting playwrights who seemed strongly to reflect and really have something to say about us today and our country." Berghoff's theatre is for American writers, both the young and established. "For example," Miss Hagen continues,

in Europe almost all the important literary people at one point or another get interested in theatre. Here people like Steinbeck, Faulkner, and Salinger, if anything, remove themselves as far as possible from theatre rather than participating in it, because in the conditions as they exist, the artist is almost always taken for a ride by lawyers and real estate agents, operators who like to dabble in the arts.

The HB Foundation retains control of the playwright's work whether done in the laboratory theatre or on Broadway.

All of these theatre projects are located in New York where they can draw on the aspiring and the unemployed theatrical artists for personnel. But as the professional theatre has tended to decentralize in recent years so too have the experimental theatres and their programs of support for new playwrights. The Firehouse in Minneapolis, the Depot Theatre in Urbana, Illinois, the Society Hill Playhouse in Philadelphia are small non-Equity experimental

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6Ibid.
7Ibid.
operations. The Dallas Theatre Center is a larger operation in this category. The Office of Advanced Drama Research working under the umbrella of the University of Minnesota financed largely by Rockefeller Foundation money selects playwrights discovered in Off-off-Broadway, regional and university theatres and arranges for productions of their works at one of several different theatres. The Theatre Company of Boston is a theatre which has made its commitment to new plays a central concern over several seasons. In addition, theatres such as the Arena Stage, the Barter Theatre, the Center Theatre Group, the Milwaukee Repertory, the Guthrie Theatre and the Cincinnati Playhouse-in-the-Park have sustained efforts to produce original scripts.8

A related effort is the American Playwrights Theatre founded by playwright Jerome Lawrence which was designed as a production scheme to enable non-profit theatres across the country to gain access to new plays by established American playwrights before, rather than after Broadway. More than fifty member theatres presented American Playwrights Theatre's initial offering, Robert Anderson's The Days Between during the 1965-1966 season. More recently, however, American Playwrights Theatre has widened its scope to include the works of unknown dramatists in its program. In 1968 it offered to its members Summertree, the first play of Ron Cowen.

David Ayers, the Executive Director of American Playwrights Theatre writes:

American Playwrights Theatre has decided to extend its policy to bring a sharper focus on the playwright and his development in the working theatre. APT will continue to present to its membership new scripts, many written particularly for APT, but will supplement its services to bring playwrights together with theatres concerned with the development of the play in production.

American Playwrights Theatre, in addition to securing productions of new plays by young playwrights intends to work with the Dramatists Guild, the Eugene O'Neill Foundation and the New Dramatists Committee in making available to its members the names of playwrights who have working scripts ready for rehearsal conditions, and to inform its subscribers of playwrights who are interested in becoming artists-in-residence. As many and varied as these projects are, however, none offers as extensive a program as the New Dramatists.

Opinions differ, sometimes strongly, about the actual value of these experimental workshops insofar as developing new playwrights is concerned. "The great benefit of the Playwrights Unit," says playwright Paul Foster, "is that they don't mess around with you. They just let you be and they give you some real estate to work in." Barr of the Playwrights Unit states flatly, "No amount of

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10 Wallach, loc. cit.
criticism or panel discussion will help an untalented playwright," and he would get very little argument there. However, Joe Masteroff, one of the New Dramatists' prized alumni and most vocal supporters denies the intrinsic value of most of these experimental workshops. In fact, he doesn't see any important talent coming from these efforts. "No major playwright has emerged since Albee and he emerged ten years ago. This is not the most brilliant period in American theatre history." Speaking from the frame of reference of the establishment professional theatre his thoughts ring true. In the sixties as one walked through the real estate known as Broadway, one might easily have the impression that America's plays were all written by a handful of people from England and at least four men named Neil Simon. Many of the supporters of the experimental laboratory theatres feel, however, that their product is not aimed at the commercial theatre which Masteroff is based in, and therefore, the results must be judged by a different set of criteria. They feel that they have turned out many successful playwrights insofar as their audience is concerned. Megan Terry, Sam Shepherd, Jean-Claude van Itallie emerge as examples.

The HB Foundation and the New Dramatists Committee of all the major agencies devoted to new playwright development are the most strongly dedicated to the principle that playwriting should be

11Ibid.
12Ibid.
approached professionally like any other craft with all the instructional tools available to other disciplines. Sam Shepherd, blunt in his assessment of programs like the New Dramatists which operate so strongly within the establishment, says "I think that's a kind of cultural hang-up where people are trying to stick with the conventional theatre and make it into a kind of educational event."\(^\text{13}\)

A young writer named Narda Stokes who became a member of the New Dramatists in 1959 admits that she sees a tendency within the membership, and I certainly include myself in this criticism, to place too much stress upon the current commercial Broadway theatre as a criterion—in other words, to be somewhat shortsighted when it comes to exploring new forms and new themes. It seems to me that out of the nucleus of thirty to thirty-five new playwrights having the advantage of such an organization might grow an exciting and militant new theatre movement so much needed in America. I don't mean to imply that we're not trying to rise above the cliches and commercialism, for many of the plays written by New Dramatists are honest and courageous efforts. But with the theatre posing the tremendous economic problem it does, and the writer wanting to eat and, perhaps even more, to see his work performed—well, the dilemma hasn't grown any new horns in recent years, just longer ones.\(^\text{14}\)

There is, however, no pressure placed on a member of the New Dramatists Committee to disassociate himself with any of the experimental production groups while he is active with the New Dramatists. Many of the Committee writers belong to several of the other organizations.

\(^{13}\text{Ibid.}\)

\(^{14}\)Keating, \textit{loc. cit.}, p. 66.
All of the playwright-oriented groups agree that the American theatre needs new playwriting talent, and needs it badly. Sam Shepherd, however, isn't overwhelmed by the attention now being lavished on the young dramatists. He argues that all efforts to uncover new writing talent aren't being done for his sake. He insists that the experimental workshops and laboratories devoted to new plays need the writers far more than the writers need them. "I think they're doing it out of necessity because of what's happening to the theatre. I think the problem of having a place for every new playwright isn't because everyone is being philanthropic."

The New Dramatists Committee would not argue with this evaluation. In fact, it would wholeheartedly agree, and this genuine need for new talent has been the Committee's rallying cry for support.

B. THE NEW DRAMATISTS' PHILOSOPHY

The philosophy of the New Dramatists Committee has not been altered essentially since its founding in 1949. The basis for the operation of the Committee rests now as it did then, on two basic premises. (1) Playwriting is at least in part a craft. (2) This craft can be learned. The Committee still requires that the artistic abilities of its members be demonstrated prior to their acceptance into the group.

Included in the Committee's idea of craft are found the

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15Wallach, loc. cit.
"dicta" which established writers pass on to the hopefuls as the less tangible aspects of writing for the professional stage.

James Goldman comments:

Among the things I learned while a New Dramatist, aside from how to write a second act, are how to write a first act; what rehearsals look like; what the problems are in Philadelphia; how to rewrite; what to look for in a director and how to compromise when you can't find it; what producers do, if anything; how to cut your favorite lines, including laughs; how much it's safe to drink when under pressure; what mistakes to avoid at all costs and how hard it is to avoid them; in short, all that can be taught about being both a writer and a worker in the theatre.16

In the process of absorbing these things, the New Dramatists attempts to keep its writers alive and strong enough to move typewriter keys. In short, as James Goldman's novelist brother, William, puts it to "Let the American playwright know that somebody wants him. He's just like any other animal; feed him, keep him warm, pet him every now and then. Who knows? Someday he might even lick your hand."17 In order to accomplish this the Committee established several specific aims. (1) Offer the beginning playwright a chance to see more plays as most beginning writers cannot afford to see enough theatre. (2) Provide the young dramatist with an opportunity to meet and discuss craft problems with established playwrights. (3) Provide the vital function of having the new playwrights view their works as produced and played before a live audience. (4) Bring

16NDC Fund-Raising letter from James Goldman to Jerome Lawrence, April 8, 1969.

together the writers for critique sessions and readings of one another's works.

The New Dramatists retain the belief that these aims can best be accomplished on something other than the level of a formal school. The Committee has always been viewed as a facility that would enable the playwright to learn more about his craft. The facility is there for those who are willing to avail themselves of the opportunity. To keep this facility "open" they insist that the members keep delivering plays or be dropped. "We can't just get loaded up with interesting writers who are dead wood," comments agent Audry Wood.

C. THE NEW DRAMATISTS COMMITTEE: BENEFITS TO THE PLAYWRIGHT

There are many journals and books devoted to playwriting technique and theory. Almost all try to justify the supposition that playwriting can be taught. W. T. Price, writing around the turn of the century, asserted, "The idea that one can be born a playwright is a monstrous lie and wrought with evil." Others over the years have been less eloquent but equally adamant in theory. Although the learning of the craft of structuring a play script is certainly an important aspect of the New Dramatists' program, an equally important emphasis is on the welter of less tangible problems which frequent the would-be playwright's life.


The aim of the Committee is to create a program that is both practical and profitable to the young playwright as well as to the theatre in general. The group does not tell a writer how he must do anything. Rather, they expose the would-be dramatists to things as they are in the practical and problem-ridden professional theatre. No matter how brilliant a play may be, if the writer doesn’t know how to function effectively in the total theatre picture, he ends up as a cripple when it comes to the realities of having his work produced. Because of the economics of today’s theatre there is little opportunity for the young playwright to gain experience on Broadway. Consequently, there is a need to give the young and beginning playwrights exposure in the professional theatre via the Committee. Recalls Robert Anderson,

I used to say to my classes that fifty per cent of the job is learning how to write a play and fifty per cent is learning how to get along with people. This is one of the playwright’s big problems, and it’s one of the ways in which the New Dramatists is helpful. It can help the young writer to figure out some of the mundane things such as helping him to know whom to trust with his play, and how to work with a director. This is a kettle of fish that you don’t know when you sit down to write a play.20

The Committee has tried to treat the creative writer with a certain amount of respect—to make him feel at home in the community of professional stage writers. Many of their efforts are focused upon the writer as a creative agent rather than upon a particular script.

"One can so quickly grow cynical in this business," says Miss O'Harra, "and let cynicism lead to sterility." To this end, the Committee feels that there is a great importance to the new dramatist in being spoken to as a successful writer, as one of the "accepted."

Doubtless a young writer needs a certain mettle to withstand the barbs of disappointment, ill-founded criticism, or worse, lack of attention. The comraderie that so many of the New Dramatists members cite as one of the prime attributes of the organization hopefully adds to the armor that the playwright needs to withstand the arid periods of self-doubt, frustration, and despair that come to every writer. Part of the real vitality of the group is in the sense of participation that permeates the operation. It isn't a handful of writers being lectured to by a handful of teachers. Everyone is a part of it.

Recently, especially since they now have acquired a theatre of their own, the emphasis of the group has been gravitating towards a stronger workshop program. For many years, the production aspect of the Committee's programs was strained due to lack of facilities. While the fact that the New Dramatists Committee does not produce its members' works professionally sets it aside from most other practical playwriting groups, the group has not been entirely pleased with this lack of production. In the early sixties, George Hamlin

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21 Interview with Michaela O'Harra, March 21, 1967.
approached the Ford Foundation with a plan for a production company that would put on four new plays by New Dramatists each year in an Off-Broadway theatre. Some of the Board considered the lack of a professional production company to be the Committee's one major failing. "The ultimate and most important thing you can do for a playwright, we can't do," Michaela O'Hara said all the time. "We can't produce his plays. If we could have produced Paddy Chayefsky's The Man Who Shook the Mountain, or Bob Anderson's Eden Rose, or early, imperfect plays by some of the other people, we might have advanced their careers by five years or more." Not everyone was as enthusiastic about the program. Many felt it would detract from the other vital programs of the organization. The result has been an emphasis on the workshop and other programs rather than on a professional production scheme. The workshop program, however, has taken on added impetus in recent years as it has become increasingly difficult to find a production for a new play.

Many beginning writers are forced to accept criticism from people who have no basis upon which to form valid criticisms. The playwright often uses this non-professional appraisal as the only means to evaluate his work. Often, overly positive criticism from a friend proves to be as detrimental to the new writer as cynical criticism from others. The New Dramatists does offer a system in

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22 Keating, loc. cit., p. 63.
which criticism from other neophytes as well as the established writers is available to the members. It is left to each member's own abilities and ambitions to select what is meaningful to him from the New Dramatists' many programs. It is strictly left to the writer to absorb the craft of his profession as it is presented in plays, workshops, critiques and by the many professionals with whom he comes in contact as a member of the Committee. It may be quite valid to assert that formal training has never made a great playwright, but similarly there is no evidence that it has ever ruined one.

To this day when asked which aspect of the program she thinks has been the most successful Michaela O'Harrá retorts that all of them together help to create, not to stimulate, a climate in which it is possible for the writer who has the initial creative potential to develop within as nearly a total professional environment as possible.

The writers vary considerably. There are some who need nothing but to go to the theatre. People used to criticize that by saying "look at that one, all he does is come in and get tickets and he . . . ." My answer has always been that all I ask is that he write plays. If he's writing scripts and they're getting attention, and they're getting to be better scripts, that's all I need. We're here to do that job and only that job.23

Art per se cannot be taught anymore than one can teach the beauty of a sunset, but craft and technique can be learned. As an

23 Interview.
artist can learn to mix paints so too can a playwright learn to write dialogue. The New Dramatists Committee is extant today twenty years after its founding and, judging by the lifespan of many other similar groups, this speaks well for its accomplishments. Today, these twenty years later, the group is still concerned with creating an atmosphere beneficial to promising dramatists, and is still concerned with craft. Perhaps one of their most vociferous (and successful) advocates of the Committee's approach, Paddy Chayefsky adds his voice to the plea for writers to learn their craft.

I'm a very unsentimental person. I feel gratitude towards very few people or institutions. The college I went to and the New Dramatists Committee are among them. To this day, I still use the rules I learned in meetings with playwrights arranged by the Committee. Beautiful writing cannot be taught, but competence and professionalism can, and these things can be enough. New Dramatists meetings are not vague or discursive with a lot of people sitting around discussing jazz like "integrity." They are sessions at which you can learn the craft rules, the literary tools of the trade. (Underlining mine)

D. THE NEW DRAMATISTS COMMITTEE: BENEFITS TO SOCIETY

Just because the New Dramatists Committee exists there is no reason to suppose that it is suddenly going to discover an entire stable of successful playwrights. Many good talents simply never join organizations of this sort. Like Lindsay, Michaela O'Harra was not fooling herself about the ability of the group to revolutionize

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the theatre world or even to generate scores of new and successful Broadway productions. The Committee has remained adamant on this point. It has from time to time been asked to show its medals of achievement. To some perhaps the results have not justified all of the dollars and hours of man-power that have been poured into the Committee for these past twenty years. All the Committee can realistically do to respond to these challenges is to list their members with their professional credits and say that in some way, these writers found it easier or less lonely or quicker to write good plays because they were members of the group. It is doubtful that it is at all easier for the young writer today to establish himself as a Broadway playwright than it was twenty years ago. In fact, the conditions of the theatre today may make it more difficult. During the period in which she was running the organization, Michaela O'Hara used to complain bitterly that the Board of Directors and the people who were donating the money were constantly pushing to see results. "They always want to see results. They want to know who's on Broadway and who's a Guggenheim Fellow, and they want this now not yesterday. They seem to forget that writing plays takes time." 25 Most of the writers in the New Dramatists have never made it to Broadway; most of them never will. But as Howard Lindsay recalled of the first group of playwrights,

25 Interview.
I was hoping that if we dug up one or two repeating playwrights, or three or four, that would satisfy them. I knew that when we got this group of thirty playwrights together that there weren't going to be more than three or four among them who would be repeating playwrights. But there were."26

It is safe to say that the New Dramatists Committee has, in the last twenty years, accomplished its stated purposes. It has created an atmosphere which has attracted many new playwrights. From this group of playwrights have come a substantial number of "commercial" writers for the theatre. But what of this theatre in which the Committee's dramatists became active? Perhaps to establish the relevance of the Committee today, it is the Broadway theatre that needs to be analyzed.

At the annual New Dramatists' fund-raising luncheon in 1961, Paddy Chayefsky announced from the dais: "We want to produce working playwrights. I think this is a much better solution to the theatre's problems than a recent suggestion to cut playwright's royalties."27 This drew a burst of applause from the audience. Certainly, if today's theatre were stronger, if there were a constant output of productions in the professional theatre, then the creative impulse of aspiring dramatists would be stimulated to the extent that the New Dramatists Committee's activities would be superfluous.

The argument is that there are not enough producible new

26Interview with Howard Lindsay, March 22, 1967.

playscripts available to support a vibrant professional theatre. Can this be entirely correct? Over 3,000 plays are copyrighted annually in the United States. Every agent has a desk top full of new scripts and the New Dramatists are confronted every year with literally hundreds of applicants with newly-written works in hand. Playwriting courses throughout the country are training countless students as playwrights and every producer is inundated with requests to read new scripts. Of course, there is no objective way to gauge talent, to measure the quality of these works, but surely more good plays are written than ever get produced. It is evident in experimental theatre and workshops that the rare ability to write plays has not vanished. Perhaps then many of the most talented new playwrights are demonstrating their talents elsewhere, but this must be because "elsewhere" has more to offer than the Broadway theatre. No one has yet been able to demonstrate that the artistic abilities of a society diminish en masse but it seems possible, even probable, that they shift in emphasis. There is writing talent available; it is the outlet for this talent that is lacking. One can argue that America could produce a great many shepherds if there were a demand for that profession. The latent ability to be a shepherd exists in our society no doubt, but there is little need for such services. Correspondingly, the need for Theatre in our society appears to be decreasing, hence, the rewards for becoming a playwright are diminishing.
The tendency today is to view the playwright as a boredom-killer or an "escape" artist—a hired writer who goes around creating happy moments or excitement to help smother the ennui of our society. In this respect the writer is placed on a par with professional football players, yacht manufacturers, and dune buggy designers. Many talented writers would rather not go through the extraordinary trouble of writing a play just to kill someone else's boredom.

Part of the reason for the decline of theatre is, of course, television. People feel no need to spend money on theatre tickets when they can stay home and watch TV for nothing. Television has also contributed greatly to the "happiness excitement" style of entertainment that audiences now seem to demand. As the population grows and "individuality" loses stress, the need for fast popular entertainment increases and the personal individual articulation of the theatre becomes less meaningful. As a communications medium, too, theatre cannot begin to compete with television. It would take fifty years of plays at the Cafe La Mama to reach as many people as one episode of Bonanza.

It would seem logical, then, that the dramatist would turn to the successful television medium where he could communicate with hundreds of millions of people. There is plenty of room and a good climate for TV writers—a sort of febrile Bohemia where a writer is constantly at work. Television would seem to be a good training
ground for the playwright because television drama doesn't have to be completely polished or artistic all the time. However, for television to be a fertile field for the writer it would have to want and need good drama—not necessarily enduring masterpieces, but good drama. Such is not the case. The circumstances of television are against a significant amount of good drama ever being produced. Television is judged by the ratings, the big audiences. Producers and sponsors are unwilling to gamble on any program with a more select audience or controversial subject matter. When drama is produced it is nearly always a "proven" play with a "name" cast. Public television does attempt to present more experimental works but, at present, public television's demand is not great enough to absorb the large number of serious young dramatists who would like a showcase for their work.

A few years ago Walter Kerr writing in the New York Herald Tribune asked in large type, "What Has Happened to Our Playwrights?" Since then the question has become "What Has Happened to Our Theatres? To our Audiences?" The answer to all these questions may be the same. Theatres are becoming less and less necessary and no one is going to keep them around if they are not necessary. If theatre is becoming less necessary to our society (partly due to television and the movies) then, of course, the aspiring playwright is finding it increasingly more difficult to sell his wares.
Richard Schechner, when he was resident pessimist of The Drama Review, commented to critic George Oppenheimer:

I have no contempt for you, Broadway isn't worth being contemptuous of. It's disappearing into high-rise buildings anyway. Something can be important in one of three ways: economically, socially, artistically. Artistically, Broadway is of no importance. Socially, yes: we get together and talk, like now. Economically, it is of no interest: if it died, the New York tourist business would suffer slightly, but it has no effect on the gross national product, and no one would mourn. There's no point to whipping Broadway; one wants to preserve it because of its quaintness. It's like the Alamo—a tourist attraction we should all remember.28

Gore Vidal is more succinct: "I like writing plays. I like writing novels too. I suppose I'm attracted to decadent forms."29

There are writers around and there are those who are serious about the theatre. The point is, is the theatre serious about them? Do the dramatists fill a void in our society or are they museum curios?

Paddy Chayefsky has this to say:

If you mean to write plays the New Dramatists are a superb organization. In fact, it's the only organization around. The only other way to learn to write plays is the way Robert Louis Stevenson suggested writers learn anything. You learn to write like you learn to whittle. You do it. Unfortunately, there's not too much room for whittling. There's not much call for it. You have to do all your whittling on your own now, and with no particular recompense except the fun of whittling. The New Dramatists Committee now provides at least a place to whittle with other whittlers.30


29Ibid., p. 137

30Interview with Paddy Chayefsky, October 7, 1969.
There is no way to know if theatre will once again become the important element of society that it was to the Greek or the Renaissance man. Perhaps as more and more avenues of human contact are closed to men the theatre will become the "new communication." Meanwhile, the New Dramatists Committee undoubtedly will continue to turn out young writers who are interested in writing for the theatre, as limited as that form may now be. Many plays have been contributed to the American repertoire because of the Committee. Through the playwright members and their works the New Dramatists certainly have exerted an influence on the theatre scene. Michaela O'Harra wanted to create an environment which approximated a healthy theatre in which the writer could function more effectively. The status of the professional theatre today is not healthy and this makes it even more difficult for the professional playwright to find room for his creations than in 1949. The New Dramatists Committee has not significantly altered the American theatre. It has not been the nursing hand to the wounded industry. But this was not its aim. The New Dramatists Committee has aided a few playwrights to learn their craft and has supplied these writers with a helpful atmosphere in which to work. This was the Committee's aim. It would be nice if one could report that the Committee has singlehandedly restored a shaky art form/industry to its collective feet, but this is out of the question. If and when the day comes that the theatre becomes
again an important and necessary element of life, then the role of the Committee may stand in a brighter, more pertinent light.

It is difficult, if not impossible, to find members of the New Dramatists Committee who, regardless of their preference for specific programs, are not agreed that they are better playwrights for having been members of the Committee. But as longtime member Frank Duane has pointed out:

New Dramatists as an organization must always stand at the bar of a more public judgment than that involving its members alone. Asked what important playwrights we have developed, we can point to Paddy Chayefsky, William Gibson, Bob Anderson and the others. But we are told that those men would have made it without the New Dramatists. How can any "club" take credit for what was, according to a large body of opinion, an almost preordained triumph? Writers are individuals from the word "go" and how can any organization which demands that they be halfway home before they even get in take credit for their eventual homecoming? But then how can it not? If talent alone opened plays on Broadway, children would be the sole winners of the Pulitzer Prize. There is that chasm between. There is that moment, long or short, that bridge-needing moment between triumph of the classroom and the triumph of the stage. There is that long dark night of the playwright's soul between going to work on Monday morning and going to Sardi's on Tuesday night. How can it be filled? How can the longness of the night be shortened? That's what the New Dramatists is about.31

In the end, education and talent and ambition and dreams serve as only part of the prerequisite for becoming a successful playwright. The New Dramatists develops the other parts. The Committee gives the young writer an opportunity to learn his craft, 31

31 Keating, loc. cit., p. 67.
the "how" of the art, and it offers him the intangibles of support and assurance. The New Dramatists as an organization has little specifically to gain from its efforts. It produces no shows, it makes no money, it lights up no marquees. It has been uniquely successful in accomplishing its sole aim—to help the writer and through him to help the theatre. It's too bad that at the moment, at least, there is such a minimal demand for its product—the professional playwright.
APPENDIX A

MEMBERSHIP

The following names appeared at least once on the membership roles of the New Dramatists Committee issued between 1949 and 1969:

Adams, A. B.
Adams, James
Adams, William
Adelmann, Louis
Adelmann, Milton
Aiken, Alfred
Aldrich, Keith
Alexander, Ronald
Allardice, James
Altman, Jess
Anderson, Robert
Anderson, Walt
Appell, Don
Appelman, Mark
Apstein, Theodore
Armstrong, Rella
Armstrong, Robert
Ashamn, Jane
Auerbach, Arnold
Aulicino, Armand
Babcock, Hayes
Bachman, Robert
Baehr, Nicholas
Baldwin, James
Baldwin, Joseph
Balf, Miriam
Barefield, Jack
Barlow, Ann Marie
Barrows, Robert
Barry, Marilyn
Bates, Jonathan
Baumbach, Jonathan
Baxt, George
Bearson, Lawrence
Beier, Carl
Bellak, George
Best, Charles
Best, Alfred
Bettenbender, John
Biel, Nicholas
Bigelow, Otis
Birnkrantz, Samuel
Blake, Elizabeth
Bonheur, Flora
Breen, Edward
Brewster (Tyler), Townsend
Bromberg (Josephs), Conrad
Bronner, Edwin
Brown, Kenneth
Buchwald, Charlotte
Bullins, Ed
Burton, Russell
Burton-Mercur, Paul
Caldwell, Joseph
Carlinno, Lewis John
Carrington, Elaine
Carroll, Dean
Carter, Arthur
Carter, Robert
Chamberlain, Lowell
Chayefsky, Paddy
Child, Nellise
Childress, Alice
Clarke, Wm. Kendall
Clement, Victor
Cobin, Harold
Code, Grant
Colby, Allyson
Coleman, Lonnie
Coleman, Patricia
Coleman, Val
Colson, Robert
Comorthoon, James
Cooper, Mae
Corington, William
Costello, Ward

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Coudert, Jo
Cowen, Ron
Cox, Curt
Crain, Wm.
Crane, Burton
Dare, Derby
David, Charles
Davidson, Madeline
Davis III, Allen
Day, Lillian
Dearborn, Elwyn
De Roo, Edward
Devane, William
De Wolfe, Henry
Diamant, William
Dizenzo, Charles
Drake, Alfred
Drayton, Mary
Drew, Bernard
Drexler, Rosalyn
Druck, Mark
Duane, Frank
Dubin, Alexander
Eager, Edward
Easton, Sidney
Edwards, Paige
Eels, George
Elder III, Lonne
Elliot, Elaine
Elman, Irving
Elspeth, Eric
Elwell, Robert
Esser, Carl Wright
Falk, Lee
Fedoroff, Alexander
Fischel, John
Foote, Horton
Foreman, Richard
Fornes, Maria Irene
Foster, Gladys
Foster, Paul
Frainkel, Helene
Frankel, Deborah
Frankel, Herbert
Franzblau, Harlod B.
Freund, Phillip
Friedman, Charles
Friedman, Joel
Funt, Julian
Gagliano, Frank
Garrison, John
Gates, Jack
Gates, Natalie
Gerber, Jack
Gerolmo, Frank
Gerstad, John
Gibson, William
Gilligan, Edmund
Gilner, Elais
Giunta, Aldo
Goforth, Frances
Golden, Alfred
Goldman, James
Goldsmith, Gloria
Goodey, Elizabeth
Gordon, Kurtz
Grady, Lester
Granick, Harry
Graves, Clifford
Graves, Will
Green, Sheila
Greendale, Alexander
Greenfeld, Josh
Grey, Glorine
Gregg, Jess
Grieco, Rose
Grinstead, Robert
Gross, Martha
Guare, John
Gumpel, William
Gutherie, William
Hailey, Oliver
Hammill, Joes
Harvey, James
Haussamen, Crane
Havoc, June
Hayes, Joseph
Haywood, Donald
Heider, Albert
Hellmer, Kurt
Henderson, Albert
Hennefeld, Edmund B.
Henney, Robert
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Young, John
Young, Stanley

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Zavin, Ben
Zielke, Howard (David Wright)
Zimmerle, Carl
APPENDIX B

PROFESSIONAL PRODUCTIONS OF PLAYS BY CURRENT OR ALUMNI NEW DRAMATISTS FROM 1952-1953 TO 1968-1969

The list includes the season of first Broadway, Off-Broadway, or professional production outside New York. It is compiled from New Dramatists Committee annual reports and is not necessarily a complete list of every play ever professionally produced by every New Dramatist, and, as can be concluded from the title does not include those numerous plays produced non-professionally by universities, little theatres, etc., nor those plays optioned but never produced. Nor was the author necessarily a member at the time of production.

B = Broadway 0-B = Off-Broadway 0 = Outside New York

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APPENDIX C

MAJOR PLAYWRITING AWARDS WON BY ACTIVE AND ALUMNI
NEW DRAMATISTS SINCE 1951

Pulitzer Prize
1952 The Shrike by Joseph Krann
1953 Picnic by William Inge

New York Drama Critics' Circle Award
1953 Picnic by William Inge
1961 Carnival by Michael Stewart
1964 Hello, Dolly! by Michael Stewart
1967 Cabaret by Joe Masteroff

Ten Best Plays List - Louis Kronenberger-Henry Hewes
1951-52 The Shrike by Joseph Krann
1952-53 Picnic by William Inge
1953-54 Tea and Sympathy by Robert Anderson
1953-54 The Magic and The Loss by Julian Funt
1954-55 The Desperate Hours by Joseph Hayes
1954-55 Bus Stop by William Inge
1957-58 The Dark at the Top of the Stairs by William Inge
1959-60 The Tenth Man by Paddy Chayefsky
1961-62 Gideon by Paddy Chayefsky
1962-63 She Loves Me by Joe Masteroff
1962-63 Tchin-Tchin by Sidney Michaels
1962-63 P.S. 193 by David Rayfiel
1963-64 The Passion of Josef D. by Paddy Chayefsky
1963-64 Dylan by Sidney Michaels
1963-64 Hello, Dolly! by Michael Stewart
1965-66 The Lion in Winter by James Goldman
1966-67 You Know I Can't Hear You When the Water's Running by Robert Anderson
1966-67 Cabaret by Joe Masteroff
1967-68 I Never Sang for my Father by Robert Anderson
APPENDIX D

OTHER RECOGNITION WON BY ACTIVE OR ALUMNI
NEW DRAMATISTS

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<td>James Goldman</td>
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<td>Charles Best - 2nd Prize</td>
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<td>Anthony Terpiloff - 1st Prize</td>
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<td>Joseph Hayes</td>
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<td>Dramatists Alliance Award</td>
<td>Ann Barlow - 2nd Prize</td>
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<td>Elmwood Community Theatre Award</td>
<td>Clifford Mason - 1st Prize</td>
<td>1968-1969</td>
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<td>Emmy Award Nomination</td>
<td>David Rayfiel</td>
<td>1963-1964</td>
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<td>Ford Foundation Grant for Creative Writing</td>
<td>James Baldwin</td>
<td>1958-1959</td>
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<td>Ford Foundation Program Winners</td>
<td>Charles Best</td>
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<td>Josh Greenfeld</td>
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<td>Sidney Michaels</td>
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<td>Phillip Pruneau</td>
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<td>Lionel Wiggam</td>
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<td>James Adams</td>
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<td>Miriam Stovall</td>
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<td>Golden Globe Award</td>
<td>Lewis John Carlino</td>
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Guggenheim Fellowship for Creative Writing in the Drama

- Loften Mitchell 1958-1959
- Arnold Weinstein 1964-1965
- Charles Dizenzo 1966-1967

Hallmark Competition Finalist
- Julia Savarese 1960-1961

Harlem Writers Guild Special Citation
- Loften Mitchell 1962-1963

Helene Wurlitzer Foundation Grant
- Allen Davis III 1967-1968
- Allen Davis III 1968-1969

Huntington Fellowship
- Mildred Kuner 1952-1953

John Golden Fund Award
- Alexander Federoff 1953-1954
- Ann Barlow 1956-1957
- Joseph Caldwell 1956-1957
- Romeo Muller 1956-1957
- Charles Best 1957-1958
- Joseph Caldwell 1957-1958
- Louis Lippa 1957-1958
- Violet Welles 1957-1958
- Frank Duane 1958-1959
- James Comorthoon 1959-1960
- Narda Stokes 1959-1960
- Anthony Terpiloff 1959-1960
- Harold Yablonsky 1959-1960
- Alice Childress 1960-1961
- Arthur Pittman 1965-1966
- Joseph Scott 1965-1966
- Kenneth Brown 1967-1968
- Lonne Elder III 1968-1969

John Hay Whitney Fellowship
- Lonne Elder III 1963-1964

J. Walter Thompson Fellowship
- Edward Breen 1956-1957

Kraft $50,000 TV Award
- William Noble 1956-1957
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<th>Award</th>
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<td>Langly Fellowship</td>
<td>Eugene Raskin</td>
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<td>Lolo D'Annunzio Committee Playwrights Award</td>
<td>Jerome Max</td>
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<td>Longview Foundation Grant</td>
<td>Sylvan Karchmer</td>
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<td>MacDowell Colony Fellowship</td>
<td>James McGee</td>
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<td>Halsey Melone</td>
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<td>Stewart Stern</td>
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<td>Sol Stein</td>
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<td>Allan Davis III</td>
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<td>Macmillan Award</td>
<td>George Selden</td>
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<td>National Five Arts Award</td>
<td>Harry Granick</td>
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<td>National One-Act Play Contest</td>
<td>Ann Barlow</td>
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<td>North Carolina Drama League Play Contest</td>
<td>Lewis John Carlino - 1st Prize</td>
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<td>&quot;Obie&quot; Award</td>
<td>Louis Lippa</td>
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<td>Jack Gelber</td>
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<td>John Wulp</td>
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<td>Rosalyn Drexler</td>
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<td>John Guare</td>
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<td>Israel Horovitz</td>
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<td>O'Neill Foundation Fellowship</td>
<td>Ron Cowen</td>
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<td>William Parchman</td>
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</table>
Outer Circle Critics' Award
  Joe Masteroff  1966-1967
  Lonne Elder III  1968-1969

Presbyterian Players Play Contest
  Frank M. Mosier - 3rd Prize  1958-1959

Presidents' Committee on the Arts Award
  Don Petersen  1966-1967

Pulitzer Prize Nomination
  Ron Cowen  1967-1968

Radcliffe Institute for Independent Study
  Fellowship
    Alice Childress  1965-1966
    Alice Childress  1966-1967
    Alice Childress  1967-1968

RCA Fellowship
  Frank Duane  1955-1956
  James L. Herlihy  1956-1957

Roadstead Foundation Drama Award
  Ray Sipherd  1961-1962

Rockefeller Foundation Fellowship
  Rosalyn Drexler  1965-1966
    Jerome Max  1965-1966
    Paul Foster  1966-1967
    Frank Gagliano  1966-1967
    Aldo Giunta  1966-1967
    Jerome Max  1966-1967
    Lanford Wilson  1966-1967
    Megan Terry  1967-1968
    John Guare  1968-1969
    Lyle Kessler  1968-1969

"Show Business" Grand Award - Best Playwright
  Israel Horovitz  1968-1969

Stanley Drama Award
  Gene Radano - 3rd Prize  1962-1963
  Lonne Elder III - 1st Prize  1964-1965
  William Parchman - 1st Prize  1966-1967

Stephan Vincent Benet Award
  Felix Leon  1952-1953
Theatre Club Award
Joe Masteroff 1955-1956
Joe Masteroff 1966-1967

Thomas Wood Stevens Award of Dramatist Alliance
Sol Stein 1953-1954

Tony Award Nominee
Joe Masteroff 1963-1964
Sidney Michaels 1963-1964

Tufts College Drama Award
Norman Vein 1953-1954

University of Arkansas Play Contest
Frank H. Mosier - 2nd Prize 1958-1959

University of Chicago Play Contest
Alex Federoff - 2nd Prize 1957-1958

University of Indiana Writer's Conference Poetry Award
Lionel Wiggam 1961-1962

Variety Poll Winner
Joe Masteroff 1962-1963

Vernon Rice Drama Desk Award
Jack Gelber 1959-1960
Oliver Hailey 1962-1963
Lewis John Carlino 1963-1964
Lanford Wilson 1966-1967
Ed Bullins 1967-1968
Israel Horovitz 1967-1968
Ron Cowen 1967-1968

Video Stage '58
Anthony Terpiloff - Honorable Mention 1958-1959

Wesleyan Foundation Fellowship
Ron Cowen 1967-1968
John Guare 1967-1968
William Parchman 1968-1969

Yale - ABC Fellowship
William Parchman - Alternate 1964-1965
Don Petersen 1964-1965
Charles Dizenzo 1965-1966
Malcolm Mamorstein - Alternate 1965-1966
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<tr>
<td>Kenneth Brown</td>
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<td>Charles Dizenzo</td>
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<td>John Guare</td>
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<td>Megan Terry</td>
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<td>Lonne Elder III</td>
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<td>Maria Irene Fornes</td>
<td>1967-1968</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
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Paddy Chayefsky, October 7, 1969.

Mary K. Frank, October 7, 1969.

Howard Lindsay, March 22, 1967.

Michaela O'Harra, March 21, 1967.
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