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The Work of John Reed, Louise Bryant and Eugene O'Neill in the Context of The  
Provincetown Players

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I confirm that this thesis is my own work written using solely the sources and literature properly quoted and acknowledged as works cited.

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## **Anotace**

Cílem této diplomové práce je představit práci Eugena O'Neilla, Louise Bryant a Johna Reeda v kontextu jejich působení v divadelním uskupení Provincetown Players. Teoretická část je rozdělena do tří rozsáhlých kapitol, kdy první z nich podává obraz americké společnosti na přelomu 19. a 20. století, ukazuje stav, ve kterém se nacházela kultura a především pak divadlo, a s přihlédnutím na předchozí jmenované se zabývá důvody vzniku jednoho z nejdůležitějších amatérských divadel v Americe. Druhá kapitola v krátkosti představuje historii Provincetown Players, jejich přelomové počiny a nejvýznamnější členy. Teorii pak zakončujeme kapitolou mapující život O'Neilla, Bryant a Reeda před příchodem do Provincetownu, jejich pozdější pobyt v tomto přímořském městě, a především jejich vzájemný vztah, který je ovlivnil na rovině osobní i pracovní. S tímto vědomím pak v praktické části analyzujeme tři vybraná díla těchto autorů, konkrétně *The Game* Louisy Bryant, *The Eternal Quadrangle* Johna Reeda a na závěr *Thirst* Eugena O'Neilla. V analytické části se zaměřujeme nejen na obsahovou a formální úpravu her, ale hledáme také návaznosti s reálným světem a spojitosti mezi trojlístkem umělců.

**Klíčová slova:** Provincetown Players, Eugene O'Neill, John Reed, Louise Bryant, Little Theatre Movement, americké drama, divadlo



## **Abstract**

The main aim of this thesis is to present the work of Eugene O'Neill, Louise Bryant and John Reed in the context of the Provincetown Players. The theoretical part is divided into three extensive chapters, the first of which presents a picture of American society at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, shows the state in which culture and, above all theatre could be found, and, considering the previously mentioned, deals with the reason for the creation of one of the most important amateur theatres in America. The second chapter briefly presents the history of the Provincetown Players, their biggest achievements and the most important members. We then conclude the theory with a chapter mapping the life of O'Neill, Bryant and Reed before coming to Provincetown, their later stay in this seaside town, and also their mutual relationship, which affected them both personally and professionally. With this in mind, in the second part of the thesis we study three selected works by those authors, namely *The Game* by Louise Bryant, *The Eternal Quadrangle* by John Reed and finally, *Thirst* by Eugene O'Neill. In this last chapter, we not only analyze the plot, motives, themes and form of individual plays, but we will also look for the links with the real world and the connection between the trio of those artists.

**Keywords:** The Provincetown Players, Eugene O'Neill, Louise Bryant, John Reed, Little Theatre Movement, American drama, theatre

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*To Lou, Jack and Gene.*

*I owe you everything.*

## **Introduction**

During the first two decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Provincetown was perceived as a small seaside town, where many artists went to draw inspiration, and which was behind the creation of many important artistic groups. Regular visitors included a small group of theatre enthusiasts and politically and socially minded individuals who often visited here during the summer months with the hope of finding the peace they could not reach in the hectic and frantic city of New York. Only a few people could have guessed that the idea of the revival of the American theatre and the creation of distinctive American drama, which until then had not been represented in their culture, would eventually arise from evening conversations between friends on a myriad of topics. From a simple idea, within a few hours, it became a tangible substance in the form of the first attempts of the dramatic texts. Within a few days, the first play, *Constancy*, was created. During the summer of 1915, one of the most important eras of modern (American) drama began to be written.

The formation of the company, which gained stability and a certain level of officialness only in the next few months when the name of the company, the Provincetown Players, was chosen, was unprecedented since most of its members did not primarily (and professionally) focus on the theatre. Although many of them belonged to the artistic community, their work often veered into political and social directions. It was not only their interest in cultural events and artistic sensibilities; above all, political orientation and social awareness managed to unite such outwardly different characters. Anarchism and socialism were an integral part of their community. In addition to this, the work of the company as well as individuals was characterized by tasks regarding women's emancipation, discrimination of racial and ethnic groups or preference for freedom of love. The same was true of the professional collaboration and personal relationship between the playwright Eugene O'Neill and the journalists, political activists and later married couple John

Reed and Louise Bryant. Although they have their own positions in history, they were united by a strong bond that began in New York, and culminated in Provincetown, only to be forever severed by the untimely death of John Reed. This period, filled with mutual support and omnipresent inspiration, fundamentally deviated from their portfolio created up to and after that time. What happened in Provincetown was, in the case of O'Neill, Bryant and Reed, the expected outcome of their lives up to this point. Their efforts to define themselves against the experiences of the past became a crucial milestone in the founding of the Provincetown Players and its goal to transform American drama into a venture that would find a balance between commercial theatre and experimental theatre, and that would help create a purely American identity of drama, art and society such.

Many years ago I saw *Reds* (1981), the film by Warren Beatty, which followed the life of journalist and communist activist John Reed and his wife Louise Bryant and their short, but intensive encounter with playwright Eugene O'Neill. As someone who has great admiration for O'Neill's plays and is fascinated by the journalistic works of Reed and Bryant, I was very surprised not only by the friendship between the two men, and the later love affair of O'Neill and Bryant but above all, by the place where this meeting happened. Their stay in the seaside town made sense in the case of the playwright, who was very fond of the ocean and many of his plays were situated on the sea, but not so much in the case of the two activists, who preferred hectic lifestyle full of sudden and abrupt decisions and dangerous travels. Provincetown and the theatre company the Provincetown Players gave these three artists something that greatly influenced them not only in their work but also on a personal level. I wanted to discover the uniqueness of that place and above all to understand the events of the summer of 1916, which marked a turning point in their lives.

Through my research, I will try to convey to the readers of this thesis the exceptionalism that at one moment washed over the city, the theatre company and all its individuals.

The first part, divided into several chapters and further sub-chapters, will first analyze the situation of the European theatre and artistic trends popular at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and how this development influenced the tendencies and directions in which American drama went. Subsequently, considering the state in which American culture was in this period, we will look at how the newly emerging Little Theatre Movement, which was born from the ideas of European theatrical realism and experimentalism, attempted to revive the up to that time distinctly commercial production of drama. We will conclude the presentation of the background with the two most important groups of this movement—The Washington Square Players and the Provincetown Players.

The next chapter will try to briefly but comprehensively present the history of the Provincetown Players, its most important works and the most prominent representatives. We will also discuss the importance of Provincetown itself, and what role this city had in the search for and building of the native stage. We will continue with the move of the Players back to New York and what effect this decision had on the presentation of the work and transformation of the company throughout the following years. We will also try to show the main problems that little theatres encountered and why their successes also naturally meant their failure. This part will be followed by the last chapter of the historical research, which will be devoted to the three artists, Louise Bryant, John Reed and Eugene O'Neill. We outline their lives before coming to Provincetown, how their background shaped them, where their interest in art and politics began and at what moment their lives became intertwined. Within this part, there will be a sub-chapter directly related to their mutual relationships and how this bond was transferred to their work.

In the last, analytical chapter, we will discuss three selected plays, one work by each author, created during their stay in Provincetown, taking into account the previously mentioned points. This thesis should therefore outline not only the history of the development of modern American drama and the importance of the Provincetown Players but also show how the personal lives and professional lives of the authors often overlapped and complemented each other.



## **1. The situation in American society and its culture at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and the reasons behind the creation of the Provincetown Players**

If we set out on the journey of discovery to find reasons behind the creation of the Provincetown Players, we will not only get bogged down in the deep waters of the development of American drama, but above all, we will touch upon the great changes that took place in European countries at the turn of the two centuries. While in the first half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Western Europe and its audience were mainly entertained by and addicted to the works of Romanticism and the genre of melodrama prevailed on the stages, in the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, a critical reaction in the form of realism and naturalism poured in from the north and east, only to be rejected or rather challenged by currents of symbolism and emerging avant-garde during the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Despite all the differences in opinions and views on the truthfulness and uniqueness of modern drama, despite the wall of separation that was built between two sides of one continent, between Westernizers and the Russophiles (with the contribution of some of the greatest names of Scandinavian drama), between Romantics and Realists (Houghton 6), Europe stood at the forefront of cultural life and the world of theatre found harmony and agreement in its diversity. What began on the old continent in the 19<sup>th</sup> century became one of the impulses for the revival of American drama and theatre in the same and the following century. With the main idea of finding a new face and own identity, this revolution began to be born on small club and university stages, outside the spotlights of commercial theatres.

### **1.1. European theatre of 19<sup>th</sup> century and the impulse for new face of drama**

Romanticism, a popular genre across all artistic movements, was an integral part of the development of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Like any other trend, it arose as a reaction to previously well-

received styles and genres. At the same time, however, it also took on a fundamental social dimension, which changed not only the composition but also the size of the audience. Suddenly, art (and theatre in particular) felt the urge to bring a wide range of emotions to its spectators. Romanticism, with its emphasis on individualism over collectivism and focus on human emotions over rationality and intellectuality, became the direction that was able to attract a wide audience, from upper to lower classes, and brought them to the theatre (Gaul 255-256). However, in order to keep and fulfil this goal, it had to profile itself differently from the previous (and consequently the following) movement. Hand in hand with pathos and a certain level of stereotyping of melodrama, effort to please the viewer was only intensified by the grand theatre buildings, imposing scenography with an abundance of special effects and rich costume design. Seeing exceeded speaking (Wright 336). The story and the context of the plays could be easily forgiven if the visual aspect of the seen was on the highest level. As already mentioned, romanticism brought two fundamental topics into the theatre discourse – drawing of audience's interest and steadily growing popularity as the number one priority, and related to this, not only effectiveness but above all the effects of a dramatic piece fully showed on the stage (Gaul 256). Until this period, the often-overlooked subject of scenography became one of the most prominent and unique elements, that strongly influenced the American drama of 20<sup>th</sup> century. We can find the beginning of this tradition on the old continent, and we will encounter this connection between these two separate and lonely living worlds of European and American art with regularity throughout our work. And although we may sound critical toward this movement, the phase of romanticism, the emphasis on elaborate scenography was a fundamental milestone for modernism.

Realism and its related naturalism stood on the other side of the spectrum – here too the expression of emotions prevailed, but in contrast to the grand gestures of romanticism, the two

mentioned genres remained quite grounded with more natural expressions of hardship. The predestination of a person in society and the family hierarchy, and the scientific explanation of certain situations played a major role here. Emphasis was placed on a real and realistic depiction of the human experience within and of life, and the drama of the individual's fate prevails over the often-simple love plots of the romantic currents (Boyer xv). The movement, which was at first overshadowed by still popular romanticism, only very slowly and gradually managed to get out of the narrow circle of observers from among the playwrights and academics. (Boyer xii). Realism and naturalism dominated two territories in particular—Scandinavia and the Russian Empire. Names such as August Strindberg, Henrik Ibsen and Anton Chekhov were responsible for the surge of realism that spread beyond the borders of the European continent. The tradition of those greats continues in the works of their followers to this day. Their plays often depicted the struggles of individuals in everyday life and the inability to fit into the social stream, at the same time they touched upon overlooked topics, whether it was the role of women in a male-dominated world, the political involvement of every one of us, the question of (in)culpability or the depiction of mental illnesses and disorders (Boyer xxi). The tendency to focus on the correct rendering and grasping of the presented topics resulted in an effort to work significantly with the actor's body. With the entry into the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the art of acting also progressed further. From mannerism and grandeur, it began to move toward naturalness and minimalism. The foundation of this type of acting was laid by the Russian actor, director, theorist and pedagogue Konstantin Sergeevich Stanislavski (Carnicke 42). His method, which, together with Brecht's, Meisner's and Strasberg's, is currently the most popular among not only theatre but also film actors, was based on so-called 'psychological realism', when the actor had to fully identify with their character, not only on the basis of their thinking, knowledge and understanding but also from the point of view of their

physical and vocal characteristics (Binnerts 1). The creativity and complexity of this acting method was the main driving force behind realism and naturalism. It was precisely these two currents from which modern American drama drew most. With the greatest popularity and with the broadest focus, some theatre groups found realism the best method for the correct grasp of themes and motifs of their plays, some focused on working with the actor and their body along the lines of some of the points of the Stanislavski method, and some, on the contrary, paid attention to naturalism in the formation of a specific American nature and predestination. The wide spectrum of possibilities that these two artistic currents offered then became the cornerstone for the creation of the best of American theatre and drama of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century.

At that time, Europe was going through a huge transformation, and it began to dawn on the theatre as well. What previous movements and historical periods lacked the most was something, that some people thought did not and should never belong to the theatre, and that was experimentation with subjectivity and objectivity. What the entire 19<sup>th</sup> century was trying to do, which was to build a strong audience base, was criticized with the arrival of the following century. Symbolism and the avant-garde called for a purge that would air out not only the repertoire but above all auditoriums of theatres. The experimental drama set for themselves a goal to establish a new order, that will help with demarcation against the commercialism of theatre and its art. The very word *art*, that was so often associated with the idea of an imitation of life, came to be considered nothing but craft. This new artistic wave was aware of this fact and deliberately went against it. Even though overlapping with some of the motifs of romanticism and realism took place (Sprinchorn 118), it always added something dislocated or absurd to what was seen and heard. Rich costumes and scenes were replaced by monstrous, albeit simple symbolic motifs, body language went from natural to convulsive, characters lost their characters and became only types

(Carnicke 42), the language of the text lost its battle for the central role of the play and literary meaning was very often replaced by immateriality (Tisdell 228). Despite this, or precisely because of this, symbolism and the whole avant-garde movement gained popularity with a perhaps smaller audience, but managed to appeal even to those who had avoided the theatre until then. The young generation full of misunderstanding, the older generation full of bitterness, the outcasts, the underground, and all those who could not understand the world in its then-current form. The theatre, like any other form of art, played a significant role in the changes in society and in the understanding and interpretation of many important social issues. In a single century, thanks to many diverse movements, styles and genres, European drama was not only able to bring new topics to light, but it also began to deal with old grievances and the inexplicable desire to understand ourselves within that one identity that we have created and the one we have been given. Through predestination, through the actions of others and our own, through events that we witnessed and directly participated in, or only heard about years and centuries later.

## **1.2. Many faces of American theatre and the search for unique American identity**

But it was not only Europe that was shaped by political and social conflicts. Even America was looking for ways to point out burning questions that appeared not only in social circles but also in the field of culture. However, the state that has been built on the faith of English Protestants, with omnipresent Spanish-Portuguese heritage, appropriating the land of the native inhabitants, farming it with the hands of African slaves, had a much worse starting position than any other country in the world (Kenton 18). The 19<sup>th</sup> century was defined by war conflicts, first against Mexicans in the Mexican-American War, second against Indians during a series of Texas-Indian wars, and last but not least against themselves, in The American Civil War, which was an important milestone in the division of opinions between the North and the South on the issue of slavery. It is

one thing to win a war, but completely another thing to actually live up to your convictions and to convince the general majority about them, as your own nation. And, as always, that was the moment when art came into this picture. First, however, there must have been rebellion within the established system for the art revolution to start.

We can identify four cornerstones of theatrical production in America—minstrel shows, musical, revival of originally staged plays, and play written by European authors. The most controversial one is the first of them. Minstrel shows gained popularity during the 19<sup>th</sup> century and managed to stay on the programs until the end of World War II. These shorter sketches, characterized by pompous language, a simple set design, an even simpler story, had an issue rooted in the form of presentation – with a white actor playing a black character, they were simply a stereotypical commentary on the black community in America. These degrading, mostly comic-sounding plays became just one of the other types of attacks against African (American) people and for many years functioned not only as entertainment for the white audience but also as the incitement to hatred toward others and otherness, so deeply rooted in the history of the United States (Lemons 102-103). The positives of this kind of art are hard to find. Yet, those shows were behind the significant popularization of the use of music in the theatre. This goes hand in hand with the huge rise of the musical in the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, with this tradition persisting in the American theatre to this day.

The strongest base of American musical production can be located in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, followed by contemporary productions, which, however, often rely on the consistency of proven revivals. Since the very first period is so often left behind, thanks to the not very extensive research of scholars (which goes back to the fact that there are tendencies to focus on more popular and better phases and plays), we have very little information about what the

musical scene looked like in those years (Preston 255). But there is a basis for our research – thanks to the already proven point of gained popularity of audience, the starting point of musicality in theatre, and opulent costume and set design, we can take in a small picture of that era. Full, crowded houses that were satisfied with affectivity over effectivity. What happened in Europe with melodrama (and not only in Europe, as melodrama was also popular in America, but it was not considered one of the main trends), happened here with musical production. This also became one of the reasons for the creation of, among others, the Provincetown Players.

Revivals are another important element of American theatre. Not only musicals, but also purely dramatic forms such as tragedies and comedies, kept dusting off outdated, albeit famous theatre pieces. However, in the context of the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the question arose as to whether the theatre really wanted to build its history on repetitive productions, that cannot prove or provide a significant shift in either form, tone or performances. At a time when American society demanded a new, fresh, modern face of its culture, the theatre could not consist only of musicals and revivals. It was the European drama that could and did bring new wind into the sails, which paradoxically, later became the biggest thorn in the side of the upcoming generation of playwrights and theatre-goers.

European theatre works produced on the American stage have a long tradition. Already in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, when efforts to establish theatre first began to appear in the American art industry, Europe was the huge distributor of demanded plays. At the same time, proven classics written primarily by English authors were often sought after; for example, Shakespeare, so popular across both continents (Frenz 319). During the following years, cosmopolitanism also created the opposite effect. At the moment when American drama began in some ways to achieve the qualities that were so often appreciated in European drama, plays started to flow in the opposite direction

as well. Suddenly there was talk about the relevance of theatrical production on the new continent, and the popularity with which European plays entered the American market turned against it to the benefit of American culture. The collision of those two worlds resulted in one fundamental thing, namely the questioning of the originality of the material over the materiality of the original (Quinn 654). The identity of the nation, nationality, society and art, together with the importance of freedom of creativity, has become the main theme of American theatre at the turn of the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries.

### **1.3. Little Theatre Movement**

History is lived and experienced, and tradition is created. The United States was separated from the rest of the world mainly because of its youth. Although information about various early-dated raids by Italians, Spaniards, Germans and Swedes on the east coast of America is continuously appearing, preserved (and above all) reliable documents about the continent only began to appear with the arrival of Christopher Columbus and the subsequent, later settlement of Protestants. History began to be written with the first setting foot on American soil, tradition, especially the artistic one, had a much more difficult task ahead of it—it did not just need to set foot and lay the foundation stone, above all it had to set a crazy, marathon-like pace in order to catch up with the rich European cultural society. It had a clear inspiration that could have been built from; although the Protestants fleeing Europe wanted to break free from the bondage of their predecessors, culture and art first needed existing material in order to build something new from it. Some movements and styles fared better; others worse. In the second category, we can also include the theatre. It had no chance of rapid development in a world so strongly dominated by faith (whatever religion it was). The Puritans, who were the essential majority during the European settlement of America, were critical of the theatre and the arts in general. They held the opinion



that this kind of entertainment strongly and wrongly influenced people and turned them in the wrong direction, that is, from worshipping God (White 7). American drama was by this fact incredibly affected, and it took its first steps forward almost a century after the first European settlers, i.e. only during the 18<sup>th</sup> century. Its main goal thus became above all to reach its viewers and interest them enough to not only stay but then bring some more viewers. As already indicated, in its beginning it suffered mainly from two perspectives—it became a drama with a European flavour and, in an effort to gain the largest possible audience in such a short period of time, it primarily drew from decadent genres (Sayler 762). What followed next was a revolt that was never repeated again. The wave of new drama, commonly known as the Little Theatre Movement, resulted in a change in the perception of the role of theatre in society, an effort to put experimentalism over popularity (albeit often with the result of quantity over quality) and, above all, a general revival of theatre art in America. It left as quickly as it came, and although this nourishing, even if brief, period is often forgotten in textbooks, it left a strong mark that accompanies the direction of American theatre and drama to this day.

The first generation that began to change the face of American theatre was still trying to follow the European tradition. Many of those who later took part in the renaissance of American art travelled to Europe in their youth. Artists, (art) students, activists, socialists, those who were already in the business and even those who only just started, set out on a journey where they could see, hear, and experience up close what was being created on the old continent (Demastes 60). In the beginning of the newly emerging direction of drama, students played a crucial role. The first theatre societies that dealt with the question of quite non-existent American drama began to appear in massive waves at universities, where they were established as part of their free time activities. Students started to found amateur theatres in which they not only acted out but above all created

new texts, directed them and often participated in their production (Moses 132). This model of everyone doing everything was the image that new, experimental theatre would build on for the next few decades. From the trips that many of them so often took during their studies or during the gap year, they brought to their homeland a complex knowledge about difficult topics, new artistic trends and the need to gain political and social awareness into their everyday life conversations. As the students could not afford financially and time-consuming three-to-five-act plays, they went in the direction of one-act play, which had not been widely used until then. That too was one of the steps to success. Traditional forms were discarded for the sake of building a brand-new tradition (Mackay 4).

The Little Theatre Movement took off once it left the walls of college campuses. The 19<sup>th</sup> century turned into the 20<sup>th</sup> century, a new theatrical programme was set, and theatre groups began to be established in all major cities, including Chicago, Boston, Detroit, Seattle, and later on, most prominently, in New York (Parkhurst 9). Almost overnight, a revolution took place in the form of the creation of thousands of Little Theatres, which throughout carried several common visions—to stop commercialism in art, to bring (or even better to create) a completely new, purely American tradition and through realism to search for the truth of the text and through experimentalism to understand the possibilities of the form of drama (Sayler 771-772). This theatre movement, like any other artistic ensemble, depended on the audience's goodwill, but instead of building a wide base, they tried to maintain their settled audience's members and obtain a stable income from a smaller, but still full auditorium (Parkhurst 8). The main goal was not to make money for the theatre or for themselves but to bring in a relatively short time a large amount of newly emerging drama, which, thanks to the quantity, would be able to create a complex face of American drama. Inspiration came quickly and thanks to rich travel experiences, knowledge gained from foreign

productions, and above all acquaintance of the local audience and hot topics that regularly appeared in society, there was no shortage of texts. With the speed with which all these theatre groups came to light, their greatest weakness also went hand in hand—the lack of thought-out strategy in the progress and application of their existence (Moses 128). Although the general program of the movement was widely known, the structure and functioning of every individual organization was a different matter. Enthusiasm and love were not enough, management was also needed. The personnel composition of these groups was diverse—there were amateur actors, budding writers, political activists, journalists, painters, sculptors, but also enthusiastic theatre fans or people working completely outside of the cultural world (Murphy xv). The fact that everyone knew something different was important in the creation of some sort of hierarchy within the theatre groups. Talking to each other, perceiving each other, learning from each other. An ideal vision that, however, was showing cracks. Since in most cases, all group members had functions of equal importance and rights, contradictions and conflicts arose, which often escalated to such an extent that the group disintegrated from within and could completely disappear in just a few weeks. On the other hand, its diversity was an incredible asset—plays have covered a wide range of social themes, it started the phase of great experimentation with costumes and scenery, and with bills that brought order and a certain regularity, the idea of repertory theatre emerged. Even the very hierarchy of positions within the organization of little theatres was a revolution at that time, which was unprecedented up to that time. The Little Theatre Movement produced only a few well-known authors, actors, scenic designers, or the original plays that would have a solid place in the canon of American theatre; however, it created a complex face of the new American dramaturgy and drama, on whose foundations all subsequent generations of modernism massively built. The rebellion took place and the revolution began.

#### **1.4. New York City and its Players**

The events at the turn of the century were especially important for the following two decades. Most of the cultural happenings moved to New York, where certain neighbourhoods, such as Greenwich Village, were the definition of a vibrant community of art and creativity. The district on the West side of Lower Manhattan became a mecca of bohemian life of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and the birthplace of many artistic groups and political and social events (Strausbaugh 99). Two theatre groups—The Washington Square Players and The Provincetown Players—made their mark most significantly in the history of this neighbourhood and, by extension, of the entire Little Theatre Movement (Egan 97). Each had its own distinctive character, each had its own program, and although in many ways these two theatre groups contradicted each other and were in most cases quite critical of each other, both were indelibly written in the history of American drama.

The Washington Square Players, as the name implies, were based at Washington Square, in the very heart of Greenwich Village. They were founded in 1915, at the peak of the Little Theatre Movement. Their general image did not differ in many ways from other independent theatres, yet it was somehow successful in going down in history, and theatre critics, academics, and artists turn and return to their existence steadily and in the long term. What are the reasons behind their success? We can identify the four most important and prominent ones: the regularity with which they brought new plays; variety and contrast in their bills; simple, yet vibrant scenery full of colours and atmosphere; and finally, especially later on in their work, significant acting performances (Mackay 30). With The Washington Square Players, we can find an almost-perfect image of strong, working cooperation between all members and parts of the business. Like most little theatres, the Players as such did not last long, their demise/downfall occurred as early as 1918; however, the tradition they were able to build in those three short years was transferred to

the newly-formed professional theatre society, The Theatre Guild, still working, even though with quite long pauses between, to this day. In the case of both these companies, the cornerstone was the cooperation of all involved, in writing new plays, searching for and translating already existing plays, especially foreign ones, finding places and spaces for the production, choosing the creative team, creating costumes and sceneries, subsequent promotion, and many other necessary, albeit often invisible works (Parkhurst 10). Their first bills were pieced together by purely one-act plays, which, thanks to their length and in many aspects uncomplicated scenography, allowed them to do up to eight performances in one week. Once they found their footing (and in their case, it was a time span of few bills), they could afford to move on to more complex, mostly four-act plays (Mackay 30-32). These then fulfilled the role of the peak of the whole season, they received the most attention, the members of the group could work with more expressive and therefore in most cases also more expensive methods and, above all, in addition to the plotline, the characters and the acting and performing could develop more significantly. With the increasing number of staged plays and the unstoppable rise of full-length plays, the acting within this theatre group in many cases reached the level of professional actors (Mackay 34).

Overall, the word “professional” is important in the context of both the Washington Square Players and the central idea of Little Theatres. What most theatres of the movement fought against was ultimately what the Washington Square Players were criticized for the most—their eternal tendency to match the big professional theatre projects and to prove that even the new American drama and the often-undiscovered European drama can fill one of those many oversized Broadway-format auditoriums.

One of the main ideas of the Little Theatre Movement was to break free from the bondage of commercialism. As the name of the movement already suggests, it was composed of theatres

that were typical for their smallness, in terms of the size of the auditorium and the stage, the length of the plays, the number of characters in the works and of members of the individual theatre groups. The effort to create another, new current that would not cancel the others, but would stand on a separate track, was in some ways trampled into the ground thanks to the ambitions of the Washington Square Players. Their eternal and very prominent effort to create a play that would interest even larger theatre producers caused them to forget the main idea of the movement and also to forget who their main target was. This was also reflected in the price of the entrance fee. What started with just a few-pence subscription suddenly turned into a dollars-craving competition of who will give more and the most (Mackay 37).

It is a wonder that more of their peers and colleagues did not object to their behaviour. Most distinctive voice did not begin to appear until many years after the very peak of this period of American theatre revival. At that time, the most vocal critics of the Washington Square Players became a group that would form only a few months and a stone's throw after them—the one and only the Provincetown Players.

## **2. Seven years of experimentation: brief history of the Provincetown Players during 1915-1922**

The formation of the Provincetown Players was as well thought out as it was spontaneous. A group of artists, journalists, activists, and intellectuals in general, who were able to speak with the same fervour about the revival of the theatre as they did about the need for a social revolution, felt the necessity and duty to contribute to the discussion about building a new drama that would be purely American. With their often novel and in many cases not very theatrical-like views, they not only managed to build the name and the reputation of one of the most important theatre companies within the Little Theatre Movement, but above all they succeeded in an incredible derring-do in the terms of significant contribution to the revival of American theatre by a company composed of for the most part of non-theatre people (Goldman 296). Although the name of The Provincetown Players was eventually absorbed by the passing of time and the complexity and layering of the history of theatre, their innovation in the field of production and staging of plays continues to this day. Some names are forgettable, some names are memorable. Some gave an unmistakable form to this theatre group, and at the same time left a significant mark in American history across its various periods and branches. Whether it is Jig Cook, John Reed, William and Marguerite Zorach, Susan Glaspell or Eugene O'Neill.

### **2.1. American native stage and the role of Provincetown**

Even though the name of the group may not imply this fact, their history started to be written in New York. The city that never sleeps, the city which is united by differences, welcomed art-loving, broadly educated people who were looking for a place for their self-development. People all around the States came to this metropolis with visions and dreams and in the end, it was

above all that particular place that shaped them into their final, unique form. It was no different with the members of the Provincetown Players (Deutsch 6). George Cram Cook and Susan Glaspell, husband and wife and founders of the company, grew up in Davenport, Iowa (Ben-Zvi 6); John Reed spent most of his young life in Portland, from where he then travelled to Europe for a several months stay; one of his first partners, later a member of the company and also the woman whose relationship with Reed became the subject of one of the first plays of the Provincetown Players, Mabel Dodge Luhan (Egan 3), lived in Buffalo until the age of 16; another woman who greatly influenced Reed's life, Louise Bryant, was born in San Francisco, California, raised in Reno, Nevada, studied in Eugene, Oregon, and eventually moved to Portland with her first husband (Dearborn 9-20). We could continue this way with nearly every member of the Players. One of the exceptions, which stands most prominently, is Eugene O'Neill. The artist was a native New Yorker, but his whole life, he has been chasing the waves of the sea. This motif reflected throughout his work was strongly encouraged by his long-term stay in the city of Provincetown (Egan 262). His arrival in this seaside city was delayed compared to the rest of the members, but it brought great changes and grand success, which shaped not only the group and O'Neill himself, but especially the later work of American drama.

The small town in the state of Massachusetts abounded with an incredibly rich history and an unmistakable aura of uniqueness. During the 17<sup>th</sup> century, the massive construction of docks and piers began in the city, which culminated two centuries later, when the character of the city completely succumbed to life on the sea and Provincetown acquired "its new status as an international seaport" (Egan 34). As slowly as this image was formed, it fell much faster. The 20<sup>th</sup> century displaced this dominance and brought a wide range of artists to the sleepy town. It was mainly writers and painters who helped to strengthen the city's image as "an art colony" (ibid.).



The Players also signed significantly under this development. Members of the then-non-existing company met there every summer for several years. They talked about anything and everything that was considered a hot topic—from Marxism to women's rights, to war and political conflicts. It was not until the summer of 1915 that the narrative of their conversations changed and turned 180 degrees. (Egan 4) The group registered the formation of The Washington Square Players and their unprecedented acclaim in their very first season. However, the group, at that time living by the sea, was very critical of their actions; they were mainly bothered by the too-fast transition from amateurism to professionalism, the deviation from building tradition to gaining popularity, and, above all, the settling for and prioritizing adapted drama over native drama (Kenton 17). They were aware of the incredible power of the theatre—what we experience ourselves in everyday life, we see someone else experience on the stage. We can learn from this without suffering from it. At the end comes the katharsis, the purification of the soul. While they did sense that the group, which had neither actors nor playwrights among its members (ibid. 18), would have a hard time establishing itself in the massive flood of little theatres, they threw themselves into work not only with enthusiasm but also with furious pace, which resulted in the writing of their first stage play *Constancy* in less than two nights. Neith Boyce was credited as the play's author, although all the founding members worked on it together. The same was true of the second play, *Suppressed Desires*, which was co-written by Glaspell and Cook, with considerable input from other artists

Both of these plays were united by several common motifs and factors—both one-act plays critically and satirically commented on the happenings in the very heart of the group; the former was a comic depiction of the romance between Dodge and Reed, the latter was generally concerned with absurdity of dreaming and analyzing of an individual's obsessions (Deutsch 7-8). To the extent possible, they began to experiment with the space in which the plays were staged; the group

chose a truly non-theatrical building for the establishment of the theatre—Mrs Mary O’Brien’s fish house, which stood high on Lewis Wharf (Parkhurst 12). The stage setting was simple yet incredibly creative; the stage and auditorium exchanged their positions, and a view of the stormy sea was provided as the background (Deutsch 8). The genius loci of the place was transferred to the plays, to the artists, and to their audience. The summer of 1915 marked the beginning of something that most likely none of those present had believed or hoped for. Thanks to their novelty, creativity, emphasis on preserving the main idea of the movement, i.e. the creation of new American drama and above all, for finding an exceptional place in which tradition rose to the surface from every corner, from every alley and street, they were capable of a similar miracle in a short time as their competition.

## **2.2. The arrival of Eugene O’Neill and the historic summer of 1916**

The second bill of the 1915 season brought two more plays, *Change Your Style* by Cook and *Contemporaries* by yet another founding member Wilbur Daniel Steele. Like the previous two plays, these were still riding the wave of comicality, with the first satirically looking at the number of art schools and groups that had been products of Provincetown over the course of the years, while the second expressed the narcissistic aura of revolutionary New York (Egan 124). After these two completed the first season of the Provincetown Players, most of its members went back to New York, where they spent the winter months making plans for another season in the seaside town. They began to realize their strength, and above all, their main weapon—Provincetown itself. Even though NY guaranteed comfort and simplicity of being, the artists gladly accepted the woes of the erratic city in the state of Massachusetts and appropriated its disadvantages to their advantage. The uniqueness of this place and the unpretentious unconventionality and experimentalism of the company attracted more and more people who wanted to become active

members of The Players. To the original twenty-two members of the group, another eight people joined in the following year—among the most prominent names that contributed to its further development are the following four: Edna Kenton, John Reed, Louise Bryant and Eugene O’Neill (Kenton 22).

Edna Kenton was a phenomenon. Although she never participated in the running of the organization in terms of writing, acting, directing or staging (Kenton 2), she was one of the main reasons behind the popularization and popularity of the Provincetown Players and bringing knowledge about it to future generations. Her book *The Provincetown Players and the Playwrights’ Theatre, 1915-1922* has become an integral part of the corpus of American drama, and quite a few academics and students draw heavily from it. This MA thesis is proof of that. And although her chronicle was and is increasingly criticized for certain historical inaccuracies and confusing information about the productions and the share of individual members on them (Kenton 3), we have not received a more detailed, comprehensive and present testimony about this theatre company until today.

Let us now turn to the following trio. Even though Reed had already been involved in the running of the theatre the previous summer, primarily providing a space in his house for the rehearsing of the plays (and also thanks to his lifestyle, the subject matter) (Egan 105), he has not become an active member till his return during summer 1916. His social and political involvement took him to other corners of the country and the world, and only with the acquaintance of Louise Bryant was he able to stay in one place for a longer period of time. Bryant, who had left her first husband and Portland for John Reed and New York in the hope of pursuing her own career and building her own life (Gardner 13), followed her lover to Provincetown with a vision of strengthening a romantic relationship with him and establishing new working relationships with

other members of the Players. In the end, the arrival of Eugene O'Neill ultimately resulted in none of Bryant's points coming true the way she envisioned.

When Eugene O'Neill came to Provincetown, he was just twenty-seven years old. Leaving behind New York, which for him was a symbol of both his first steps on the stage, as well as the first major failures and frustrations from misunderstanding, he found in the seaside city not his second, but a new home. He stayed here the longest of all, a full nine years (Egan 1-2). During that time he wrote a huge number of plays, from the one-act *Bound East for Cardiff*, which began his journey with the Provincetown Players and foreshadowed his unquenchable desire to be surrounded by and drowned in the sea, to the personal account of his dealing with tuberculosis in *Thirst*, then to *Before Breakfast*, where he was last seen as a playwright and actor, to the most famous of all, *Beyond the Horizon* and *The Emperor Jones*, which symbolized the closure of one great chapter called The Players and the beginning of his road to the highest goal of the American theatre, to Broadway. Before all that, however, the long journey was filled with a great rush of creativity, a lot of meetings with inspiring people, strong friendships and relationships, but also broken hearts, drunken nights and tangos with depression (Egan 97).

That summer was the birth of something that defined the Provincetown Players for the rest of their existence—a mix of realism and experimentalism, the balance of content and form of the text, emphasis on the expression of production and staging, and above all, the constant building of a new corpus of modern theatre (Murphy 55). With the arrival of new members, the image of the Provincetown Players stabilized; bohemians with artistic talent and political-social sensibilities, who stirred the troubled waters of the culture not only of this city but of the country of that time (Egan 125). While some focused on the development of (their) theatrical knowledge, others contributed significantly to social themes that resonated with society as well as outraged it.

During the summer season of 1916, four bills containing eleven original one-act plays and two revivals were written (Kenton 34)<sup>1</sup>. Eugene O'Neill participated with two plays (*Bound East for Cardiff*, *Thirst*), as did John Reed (*Freedom*, *The Eternal Quadrangle*) and Neith Boyce (*Winter's Night* and *Enemies*, the second co-written by Hutchins Hapgood). The other five writers contributed one play each; Susan Glaspell with *Trifles*, Louise Bryant with *The Game*, Wilbur Daniel Steele with *Not Smart*, and Henry Marion Hall wrapped up the season with a special performance for children *Mother Carey's Chickens* (Kennedy). Four plays from the group's first two years at Lewis Wharf were rejected by the Washington Square Players (Murphy 8). Here they became the cornerstone on which the Provincetown Players built their own vision of modern American theatre.

The spontaneity with which they arose contrasted with the thoughtfulness and sophistication with which they worked on the resolution of the program and constitution of the Provincetown Players (Goldman 298). More fundamental than anything else was subsequent thorough fulfilment.

### **2.3. "The Constitution of the Provincetown Players" and other policies of the company**

Although we have been calling the group the Provincetown Players all along, the name and thus a certain officiality did not come about until the end of the second season (Deutsch 11), at the time when it began to be seriously (and paradoxically with the consideration of the later name)

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<sup>1</sup> Although Kenton lists eleven original plays, most sources state that that summer produced only ten original plays. It is unclear whether the Provincetown Players actually wrote eleven plays that summer, one of which is lost, or this is just a mistake on Edna Kenton's part.

considered to move from Provincetown to New York. Behind the idea of relocating to Big Apple was mainly the duo Cook – Reed, with a considerable contribution from O’Neill, who suggested the name not only of the company but also of the theatre. An unnamed group with great potential suddenly became a concrete project with a tangible home: The Provincetown Theatre and its Players (Egan 169). With this came to mind the need to create a program statement—an idea born during one summer night in Provincetown among a group of close friends needed form and formality to survive in one of the most creative and at the same time most competitive cities. Jig Cook had a vision of the theatre as an artistic community, John Reed made sure that it could become reality. On September 5, 1916, at the end of the last season in Provincetown and the beginning of the first season in New York, all active members of the company met with the goal of writing a manifesto that would act as both a guidance and a commitment (Kenton 26).

The goals that the participants of the meeting set for themselves were able to adhere to for several remarkable years, and in fact, once they began to deflect from the standpoints, it almost immediately meant their downfall (Ben-Zvi 9). What was written in the constitution is nothing that they already have not said or mentioned, but when looking back at it, from the point of view of contemporary society and contemporary theatre, it was revolutionary and extremely fresh. In addition to the name of the group, above all, it was essential to resolve the centre of their activities, who could become a member, what were the rules for their admission to the company, and what should have been avoided to not be deprived of their function.

As has been said several times, the first and main point of the constitution dealt with the type of plays to be performed. And here is probably the most interesting part of the overall work of this group. Not only did they make sure that original plays by American authors would be presented, which would build the tradition and care for the origin, but they also defined that these

authors would be exclusively members of The Players (Kenton 26). It is one thing to base all your activity on one specific period or certain movement and authors, but to entrust your entire existence to such people who were just entering the world of art, and in most cases never before wrote a single play, was as peculiar and experimental as it was daring and risky.

Somewhat less risky, but still very groundbreaking, was to conduct all artistic as well as economic activities only to the members of the company (*ibid.* 27). What began in England during the Elizabethan era, in the States became a reality at this very time. Given roles have broken down among individuals—some took care of settling the repertoire, writing new plays and staging them; some were in commission dealing with production and financing of their activities; some did a little bit of everything. There is something binding as well as liberating about that model. To be free and at the same time bound—to others, to us, to what we create, to whom we create. Art, so often accompanied by the definition of “freelance work”, is countless times in bondage to the opinions and preferences of others. The experimental theatre of this period might have felt less pressure from the public, but, with the increasing time and growing popularity with both audience and critics, great pressure arose from the closest circle. Not only the texts themselves, but all other aspects of their work had to go through a committee that included all members of The Players (*ibid.*). And despite all disagreements that arose in the company during that time, whether it was the excessive directiveness and dominance of Jig Cook, the sometimes-chaotic style of management, the bitterness and mental instability of Eugene O’Neill or a thousand other smaller problems (Ben-Zvi 9), the group managed to not only survive but more important to live fully for seven years.

## **2.4. One way ticket to New York**

The settlement in New York was surprisingly easy. At that time, there was hardly anyone in the artistic world who had not at least once heard of the Provincetown Players, the theatre company with a rapid rise and surprising success. Offers for cooperation poured in from all corners, and at 139 MacDougal Street, where their theatre was based, a rich cultural life began to blossom, connected not only with activities of The Players but also with other artistic societies, organizations or just individuals who wanted to put their name in association with this phenomenon (Deutsch 20). It was all the more difficult to artistically follow up on what happened in Provincetown during the two years. During the first season in New York, the group managed to produce an incredible nine bills which included twenty-seven one-act plays (Kenton 77). Despite this, or precisely because of this, The Players were unable to reach the quality of the previous bills which were created at Lewis Wharf. The plays lacked a certain lightness that simply failed to move with them from one place to another, as well as a certain aura of uniqueness that was so tied to the sea that surrounded and washed Provincetown from all sides. Nevertheless, as plays were still heavily inspired by experimentalism and the most used motto of the company was “do it by yourself”, The Players managed to end up in the black. It was mainly due to the fact that the productions themselves, despite their huge numbers, managed to remain inexpensive. Almost all of the properties were borrowed or improvised; actors, playwrights, management, basically all members of the company worked for free; and with the rapid growth of the subscription list, i.e. a list of patrons who regularly financially contributed to The Players’ operation, the first season in the big city could be considered both artistic and commercial success (Deutsch 21).

The second season was marked by a large outflow of many founding members of the group. With the entry of the US into World War I, many artists went to Europe to experience and later



reflect on the mood and the effects of this situation on both European society and their homeland (Kenton 63). Above all, the loss of John Reed seems in retrospect to be the most fundamental. Although during his time with The Players, he proved that he was able to bring something new into playwriting, acting, dramaturgy and theatre management, he could not deny his activist and politically oriented nature (Hicks 234). At the end of 1917, he accepted an offer to travel to St. Petersburg to document the rise of socialism and communism and the social and political upheavals of the country. He was accompanied on these trips by his wife Louise Bryant, who continued their work even after Reed's death in 1920. Their departure was a symbol of that time. The motif of freedom was strongly reflected in the subsequent works of the Provincetown Players. The freedom to express one's own ideas appeared across all branches – writing, acting, directing, set and costume design –and was behind the changes that happened during this era (Kenton 63). With the violation of freedom came the realization from the beginning of their existence –the creation of a new identity of America(n drama). At this point, The Players felt the need to slow down. The brutal pace they set in the previous season(s) eased and there was an effort to fulfil their work qualitatively.

While The Washington Square Players in particular are known to this day for discovering many essential names of modern acting, The Players from Provincetown somewhat overlooked this art form and concentrated purely on the development of playwriting and staging. It was the first two New York seasons that showed the dependence of The Players on the spirits of Eugene O'Neill and Susan Glaspell (*ibid.* 77). In mostly mediocre seasons, once in a while, there was a hit that often later appeared on one of the leading Broadway stages—mostly thanks to their contribution. Together they wrote ten plays over the course of two years; O'Neill's six being slightly ahead of Glaspell's four plays (Kennedy). In the following years, the forces were even

until Glaspell finally gained the upper hand, opening and closing the last-ever season of the Provincetown Players. These two authors could not be more different, yet they complemented each other perfectly and formed the basic framework of the entire company. While the theme of the sea, raging, destroying, waiting, loved and loving, permeated all of O'Neill's work (Dowling 515), Glaspell often reached out to themes of sexuality, femininity and women's role in a world so often dominated by men (Bach 39). Almost every play of theirs was guaranteed success, yet they managed to surprise every time with their talent and the originality of their works. And although they are considered not only the most important members of The Players but above all as some of the most influential playwrights of their time, they remained loyal to those who discovered them in the beginning and who gave them a chance to excel. Both O'Neill and Glaspell were among the few who remained with the group until its demise in 1922.

### **2.5. The success that failed**

As time went on, the group's work began to show the first cracks. With the departure of some prominent faces of The Players, in addition to the aforementioned Reed and Bryant, the Zorachs, who left a significant mark in the face of many productions, separated from the group, or the very first member, main producer and artistic director, occasional director and playwright Jig Cook, who travelled to Greece in 1919 (Deutsch 91). Each season saw at least one successful play, and the group welcomed outstanding artistic personalities; for example Djuna Barnes (who wrote *Three From the Earth*, *An Irish Triangle* and *Kurzy of the Sea* in one season and thus significantly contributed to the character of the entire 1919-1920 season), Wallace Stevens (who contributed with his first and at the same time last play *Three Travelers Watch a Sunrise*), or Edna St. Vincent Millay (*The Princess marries the Page* opened the winter season of 1918, during the second bill of the 1919-1920 she returned with structurally demanding production of *Aria da Capo*) (Kennedy).

Despite all this, however, the overall quality of the work of The Players began to wane. After the fourth New York season, the number of new plays dropped rapidly—the fifth season consisted of “only” seven plays when the trio O’Neill-Glaspell-Cook (who briefly returned to the group, wrote the play, and left again during the last season, outraged by the management of the group (Deutsch 55)) created a total of four of them. The company had no other choice but to bring plays that were not created under their banner to fill the gap between individual bills. This resulted in introducing plays that conflicted with the constitution of The Provincetown Players—although it stated that the only plays that would be staged would be those of native originals, the company started to produce European plays and also commercially successful plays (Kenton 115).

Commercialism entered the group from within and contributed to its demise. Some of the members of The Players decided to develop their further activities outside of the experimental theatre, often resorting to Broadway productions, where their names may never have gained the same attention as in and during The Little Theatre Movement, but they could develop even further, gaining new experiences in more expensive and therefore more demanding productions (Ben-Zvi 9). A more pronounced deviation from amateurism to commercialism was seen in newly written plays. Most of those written by Glaspell and O’Neill gained popularity with a wide audience throughout the whole company’s existence, and the big Broadway theatres began to notice this fact. They waited with great anticipation for new plays from those two authors and asked for their expansion on commercial scenes.

The turning point and the subsequent rapid disintegration of the company took place with the production of O’Neill’s play *The Emperor Jones*, which premiered in the penultimate season of the Provincetown Players. The tragedy deals with the life of Brutus Jones who kills another black man in a dice game and later escapes from prison to a Caribbean island. The simple plot did

not bring much that new, it was the circumstances of its creation and above all the form in which the work was presented that attracted the attention of the public, critics and theatre producers during the evening of its premiere (Kenton 129). Seen as Eugene O'Neill's most experimental play, it is a balanced mix of experimentalism and realism, fully utilizing the latest explored and newly discovered possibilities of stage techniques and technologies. The play worked significantly with lights, creating a perfect combination of illusion and imagery (ibid). After a successful run on MacDougal Street, it was transferred to another, bigger stage as its demand from the audience was unbearable. After more than 200 shows, the play went on tour in the States, and the final show was made on Broadway (Dowling 560). This step became a symbolic end to the amateur activity of the Provincetown Players, and although the house with the number 139 on it is dedicated to theatrical activity to this day and bears Provincetown in the name along with the Playhouse, it no longer has much in common with the original idea and with the unique spirit of previous times (Deutsch n15).

We certainly cannot consider the end of the original company as an unequivocal failure. In retrospect, we can refer to the Provincetown Players as probably the most important theatrical group that significantly influenced the American theatre of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and dug out the path for modern drama. During their existence, they were able to produce ninety-four plays by forty-eight authors (Bach 34). They brought to the light of the world countless personalities who advocated the revival of this type of art—mainly playwrights and scenic designers. They touched on themes that professional theatre so often avoided for fear of commercial failure—from the role of women in society, countless types of love, mental instabilities, racial divisions, or more politically oriented issues. And the element of the native stage stood above all that. Primarily in the beginning, it was a strong symbol that united the entire company. In Provincetown, on the pier, just a few steps from the stormy sea, stood a dilapidated two-story building that became the

birthplace of The Players and the place where a piece of American theatre history was created during one completely ordinary summer evening.

After seven years, two of them in Provincetown and five in New York, one chapter has come to an end to begin writing a new one. The power of the sea was lost. Broadway, which was at the beginning of the century massively criticized not only by this group but by the entire movement, began to reach for themes and plays that up to that time had only been produced by independent, amateur, experimental theatres (Murphy 225-226). The Little Theatre Movement, and all its Players, Playhouses, Theatres and Others became a success that failed. The revival of American theatre was done, and those who were behind this success could, with peace of mind, disappear from the face of the Earth.

### **3. Life and work of John Reed, Louise Bryant and Eugene O’Neill before and during the Provincetown Players’ years**

The uniqueness of The Players lay, among other things, in the differences that united them. Despite the small number of members that have passed through the company over the seven years of its existence, diversity appeared across everything they brought with them—through their backgrounds, education, previous professions and related professional successes, to policies, beliefs, dreams and the stories they wanted to tell. It was the same with our central trio of John Reed, Louise Bryant and Eugene O’Neill. On one side stood Reed and Bryant, these days pigeon-holed as journalists, activists and communists, and on the other side was O’Neill, a respected playwright, four-time Pulitzer Prize winner, and, among other things, an important figure of American culture of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The circumstances from which they arose, and the direction their steps took before they came to Provincetown, strongly marked why and for what purpose they had come to this seaside town. The first for revolution, the second for rebellion, and the third for liberation.

Although they were often associated with each other and many times they worked together, each shaped a slightly different part of the functioning of the theatre, even in different time periods. Unlike many other members, all three of them wrote at least one play and acted in at least one production, but in general, they were perceived as people with distinct and different personalities, which somehow made it work. Their relationship is often seen as a limited period of a few months that they spent together in Provincetown, but there was much more. It began to form a few years before the fateful summer 1916, during winter evenings in Greenwich Village in 1913, and was not severed until a decade later, during the early 1920s, when in the correspondence between two lovers, differences worthy of division began to appear between the written lines. What happened

between these two events was a unique fusion of three souls who understood, loved and admired each other, although their surroundings did not understand them and often strongly condemned them. What that city, that place and all the friendships and relationships established there gave to them, then marked their subsequent work.

### **3.1. John Reed: the socialist and the poet**

John Reed was the first to be associated with the Provincetown Players, as his work as a political journalist brought him to New York, where most of the future members live and worked at that time. He soon became a part of all the social happenings in Greenwich Village, not only as a passive observer but also as an active creator (Rosenstone 104).

From what we know about John Reed today, his connection with the mecca of art can be viewed as absurd. His calling card as a journalist, war correspondent and above all one of the first communist activists in America seems to be indelible, his other side, more sensitive and vulnerable, is often hidden and lost behind this hard and solid façade, which he created thanks to his politically tuned work. He was not a stranger to art—already in early childhood, when, due to his poor health, he had to spend most of his day either in a hospital bed or in home care, surrounded by nannies and nurses, he found a great interest in literature. He was most drawn to fictional romance and historical prose, with their strong characters and often complicated storylines, but he did not disdain horror literature or, on the other side of the scale, poetry. However, he was not only a keen reader and appreciative consumer; he himself started writing at a very young age and creating his own worlds and the characters in them until he finally decided on the career of a writer. He was then nine years old (14-15).

But it was not only literature that fundamentally shaped his interests; even the establishment and affairs of the household played an important role in profiling him. The mother's

side was known as a notable family who owned and ran several companies in Portland (Hicks 4); his father was an agricultural manufacturer (Hombberger 8). Because of this, Reed was in everyday contact with the working class, and he could quite easily see problems and issues that built deep gap between lower and upper social classes. Thanks to his writing talent and social sensibility, very early on, during his university studies, he began to devote himself to journalism, where he could reflect on and critically write about those topics (Hicks 39). This became, until his untimely death, his lifelong mission.

After failing the first enrolment Harvard, he got there after a second try. Here he not only engaged in sports, but also further develops his writing and rhetorical skills (Hombberger 15-16). He became a member of the drama club, provided editorials to countless university papers, and above all, he attended meetings of the Socialist Club, which significantly contributed to deepening his interest and knowledge about socialism (Hicks 32). It did not take long for Reed to venture outside the States; he set out in the direction of South America and also visits some important European countries and their metropolises (51). This time only as a silent observer. Over the next three years, during which time he contributed massively to various newspapers and journals, such as *Collier's* or *The Century Magazine* (66), accepted a permanent position in politically oriented *The Masses* and soon established himself as a prominent figure of the new, modern, American journalism, he is sent by the *Metropolitan Magazine* to Mexico to cover the ongoing Mexican Revolution (Hombberger 55). This was the first, but certainly not the last of his work trips. In the following years, he went to Italy, France, and briefly to Germany, in the meantime, he stopped in New York several times and did not miss even shorter and less demanding trips around the states, where he mainly followed and focused on struggles of labour unions for better rights of their workers (64). Meanwhile, in the summer of 1914, he went to Provincetown to relax there for a few



brief days. He is accompanied by his then-girlfriend Mabel Dodge (Hicks 157). This is the woman whose tumultuous relationship with Reed would later become the subject of the first-ever play presented by the company that would be later known as the Provincetown Players.

The years 1915 to 1917 became crucial in his life, when the expansion of his work is enormous and points to how rich and at the same time hectic Reed's life was. In 1915, for the first time, he travelled to Eastern Europe, through Serbia, Bulgaria, Romania and Ukraine he reached Russia (194). Impressed by this vast land, he returned there countless time over the next five years, only to be laid to rest there for eternity in 1920. His journey to the east was one of the shorter ones; in a few short weeks, he went back to the States and settled in New York for the longest period. Here he began to sneak into the art world and the cultural happenings mainly around the people of Greenwich Village. He met many people who he later called friends and family—including the already mentioned Jig Cook or Eugene O'Neill. At the beginning of 1916 he visited his mother in Portland and on that occasion, he met Louise Bryant (Homburger 83). She, impressed by his free spiritedness and enthusiasm, found in him, in a short time, an ally, a friend and a lover. Although married, blinded by both love and opportunity, she went with him first to New York, and later to Provincetown. Here, during the summer of 1916, they witness extraordinary cultural events and are the direct creators of a unique theatre group.

Reed was charged primarily with managerial duties. Thanks to his never-ending ambition, he soon suggested to director Jig Cook and the other members to move the company back to New York and call for the official formation of the Provincetown Players. In addition to this zealous leadership, however, he also created artistically—it is mainly during this time with The Players that he fully devoted himself to writing again, experimenting with dramatic form and finding his passion for poetry (Egan 4-5). Besides to the two plays *Freedom* and *The Eternal Quadrangle*, in

July 1917, he published his first and at the same time his last collection of poems, *The Tamburlaine And Other Verses*. In the same year, however, Reed and Bryant left the group and officially lost the status of its members (Black 36). Their journey with theatre diverges for a simple reason—the events taking place in Russia, which foreshadowed the October Revolution, were much too tempting for them not to take them seriously. So; they set out together, already as a married couple, to the east of Europe (Rosenstone 264).

Direct experiences from the ongoing revolution and the nascent idea of communism became their fulfilment and marked them for the rest of their lives. Their artistic desires and passions were suddenly gone, and only journalistic and activist ambitions remained. Bolshevism, for which they fully fell during their stay in Russia, was reflected in the work of both of them; Reed's *Ten Days That Shook The World*, published in 1919, and Bryant's *Six Red Months in Russia*, published a year earlier, provided first-hand accounts of the events of the time, and made their mark not only in the history of American journalism and communist activism, but in the history of America in general. His sudden death in 1920, which, however, seemed to be inevitable due to his lifelong health problems, interrupted not only the well-launched career of this acclaimed, albeit by American society controversially perceived author, but above all, it had a huge impact on the lives of his loved ones, among whom were also Louise Bryant and Eugene O'Neill.

### **3.2. Louise Bryant: the feminist and femme fatale**

A fragile child's soul can perceive more sensitively the situations when their life becomes unstable. Although the childhoods of Louise Bryant and John Reed could not seem more different, both were far from idyllic. Born in San Francisco, Louise soon moved with her parents to the family ranch in a small town in the state of Nevada. Her mother was a typical housewife, her father, Hugh Mohan, was a prominent journalist and political speaker for the Democratic Party. Even

though they were living above the means of the average American family, the relationship was marred from the beginning by the father's frequent mood swings and his growing addiction to alcohol, which culminated in the estrangement from his wife and their three children. It was the year 1889, Louise was only four years old, and she was already losing her first male role model (Dearborn 11-12). Soon after the divorce, the mother remarried, this time to a very ordinary middle-class freight conductor on the railway, Sheridan Bryant (Rosenstone 239). Louise owed a lot to her stepfather. Thanks to his work, as was the case with Reed and his own family background, she began to perceive the differences between classes, where, due to the divorce of her parents, she went from a well-off family to the average middle-class society. But she did not blame either of them, on the contrary—even though they fell in the social rank, Mr Bryant was able to take care of the family well enough. She began using her step-father's surname, and although she never officially requested the change, she used it through her three marriages until her death (Dearborn 13-15).

After finishing high school, she attended college at Nevada State University. When her step-grandfather died, she left her studies for a few months and devoted herself to teaching young children, mostly from Mexican families, to finally transfer her college credits from Nevada to Eugene, where she began studying at the University of Oregon (Rosenstone 239). During her university years, she discovered previously unknown interests in various circles. With her articles, she contributed to many literary magazines, and in some of them she was even led as an editor or illustrator, she tried to write poetry, studied the history of journalism, and among other things she also devoted herself to dancing and basketball (240). A rich social life opened up to her—she was often seen with different boyfriends, she dressed extravagantly and wore quite a heavy make-up for that time; she gained popularity among students, but caused outrage among her professors.

Despite this, or precisely because of this, she did not neglect her studies and she completed her bachelor's degree in history in 1909 (Dearborn 19-22).

In the same year, just shortly after graduation, she moved to Portland. This city would play a major role in her life, as it was here that she met her first two husbands and she tried to establish herself as an independent woman who refused to play the role that the world had already assigned her. The first months in Portland mirrored her years at university. She attended many parties, made new friends from various art circles, was editor and illustrator for the *Portland Spectator*, and worked as a freelance reporter for *The Oregonian* (22-23). In late 1909, at one of many parties, she met her first husband, dentist and passionate art collector, Paul Trullinger (Homburger 104). In addition to the feeling of financial security, she also gained something that was foreign to her and that she could not stand—the role of a middle-class wife. She tried to fight with this predestination in every way possible. Even after marriage, she kept her maiden name; she rented a private studio where she could write and make art; she wrote society columns for the *Spectator* and participated in the organization of various exhibitions in local cultural centres; and she simply let everyone know, with pride and sometimes forced smile, that marriage did not bind her but gave her incredible power (Dearborn 25). However, as soon as she got a chance to escape from this state of things, she did not hesitate for a minute and ran towards a life that offered adventure, unconventionality, and advancement on both personal and professional levels. This chance was called John Reed, and it was given to her after six years of her first marriage.

For the next four years, the journey of Louise Bryant and John Reed took the same direction. First, she went with him to New York, then to Provincetown (Rosenstone 241). Here came the first hit with reality—the popularity that she always gained so easily did not appear here. Under her bohemian aura, the women of the Provincetown Players saw only a calculating, not very gifted

woman who got what she wanted through her relationships with men (Black 17-18). We cannot say that at least part of that statement is not true, but Louise Bryant was more than that. Despite her not-very-good background, thanks to her determination, unceasing ambition, and undeniable talent, she managed to get on the path, where later she could get, through her charm and the previously mentioned qualities, what she wanted.

During the year that she and her husband spent with the company, she wrote a single play, *The Game*, which textually did not differ in any way from the rest of the movement, but was essential in introducing the possibilities of stage setting (Murphy 95). She herself participated in the production of scenery, props and costumes. She starred in many productions and became a prominent face of the cast. In addition, she participated in the artistic council, which approved the forms of the next bills. As one of the few, she went through almost the entire hierarchy of The Players (Black 35). After this in all respects rich year, however, she was blown in a completely different direction, the direction of journalism and activism. In the following years, together with Reed, she travelled to Russia countless times, wrote articles and published their own publications about their testimony of the October Revolution, and profiled themselves as a powerful tandem. His untimely death in 1920 hit her hard, and although she tried to preserve their ideas and still devoted herself to writing, she never again experienced the fruitful period she had during her relationship with Reed. Louise Bryant survived her second husband by 16 years. She died in 1936 in France, alone, divorced, separated from her daughter (Gardner 273), alcoholic and poor (Black 139).

### **3.3. Eugene O'Neill: the playwright that was found and the man who remained lost**

Theatre played a vital role in Eugene O'Neill's from his very first day. He was born on Broadway in New York to the prominent family of James O'Neill, an actor and occasional writer,

and Mary Ellen Quinlan, a housewife. However, his parents' relationship and his relationship with his parents were far from the picture of a perfect family. Most of the time, his father was travelling with a theatre company around the States, and his wife often accompanied him on those trips (Dowling 27). By the time his parents returned home, James would slip into an absent state full of alcohol odour and a distracted, unpleasant mood. During her pregnancy with Eugene, Mary developed a strong addiction to morphine, supposed to relieve the pain (Carpenter 19-21). Neither of his parents ever got rid of the addictions, on the contrary; they left an indelible mark on their offspring. Their behaviour and mental and physical state strongly affected their children and their children's children, who, with a few exceptions, had to deal with their own demons throughout their lives.

As the O'Neill's spent most of the year away from home, Eugene was sent to a Catholic boarding school based in Bronx, to then relocate to the De La Salle Institute in Manhattan. Unlike Reed and Bryant, O'Neill never received a college education; briefly attended Betts Academy in Stamford (Dowling 43); he eventually got to Princeton University, but did not finish the first year. We cannot attribute those failures to his inability to effectively learn or perhaps to lack of the required level of education or intelligence; rather, his annoyance toward professors, lack of interest in lectured topics or countless drunken fights and outbursts could have been the real reason (46-49). In retrospect, these events seem to be a deliberate act and even a revolt of the young man against his father and at the same time against the life he had lived, which only appeared to him as a failure and disappointment. It was the very complicated relationship with his father that was behind many of his own psychological problems, which he struggled with throughout his life.

In 1907, shortly after leaving (or rather being terminated) from college, O'Neill moved back to New York. The following months he wandered around the city, visited bars where he got

drunk, and cafes where he met all sorts of people. Above all, two of them stand out the most from the large number. Friendship with Lou Holladay and his sister Paula led him to MacDougal Street in Greenwich Village for the first time, where he fell under the spell of bohemian life and avant-garde art (50). The second of them was Benjamin R. Tucker, an iconoclastic publisher and editor of one of the anarchist newspapers. Because of his presence, O'Neill gained awareness of anarchism as such, of the importance of freedom of speech and action, and the need to prioritize nonviolent social and political protest over physical violence in order to achieve goals (51). Tucker was also one of those who opposed this radical form of anarchism to the prominent political activist Emma Goldman, who played an important role in the lives of John Reed and Louise Bryant, as it was mainly those three (and a few of their friends and associates) who, with unceasing energy brought the latest and most varied news from the ongoing revolution in Eastern Europe and the growing interest in socialism and the nascent communism.

In the summer of 1909, O'Neill met Kathleen Jenkins, whom he married just a few months later. She was a romantic soul who, however, believed in the necessary stability of life; living in a harsh reality, he longed for freedom and detachment from life as such. They had very little in common and maybe that was the reason for their communion. Another, and perhaps the only real reason for this hasty marriage, was the fact that Kathleen became pregnant (Carpenter 29). Afraid of the slander and gossip this news would cause among their close friends and the wider New York public, O'Neills' sent their son to friends in San Francisco, and he eventually moved for work to Honduras. It was during his stay on the island that Kathleen gave birth to Eugene's firstborn son, Eugene Jr. (30). However, the relationship between the two of them was distant and sterile for most of their lives, as was the case with all his other children. The father survived the son by three years, Eugene Jr. committed suicide in 1950. He was 40 years old.

His departure from New York was ultimately a happy decision, and as an escape from a toxic city and situation he chose a journey to other lands, or rather to places without a land—he spent several years at sea, which later, next to an unhappy childhood and complicated relationships, become the main motive and theme of his plays. That was the uniqueness of O’Neill’s work—the painfully real situation, experiences and feelings written by life itself. For him, the time spent at sea symbolized liberation, calm, comfort in an uncomfortable environment, and a period of finding himself (Dowling 58). However, that moment was only temporary. The depression and growing addiction to alcohol that had begun to set in over the last few weeks spent at sea took full hold. In 1912, O’Neill felt ill with tuberculosis and was forced to move to a sanatorium for full treatment (Leech 3). Shortly thereafter, divorce papers were filed between him and his first wife. The death of his father, his mother and brother Jamie within the span of just a few years (Dowling 80-83) was a heavy blow, which, at the same time, also felt like a release.

During his five-month stay in the sanatorium, he attempted his first dramatic works. He passed the time between treatment and therapies mainly by writing and reading plays, poetry, and also books about literary theory (Carpenter 21-23). After recuperating, he moved back to New York, where he immediately started to send his texts to both smaller and larger theatres. Reactions to them were mixed, or rather downright critical—most theatres rejected his work, considering them uninteresting, unprofitable and commercially unsuccessful, primarily due to their themes and unusual form. O’Neill’s life once again began to show deep cracks, which led to his even deeper descent into alcoholism and depression. The place that he called his birthplace was completely alien, and it only worsened his psychological state (39). Thanks to Greenwich Village ties and MacDougal Street friendships, he learned of a fledgling, experimental theatre group, moving from New York to Provincetown in the summer, that wanted to expand its ranks on all fronts, especially



by young, up-and-coming playwrights. He is intrigued by this offer and in 1916 he left for Massachusetts in search of a new, and above all, different life (Murphy 169-170). He took several of his works with him, and he presented the group first with *Bound East for Cardiff*. The play was an absolute revelation, and the members of the company decided that evening to stage the production as quickly as possible. The development and the launch of the play was a pivotal moment in the company's history and with it, began one of its most successful and productive periods (Egan 5). Together with the great Susan Glaspell, O'Neill formed the principal duo of playwrights of The Players. During his time with the original company, O'Neill wrote fifteen plays, many of which were later transferred to Broadway (Kenton 159). Although the group broke up already in 1922, O'Neill tried to preserve its idea and basic structure in the following few years.

In Provincetown (although the company's production moved back to New York after the first two years), O'Neill spent seven years, and the city played a significant role for him not only on a professional level but above all on a personal one. His most successful years came after he left The Players, yet if it were not for those years, his name would most likely never have been established in the world of theatre, and the art would most likely be deprived of one of the most distinctive authors ever. Eugene O'Neill gave Provincetown and the Provincetown Players their faces and their fames, Provincetown gave Eugene O'Neill the image of Eugene O'Neill himself.

### **3.4. Reflection on the relationship between John Reed, Louise Bryant and Eugene O'Neill**

The strong bond between the trio started with the unexpected friendship of John Reed and Eugene O'Neill. These two met nowhere else than at one of Greenwich Village's many cultural evenings sometime in late 1913 and early 1914. Reed was impressed by O'Neill's well-travelled, albeit a broken soul, and offered his new friend the opportunity to travel with him to Mexico to

document the ongoing Mexican Revolution. It is not clear whether O’Neill accepted this offer or not—all we know is that both of them travelled to Mexico, but whether together or independently is not confirmed from extant material (Bak 17). What is certain is that the connection that was born between the two men was formed primarily through their interest in foreign policy and the social situation, as well as through their passion for exploring new and undiscovered things and places.

However, it did not just stop at politics, although it probably played the most prominent role throughout their friendship. As time went on, art became another link between these major figures in their respective fields. Reed saw an enormous and previously undiscovered potential in Eugene O’Neill, and he tried to promote it as much as possible with all his means. For the rest of his life, Reed consistently spread awareness of his friend’s work, often met people who showed an interest in O’Neill and thus participated in the promotion of his work to wider areas, often exceeding the boundaries of the theatre world (Egan 106). However, he did not do it out of calculation, Reed’s status at that time was greater than that of the playwright himself—he did so of his own free will and with a good feeling. He felt that American drama lacked a strong representative (of both experimentalism and realism), which he saw and found precisely in the character of Eugene O’Neill.

O’Neill felt the need and necessity to repay his dear friend not only for Reed’s effort to make him visible but also for deepening his awareness about current political and social issues, by pursuing Reed’s further education in the field of art (Bak 18). During the years they kept in touch, Reed returned to his childhood interests—he rediscovered his passion for creative writing, began to devote himself profusely to crafting works of poetry, and displayed a penchant for drama in his journalistic work, enhanced by a unique style and form of narration that appeared so often in Reed’s historically oriented works (19). O’Neill was not left behind either; although he claimed to

be first an artist and then a socialist and said that politics would not be given any space in his works, with increasing time, age and the number of written plays, he began to move towards burning political and social issues. He was critical of the onset of technocracy in society, which according to him, was erasing individuality and humanity itself from the life of American citizens (19). However, it was not the only thing that played a vital role for O'Neill; after all, the very images of the depravity and perversion of the perfect American family and the unattainability of the American dream, which the author drew from his own life and from the lives of almost everyone he ever met, was something that social activists so often pointed out.

Paradoxically, the stumbling block of their friendship became what so many times united them—the roles of politics in art and art in politics. O'Neill has repeatedly stated that he does not want to change the world through his political views, but through his artistic talent and vision; Reed was the exact opposite—citizens' interests come first, and then one can devote themselves to creating art. Or rather—art needs to be politicized so that the message reaches the widest possible range of audience. Both men considered themselves anarchists and socialists, but while O'Neill focused on dramatic possibilities first and social implications second, Reed found the message to be more important than the medium that brings it through (19) This was one of the main reasons why Reed could not be considered a full-time artist; as soon as a conflict caught his attention, he set out for the journey with an effort to portray as accurately as possible the situation of the people affected by the strife. This did not mean that O'Neill was overlooking the reality, but it cannot be said that he was an active element in those events (Dowling 134).

These slight differences in their opinions could not break the strong ties between the journalist and the playwright. In the moments when they were together in the same place, they had long-into-the-night, passionate debates on a myriad of topics. Reed's untimely death in 1920

stopped their inspiring and all-round interesting collaboration. Even though their friendship ultimately lasted as long as the existence of the theatre company in which they played essential roles did, we can see their relationship not only as a strange picture of a mismatched duo that came from two completely different worlds, but above all men who each excelled in a different field, but who tried to provide each other with a base of for personal development in areas that were primarily foreign to them.

The friendship between O'Neill and Reed lasted even when a woman entered it. It was in Portland in early 1916 when Louise Bryant first met John Reed. They quickly fell in love with each other and in a few months moved together to New York. With their arrival to Provincetown during the late spring of the same year, she was introduced to a newly come playwright, Eugene O'Neill. While he was given a warm welcome in that small seaside town, Bryant had a much more difficult starting position—from the very beginning she was an outcast of the local society. Most of the ladies of the company considered her a leech, first feeding on the previous successes of John Reed and later on the popularity and undisguised talent of Eugene O'Neill (Egan 172). Soon after her arrival, she acquired the label of a calculating woman who messed with men's heads only for the purpose of rising higher in society. One side argued that she only became a journalist because of Reed's unconditional love for her, while the other side thought she considered herself an artist because of her close connection to O'Neill. While Bryant proudly proclaimed that she is first and foremost an activist and socialist, others mockingly added that she is someone "who thinks the revolution is so everyone can have a fur coat." (Black 36) Her own words backfired almost immediately against her. Every move of hers was observed, analysed, and criticised. Most of the members claimed that her only quality lay in her beauty.

We cannot say that beauty was not one of her weapons. Behind the extravagant clothes and bold makeup stood a woman of delicate features, and long red hair and deep dark eyes. The aura that floated around her captivated everyone present, and there was a realization that she too could be the reason for the audience's fascination. During one year of working with the company, she received many acting roles, including some of the main ones, and thus formed the cornerstone of the ensemble. However, we cannot say that beauty was her only talent. She was a capable writer, journalist and playwright, thanks to her interests in drawing and painting, she designed some sceneries and costumes, and, as a member of the commission, with her adamant ability, she was able to push through many submitted proposals (48). But even that was not enough for others. Her weakness, they said, was that she was good at everything, but not the best at anything. Called weak and talentless in her time, nowadays she would most often receive the epithet 'multipotential'.

However, Louise Bryant also caused bad blood through her own actions. Shortly after arriving in Provincetown, she struck up a more than friendly relationship with local idol Eugene O'Neill (Dowling 141). This was happening at a time when her partner John Reed had left the country for another of his numerous working trips, leaving Bryant all alone on hostile soil (Egan 171). O'Neill thus became one of her allies. Their love affair, which everyone soon knew about and which the couple themselves did not hide in any way, caused an uproar and considerable resentment among the members, despite the fact that the company preferred and professed a bohemian life full of free, unbound love (155).

What perhaps irritated their co-workers the most was actually the fact that although everyone thought their affair would be based on the he-gives-she-takes system, the reality was far from that image. O'Neill supported and encouraged her to further explore the dimension of her talent. Although the writing of her only play, *The Game*, was mainly due to the relentless insistence

of Jig Cook, O'Neill's spirit and their close relationship was clearly reflected in the text (Murphy 95), as the character of Youth was unmistakably inspired by him, and the love portrayed between Youth and the Girl drew heavily on a reflection of the bond between these two artists. The text perhaps showed that Bryant's writing qualities remained slightly above average, but it gave work to many of the members of the company due to the freedom it offered in adapting it to the stage (Egan 168).<sup>2</sup>

Bryant was also a helping hand to O'Neill, just in completely different matters than one would have expected. She significantly contributed to his, even if only temporary, abstinence. Although O'Neill felt an improvement in his mental state when he arrived in Provincetown, his eternal fall into a glass of alcohol incredibly hampered him not only in his profession but above all in his efforts to return to normality. Bryant followed him on every occasion—someone may throw into discussion the word 'possessive'—and thus prevented him from deeper fall into depression and addiction. If it were not for her, in the near future he would have probably drunk himself to death, or due to his imbalance and inability to devote himself fully to writing, he would have attempted suicide again (Dowling 141). Bryant became his lighthouse, that guided him on the right way to the port.

We are not saying that the months he was clear and abstinent meant that his work became exceptional, on the contrary—O'Neill's best works were created when his talent was fed by misery, sorrow and unhappiness. At that time, however, he seemed to be the most reconciled with the past,

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<sup>2</sup> Among other things, this one-act play is very popular with contemporary theatre students, who often choose it for their performances for various reasons—for its tolerable length, diverse costume and stage options, a wider range of themes and symbols, as well as for freedom in interpretation and subsequent production.

the most perceptive in the present and the most ready for the future. When John Reed returned from his travels to Provincetown in the late summer of 1916, there became a complete symbiosis between those three artists, which was met with incomprehension from the other members of the company. Those, looking for every possible reason why this strange relationship could not work, overlooked the fact that what they saw as unfaithfulness, was freedom in love, that this trio so longed for. The idyll of these months was suddenly disrupted by something that no one expected, including O'Neill himself—the secret marriage of Reed and Bryant during the fall of that year. The happy couple became a contrasting image to the shocked and broken Eugene O'Neill (Black 17). This constant is also why Bryant's relationship with the playwright is so often criticized and its importance subverted. The freedom of love and life stood and still stands in conflict with the devotion to each other and the care for and protection of the fragile human soul.

This image of a heartsick Eugene O'Neill may have been only the wishful thinking of other members of the company, who wanted to prove their opinion about this very unorthodox relationship. In reality, not much has changed. The marriage between the two activists was primarily an act of mutual protection—Reed's failing health, as well as the sudden problems that befell Bryant at the time, made them commit to each other in a way, that they most probably did not even wish for (18). However, this marriage, even if of convenience, did not imply that the couple had not felt love, desire and lust for each other—only the officiality of this bond actually bound them more than freed them. At the same time, the wedding did not mean that Bryant and O'Neill ended their affair; the couple maintained a close relationship for the next two years (Egan 200), but paradoxically, with the death of John Reed, what connected them suddenly disappeared from their life for good, their mutual affection cooled down and they became complete strangers to each other. Bryant's bitterness and O'Neill's moodiness are evident from the correspondence

they exchanged on a regular basis over the years (Black 213). What happened in Provincetown, stayed in Provincetown—the singularity of the moment when one does not realize the brevity and fragility of life and rushes headlong into everything. The time had come to reunite with harsh reality.



#### **4. The Sign of Three: an analysis of selected works by Louise Bryant, John Reed and Eugene O'Neill**

During that one summer, when the three met in Provincetown and, together with the other members of the group, built the foundations of the newly emerging theatre, which eventually became one of the turning points of the modern American drama, they wrote a total of five plays—John Reed and Eugene O'Neill each wrote two pieces, and Louise Bryant came up with one. After Neith Boyce's *Winter's Night*, which opened the summer season of 1916, John Reed presented his political satire *Freedom*, the first of three plays that were produced by the Provincetown Players. Later, O'Neill made his debut with one of his best-known one-act plays, the already mentioned *Bound East for Cardiff*, which began his work with the Players and also indicated the direction that his dramatic work would take. This was followed by Wilbur Daniel Steele's *Not Smart*, and then Louise Bryant introduced herself with the morality play *The Game*, which began and also ended her career as a playwright. Shortly after, John Reed returned to the stage with the Wilde-tuned comedy *The Eternal Quadrangle*. This play was subsequently balanced by two dramas—Glaspell's psychological play *Trifles* and O'Neill's experiment with expressionism *Thirst*. This unrepeatable season was then closed by the plays of Hutchins Hapgood, Neith Boyce and Henry Marion Hall (Kennedy).

Although five plays were produced by this trio during this period, and at the same time, it was the only season in which John Reed and Louise Bryant were actively involved, we selected only three plays for our analysis—Bryant's *The Game*, Reed's *The Eternal Quadrangle* and O'Neill's *Thirst*. The reasons for our selection are simple; they were the plays on which this trio worked together most prominently and their constant influence on each other is most noticeable. Paradoxically, the order in which the plays were produced and played that season did not

correspond to their actual time of writing—although as the first published, Bryant wrote *The Game* as very last, only at the end of spring 1916, while the last listed O’Neill’s *Thirst* was written first, sometime between 1912 and 1913. *The Eternal Quadrangle* was created sometime between those two plays—Reed began to work on the text as early as 1914, but he significantly revised the play over the course of many months, and he continued until its release in 1916 (Kennedy). What connected the three plays were different factors, just as their three authors were connected by different priorities and ambitions.

We will analyze each of the plays not only textually, but through preserved sources, we will try to place them in a broader context of time, the functioning of the group and the personal relationship of the above-mentioned authors. We will try to approach Louise Bryant’s *The Game* mainly because of its importance in the stage setting, which later on brought the attention of a wide audience to the company, and also for the author’s effort to capture with her words the mind and the heart of Eugene O’Neill. We will then continue with John Reed’s *The Eternal Quadrangle*, where language and especially the form played a crucial role, which intelligently and humorously described the laws of the upper classes, as well as reflected Reed’s own opinions on the traditionality of love and marriage. We will then end the analysis with the lesser-known (and according to Louise Bryant, not very successful (Egan 205)) O’Neill’s play *Thirst*. We will examine its rich, expressive language, oppressive atmosphere and distressing themes, as well as the author’s collaboration with Bryant, who played one of the leading roles, and Reed, who helped with dramaturgy.

#### 4.1. Louise Bryant: THE GAME

*The Game* was created largely at the instigation of Jig Cook himself. Although Louise Bryant had ambitions to be involved in the activities of the company, she refused to participate in the creation of their repertoire by contributing any text. However, Cook sensed great potential in her, not only in writing a good play but above all in generating the necessary buzz and interest across the entire (artistic) community. Bryant was at the very bottom of the company's popularity rankings, and the release of the play may have helped move her up in that imaginary ranking. After much insistence, Cook eventually persuaded Bryant, and during the spring months of 1916, she wrote her first and only play (Black 36).

This one-act play did not deviate in any way from the traditional stream of morality plays. Bryant sketched a simple story of four characters, where Life and Death idly flip dice over the lives of people standing on the border between life and death. For example, they play for the lives of soldiers in the First World War, people affected by the plague epidemic, but also for individuals who decided to end their lives of their own free will. This last one is also the case of a young poet (character of Youth) who wants to end his suffering from unrequited love by jumping into the sea, and a dancer (character of The Girl) who can no longer bear being an outcast from society.

One of the first things the reader will notice about the text is the almost complete lack of any author's notes. Bryant only provided the characters' names, without any additional information about their appearance or general characteristics; neither we do know anything about space and time. In the case of *The Game*, however, we can claim that this indeterminacy is also related to the omnipresent contingency of the situation. Death often comes suddenly and unexpectedly, the situation a person finds themselves in is set within just a few seconds, and the

direction an individual takes is often decided only at the moment of the decision itself. Yet, at the same time, this lack of specificity could also depend on the author herself.

As mentioned in the opening paragraph, Louise Bryant was not much interested in writing the play, and perhaps the almost complete absence of notes can be related to two factors: the author's lack of knowledge of the essentials of a theatre play or, on the contrary, her desire for complete freedom during the rehearsal of the production itself (Black 118). Either way, the absence of these elements gave the production team the opportunity to work with their own creativity and imagination, and it is mainly because of this fact that *The Game* became such an important event in the history of the Players. William and Marguerite Zorach, who were among the founding members of the company, not only designed but also directed the play. Beginning artists, creating mainly in the field of painting and sculpture, tried with this play „to synthesize decoration, costume, speech and action into one mood (Murphy 95)“, and in order to do that, they gave up realism and completely devoted themselves to experimentalism. The scene showed distinct elements of post-impressionism; this was exhibited mainly in the use of shapes (Kennedy). In the depth of the stage, there was a canvas featuring a wide range of motifs of nature (the sea, trees, stones) in an unnatural form. The strong influence of cubism was shown in the usage of angular shapes of those objects and mirrored symmetry of the scenery. At the same time, both the stage settings and costume designs were significantly inspired by early Egyptian art and in combination with the manipulation of medieval allegory, they constructed “a mythology for the modern age that foreshadowed a central aesthetic strategy of high modernism (Murphy 100).”

Criticism of low quality could only be a simple statement of the truth, but at the same time, it could also be partly the result of reluctance of the members to even produced the text. However, it is clear that although the play does not have a very complex and developed plot line (the real

question is if anyone is capable of creating a more complicated yet comprehensible story in about eight pages), Bryant is able to play out several important symbols and themes, which offer much to offer for discussion. In the opening of the play, we get the image of the previously mentioned dice game between Life and Death, which symbolizes the insignificance and randomness of life, and which is reflected throughout the entire text.

LIFE: (*Counting abstractly*) Fifty thousand, fifty-one, sixty-five, ninety—(*She goes on through the next speech.*)

DEATH: Come come, Life, forget your losses. It's no fun playing with a dull partner, I had hoped for a good game tonight, although there is little in it for me—just a couple of suicides. (Bryant 53)

Death is already numbed by its often-involuntary omnipresence in the lives of those complete strangers, and we must take his<sup>3</sup> behaviour realistically and conciliatorily rather than negatively. He understands that his coming is inevitable, and although he may come earlier for some and later for others, he will always find a way into human life. His expressions, often emotionless and sometimes cruel, are just the consequences of trying to distance himself as much as possible from the fact that he has always been and always will be the bearer of bad news. Life stands in opposition to her sister as she perceives the impermanence and eternal injustice of this reality. She realizes the absurdity of the situation where, on the one hand, there are thousands of people who want to live, but due to war, social conflict and epidemics, they are chosen to die, on the other hand, there are a few chosen individuals, who have everything but in the moment of slight discomfort they want to voluntarily leave this world.

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<sup>3</sup> In English and German cultures and languages, Death is usually portrayed as male and Life as female.

LIFE: (*Earnestly*) But I want these two, whether I win or lose. I really *must* have them. They are geniuses—and you know how badly I am in need of geniuses right now. Ungrateful spoiled children! They always want to commit suicide over their first disappointments.

DEATH: (*Impatiently*) How many times must I tell you that the game must be played! It's the law—you know it as well as I do. (54)

Life offers some important historical figures, such as The Czar of Russia or George of England, as well as an entire regiment of soldiers to save these two seemingly insignificant lives (54), but Death rightly reminds her that it is not for the two of them to decide which way the newcomers will go; it is just fortune and hazard of a dice roll. The theme of the irreversibility of fate, whether inclined to one side or the other, comes to the fore again. So what is it that makes Life so attracted to the characters of the poet and the dancer that she is capable of sacrificing almost anything for their survival? Is it the desire to protect geniuses and thus preserve hope for a more educated and cultured future generation? Is it primarily an effort to save at least someone? Or is it just the need to satisfy oneself with a heroic, even if ultimately meaningless act? The greatest weakness of the text is that it does not answer any of these questions. Or, on the contrary, the greatest ambition of the text is that it leaves the answer up to each reader and spectator. Perhaps, in the end, it is not important what reasons Life had for saving these individuals, and why Death held such an uncompromising attitude toward the whole situation. Perhaps more important is the decision of the two mortals and what significance it acquires for them, which number the dice falls on in their case.

The moment we are introduced to the second central couple, the poet and the dancer, the text acquires another dimension. We get the first-hand experience of people who believe they have

been so disappointed in life that death will be their release; at the same time, we are given a view of the role and importance of love in the life of an individual. For the poet, the love of others and loving of others was what both fulfilled and inspired him.

YOUTH: If I cannot have love to warm me, I cannot create beauty. And if I cannot create beauty, I will not live! (56)

In his case, we are spinning in a vicious circle—the loss of this emotion not only costs him personal satisfaction but also causes him professional, and artistic impotence, which pushes him even deeper into depression from dissatisfaction.

YOUTH: (*Passionately*) Falsehoods. Evasions. What *is* Love, then? You gave me a girl who sold flowers on the street. She had hair like gold and a body all curves and rose-white like marble. I sang my songs for her, and the whole world listened. Then an ugly beast came and offered her gold... and laughed at me—and went away.

DEATH: (*Laughing indulgently*) That is Love, my boy. You are lucky to find it out so young. (57)

The girl also comes before the tribunal because of a disappointment in love—however, in her case, her absence of love is not only in the sense of passion or adoration, but also in the sense of caring. Through both characters, we realize how fragile and complicated love is. It can be filled with passion, sexual desire, and the need for gratification, as well as the simple need to be seen and to be perceived.

GIRL: O, Life dear, I must leave you! I cannot bear you any longer. You are so white and so cold!

LIFE: What have you to complain of? Have I not given you Fame, and Worship and Wealth?

GIRL: What are all these... without Love? (59)

As soon as there is an interaction between the poet and the dancer, we, and above all they, get the symbiosis between two souls. They meet in person for the first time only at that moment; however, the girl already met with the poet through his poems and songs, which so often evoke a longed-for desire in her. Through her dance, she tries to translate his words even to those who cannot and do not want to hear them. The poet is enchanted by the girl. Not only by her beauty but also by her purity of heart and sincerity of mind.

YOUTH: How beautiful! You do understand—you do! Wings flash and soar when you dance! You skim the sea gloriously, lifting your quivering feathery breast against the sunny wind. Dance again for me. (61)

They fall in love, and although there is a certain level of pathos in the text, their love is far from perfect—it was found at the moment when the lovers were on the verge of collapse.

YOUTH: [...] It is all a myth—Life, Love, Happiness. I must idealize someone, something—and then the bubble bursts and I am alone. (61)

They come to understand that perfection does not exist, and the eternal idealization of things and people leads to self-destruction. The fear of disappointment, the vision of falling out of love, and the feeling of inferiority are replaced by the understanding that this is all part of life, and if we do not want to be hurt, we will never be able to experience life in its purest, the beautiful and the most tragical form.

LIFE: [...] I can only give happiness for a moment—but it is real happiness—Love, Creation, Unity with the tremendous rhythm of the universe. I can't promise it will endure. I won't say you will not some day be forgotten. What if it is himself he loves in you? That, too, is Love.



GIRL: To be supremely happy for a moment—an hour—that is worth living for!

(61)

If we take into account the time of creation of the text, we cannot fail to notice certain connections between fiction and reality. In the summer of 1916, when the play was performed, a very passionate relationship between Louise Bryant and Eugene O’Neill was born. Their initially friendly bond soon grew into a love affair, which other members of the company with both pleasure and displeasure commented on. Love, in any form, was part of their months spent together, and the theme of freedom and bohemianism was significantly reflected in Bryant’s work. A moment of complete happiness and fulfilment was a kind of definition of the way of their kind of life; free love prevailed over the binding tradition of family life and the sacrament of marriage. Everyone longed for freedom and liberty, and everyone found it in something or someone else. Just because Bryant admired and desired O’Neill (and vice versa), did not mean she did not love John Reed—the two things were not mutually exclusive. Both Bryant and O’Neill were aware of the ephemerality and limitations of those moments and wanted to live them to the fullest.

GIRL: (*Hesitating*) But I have found Youth.

YOUTH: (*Swiftly*) Yes, and Youth has found Love—real Love at last. Love that burns like fire and flowers like the trees. (61)

In the play, both the dancer and the poet come to terms with reconciliation and peace of mind for the death that they chose voluntarily, even if after the pressure of those around them. The moment these lost children meet, they realize that they have found their soulmates. The poet’s broken mind and heart could not create anything beautiful without the beauty and love present in their lives; the lonely soul of the dancer had nothing and no one to dance for (Barlow 51). This motif again refers to the fact and the situation in which Bryant and O’Neill were at that moment.

He, spinning in a vicious circle where he solved his depression with alcohol and this falling into sorrow meant his further inability to write; She, perceiving the displeasure and antipathy of her surroundings towards her person, longing to be truly seen, admired and loved. Bryant's effort to attract O'Neill's attention can be sensed from the language and setting presented in the play. However, by this statement, we do not mean anything bad by any means, on the contrary—her interest and the desire to help him get out of those melancholic states seem to be more important topics than the symbolism of good and bad and Life and Death of this morality. The message, that we should give life a chance, although it seems that life itself gave up on giving a chance, is surprisingly positive momentum of this one-act play, and we feel that it aims directly from Louise Bryant to O'Neill's troubled mind.

DEATH: [...] Come—I will give you *peace!*

GIRL: (*Spurning him*) Peace? Do you think I want peace—I, a dancer, a child of the whirling winds? Do you think I would be blind to the sunlight, deaf to Youth's music—to my sweet applause, dumb to laughter? All this joy that is in me—scattered in darkness? Dust in my hair—in my eyes—on my dancing feet? (Bryant 61)

The greatness of the individual and the figure of a genius is closely related to the element of a woman and femininity. In this play, as previously stated, Death is masculine, and Life is feminine. This division prevails mainly in the Germanic languages, on the other hand, Slavic and Romance cultures usually assign pronouns to characters exactly the opposite. Rather than linguistics, in the case of *The Game*, it is another symbol connecting the real world with the fictional one. Although greatness is attributed to both mortal characters, it is primarily the poet who can claim to be a genius, as „he writes the words she interprets (Barlow 41)”. Thanks to a

combination of wisdom and talent, he is able to create new worlds and characters and bring a wide range of emotions that affect those who understand his words and language. However, female characters are the main driving and creative forces (51). If it were not for them, their sensitivity, their support and above all their love, the poet would not be able to write anything at all. Love, which is so often assigned to women as being something intimate, fragile and therefore not suitable for the stereotypical male character, is, in Bryant's work, equally divided between the sexes. Both the poet and the dancer are utterly miserable without love; the same can be said about Life and Death. By the end of the play, each and every one of them comes to the realization that love is the greatest weapon that can both save and destroy.

YOUTH: Yes. But we will have lived. Until then, Death, you are Powerless.

(Bryant 63)

#### **4.2. John Reed: THE ETERNAL QUADRANGLE**

In contrast to his wife, John Reed had ambitions to actively participate in the creation of the company's repertoire—during his tenure, which was ultimately limited to only one season, he staged two plays; after the first political satirical monodrama *Freedom* (Murphy 89), in which Reed recalled his time in prison, he came out with the light-hearted comedy *The Eternal Quadrangle*, where, following the example of Oscar Wilde, he opened “unexamined assumptions and social values [...] by upending convention and reversing the audience's expectations (Murphy 61).” The third written play, *The Peace That Passeth Understanding* was not published until the third New York season, when the journalist was no longer an active member of the Players (Kenton 99).

The story of *The Eternal Quadrangle* follows an ordinary afternoon of an upper-class family. Robert Fortescue, a stock market magnate, is expecting a visit from Freddy Temple, who later turns out to be the latest lover of his wife Margot. After the arrival of Mr Temple and the subsequent return home of Mrs Fortescue, a bizarre situation occurs—the audience would expect the confrontation between the love triangle to be full of grievances from the cheating on the part of the husband and efforts to cover the tracks of this fornication on the part of the lovers, but the opposite is true. Mr Fortescue, upon discovering that the two have broken up, blames first Mr Temple, then his wife, for their inability to maintain the love affair. The situation that their separation has put him in is unpleasant for a businessman, as in addition to his marital duties, he would have to fulfil all the other needs and demands of his wife, which he fundamentally refuses, as he is a very busy man. The climax of the absurdity of the whole situation occurs when the three decide that they will have to find a new lover for Mrs Fortescue—after a short consideration of the options, Mr Fortescue finally proposes his butler, Mr Archibald, who (un)surprisingly agrees to the proposal. Soon, another question arises—what about his own marriage? With arrival of his wife Estelle, which reveals that she is also the maid of Mrs Fortescue, the whole group decides that it would be best if she got together with Mr Temple. Everyone is thrilled with this scenario and the play ends with an idyllic image of two new love couples and a satisfied wittol.

The uniqueness of the play lies in the cooperation of visual elements and dramatic text. The visuals fulfil the function of a façade that shows the glitter and luxury in which the elites live, while also representing the tightness and affectation with which the upper society presents itself to the rest of the world. Reed, compared to Bryant's play *The Game*, clearly defined the boundaries of the playing space. He gave complete freedom to his own imagination and created the most complex and elaborate scene in the company's history. What other plays lacked, whether it was

the enclosure of space in sea plays by Eugene O'Neill and Neith Boyce, or the richness of rooms and apartments in the plays of Jig Cook or Susan Glaspell, was fulfilled in a single play by John Reed.

SCENE: [...] *A model rich man's library, looks as if it were designed, books and all, by the architect at the same time as the outside of the house. At the right, however, a contrast is furnished by a flat-topped desk covered with piles of papers, a waste basket crammed full, a desk telephone very efficient-looking, a tall filing-cabinet of yellow Office-Furniture type, and several shelves cleaned out of Literature and filled with well-handled reference book, report, box files. [...] In short, the room of a man with enough money to buy the best taste, insisting on comfort, careless of his environment, and too busy for aesthetics.* (Reed 106)

The text itself, in which sharp language and intelligent humour are combined together with Reed's feeling for creating and graduating the situation—however absurd it may seem—then becomes a mockery of this seriousness and respect with which “the people upstairs” are approached and treated. The unconventional solution and questionable acceptance of marital infidelity, as well as other related motives, contributed to Reed's effort to break down the boundaries between social classes, but also to the strict division of male and female roles in society, as well as to disprove certain myths and stereotypes and last, but not least to poke fun of the sacred statues of marriage. The combination of all this is visible but in monologues and dialogues.

FORTESCUE: I'm a busy man, and I haven't time to waste on these continuous eruptions. The emotional basis of my life must be settled, or I'm good for nothing. I can't have you focusing your scattered personality on me. You've got to get job, my dear; and the only job you're trained for is love. So for heaven's sake find a

man—but pick a stayer. I can stand a bust-up every six months. (*Sighing,*) Every three months if you must; but oftener than that will make me old before my time. (ibid. 111)

Here, Reed attempted a direct conversation between representatives of the upper and lower classes. Although there was always an interaction between them in both the real and literary world, as one social layer could not function fully and smoothly without the other, it was always made clear who was higher in status, education and intelligence. The author not only erased these differences but above all tore down any stereotypes used up to that time. At first glance, the dialogues seem to be innocuous, but they deviate by who is talking to each other and about whom they are talking—a high-ranking businessman and his maid are debating the topic of the subject of cuckoldry of the man’s wife. The maid, like the butler, resorts to the often noble, serious and educated discussion, on the contrary, the privileged have the tendency to fall into a self-pitying state full of imbalance and even childish resentment. With his depiction of servants, Reed swerved from most literary works in two crucial points—First, the cleverness of the lower class is not directly connected with cunningness to trying to enrich oneself at the expense of the master; secondly, it is explicitly expressed that these people are rich characters lacking in flatness and equivocalness, and although their existence is dependent on their employer, the employer is dependent on them by the same measure. The author turns those who are normally considered mere puppets into main characters that significantly change the course of the story.

FORTESCUE: [...] Now, Estelle, from your observations, what do you think’s wrong with those two [lovers]?

ESTELLE (*thoughtfully, after looking at them critically*): I should say it was light-mindedness on both sides. They never even quarrelled until last night, and then on

fundamental grounds. There wasn't even passion complex. They didn't interest each other at all. Havelock Ellis has a name for it—for the moment I can't recall what.

FORTESCUE (*clapping his hands together with satisfaction*): Rotten management, eh?

ESTELLE: No, I shouldn't say that. Simply undeveloped powers of selection. Adolescent whims, that's all. What there anything else, sir? (109)

However, this did not negate the fact that the author was critical of everything and everyone who tried to suppress any, even the smallest, amount of freedom and autonomy of the individual. Both Reed Bryant led a bohemian life, lacking boundaries and rules, where liberty and celebration of life prevailed over anything else. In *The Eternal Quadrangle*, he sought to bring to his audience unorthodox ideas about marriage, love and the relationship between the sexes (Gardner 350). At the same, however, the play intended to be his explicit statement about information circulating the company about a love affair between Reed's partner Louise Bryant, and Reed's friend Eugene O'Neill, happening at a time when he was first abroad, and then, due to his deteriorating health being hospitalized (Egan 205). With the love triangle, that is later turned into even more bizarre quadrangle, he made it clear that love not only has no boundaries but above all is fleeting and elusive. Neither Reed nor Bryant were saints—the journalist quite openly admitted to various short-term affairs and flings that he was involved in during not only his relationship with Louise but also with his previous partner, Mabel Dodge. Many historical sources, including Edna Kenton, testify that the play was primarily intended by Reed as a reflection of the toxic relationship between Reed and Dodge, who was the dominant and controlling element of their romance (Murphy 61).

Evidence of this matter can be found in many passages throughout the play that indirectly refer to this.

With Reed and Bryant, there was no hatred or malice towards the beloved or the lover on either side—the love affair between Bryant and her two men lived in a world of its own, in incredible symbiosis and complete understanding, both personal and professional. Throughout the play, Reed made his opinion about the whole situation clear—he scorned the scornful looks of those around him, he diminished the sanctity and the purity of the relationship, and last, but not least, he was making fun of Louise, Eugene and himself. The characters of the play were not supposed to reflect the literal reality of their relationship, but certain exaggerated mannerisms of theirs could be found in the *dramatis personae*. Mr Fortescue's persistent effort to find a new lover for his wife, who would entertain her and satisfy her both emotionally and sexually, in order to regain his longed-for peace, referred to Reed's health problems, which were said to be behind his inability to have intercourse with Bryant (Murphy 61). Mr Temple's dependence on the attention of his lover, his demand to be constantly cared of and at the same time manifestations of childishness in the life of a grown man seemed to poke fun at the fact that O'Neill had become a kind of henpecked by Bryant during their love affair (Egan 10).

FORTESCUE: [...] A woman is what she wants to be—as long as it's amusing.

ESTELLE: And a man is never what he wants to be.

TEMPLE (*gloomily*): How true! Because he never knows what he wants to be.

FORTESCUE (*approvingly*): [...] It takes a woman to find you.

ESTELLE: Yes. What's the use of loving a man if you can't change him? (Reed 115)



Compared to Dodge, Bryant was more open to her partner's choice of how he would spend his free time, as she too craved this type of sovereignty. There was no bitterness or a feeling of inferiority between them, and their bond was enriched by that it existed and at the same time, its existence did not prevent the establishment of other, often short, but all the more intense relations. The fact that Reed cast his partner in the role of Mrs Fortescue, i.e. the one who needs to have both a husband and a lover to feel complete fulfilment with her life, and, at the same time whose husband needs to choose a lover for her so that he feels satisfaction with the situation, only emphasizes their very strange, yet in all respects functioning partnership.

MARGOT: I never dared to admit it before. Now I know what was the matter. I thought I was not sick of lovers; but I was only sick of intellectuals. (112)

#### **4.3. Eugene O'Neill: THIRST**

*Thirst*, which was first staged in September 1916, belongs to a long line of sea plays that formed the basis of Eugene O'Neill's work, even though it deviates the most from his use of realism (Egan 91). Originally inspired by the sinking of the Titanic in 1912 (Kennedy), the play follows the destinies of three completely different characters who have saved themselves from certain drowning by boarding a lifeboat, but their shared stay in a space of a few meters, surrounded by a dark sea and shrouded in depressive thoughts, their survival become hell on earth. In the play, O'Neill presents a wider range of social status—"A West Indian Mulatto, dressed in the blue uniform of a sailor" represents the lower class; "middle-aged white man in what was once an evening dress, [...] evidently he had been a first class passenger" on the contrary, belongs to the highest levels of society. Between them then stands, "a young woman, [...] even more bizarre figure than the man, for she is dressed in complete short-skirted dancer's costume of black velvet

covered with spangles. [...] When she lifts her head a diamond necklace can be seen glittering coldly in the protruding collar-bones of her emaciated shoulders (O'Neill 31).” Not only in appearance, but their behaviour also shows the barrier between who is serving and who is being served. The pair of gentleman and dancer stands in opposition to the mulatto, while showing disgust at the fact that they have to be in the same boat with him. The main argument for their contempt for him is that, according to them, he stole all the remaining water, which is essential for a chance of their survival. Since, or even though, they are surrounded by the sea, the behaviour of these two characters is significantly influenced by the fact that they know they will most likely perish either by hunger or thirst. Their actions become more and more delirious with each passing minute, and they go from a state of firm belief in salvation, to reconciliation and acceptance of a dreary situation, to a complete mental breakdown and experiencing of panic attacks.

THE GENTLEMAN—I have not given up hope. These seas, I have heard, are full of coral islands and we surely ought to drift near one of them soon. It was probably an uncharted coral reef that our steamer hit.

THE DANCER—Perhaps there will be water on the island. Look; look hard! An island or ship may have come in sight while we are talking! [...]

THE GENTLEMAN—(*shading his eyes with a trembling hand and peering wildly around him*) I see nothing—nothing but a red sea and a red sky.

THE DANCER—(*still looking at some point far out over the water, speaks in disappointed tones*) It is gone. Yet I am quite sure I saw one. [...]

THE GENTLEMAN—(*shaking her by the shoulder*) What you say is nonsense. There is no island I tell you. There is nothing but sun and sky and sea around us. There are no green trees. There is no water. (42)

Calling him the gentleman is a literary pun on O'Neill's part. The word 'gentleman' whose meaning is often described as a chivalrous, polite and well-behaved type of male is quite the opposite picture of the character that appears in *Thirst*. The man, although at first glance he appears knowledgeable, balanced and well-mannered, as befits someone from a higher class, has a tendency (not only) in moments of tension to haughty behaviour, which humiliates and hurts others. At the same time, he tries to take over the thoughts of others and put into their mouths what he himself feels, but what he finds unacceptable to think as a middle-aged white man. His relationship with the woman is full of criticism towards her behaviour, often reproaching her for her oversensitivity and inability to think rationally.

THE GENTLEMAN—[talking about first time he saw her] It was in the salon. You were singing. You were very beautiful. I remember a woman on my side saying: "How pretty she is! I wonder if she is married?" Strange how some idiotic remark like that will stick in one's brain when all else is vague and confused. A tragedy happens—we are in the midst of it—and one of our clearest remembrances afterwards is a remark that might have been overheard in any subway train (38)."

Although intrigued and physically attracted to her beauty, he tends to downplay her fears and mocks her and all her traits, from her self-destructiveness to her childish naivety, and ultimately her fragile femininity; he thinks she is simply worthy of being called a woman. There is a sense of manipulation in his speech, which only contributes to her rapid descent into hysteria and madness. It is difficult to know if these traits of his character are normal for her or if he has been significantly affected by the tragic event in which he was a direct participant; either way, his toxic behaviour is inexcusable, as it was not only him who went through all this, but his companions were also part of this tragedy. It is evident from O'Neill's construction of the language

of the play that the gentleman's behaviour may have been aggravated by the events, but they were certainly not its cause.

The mulatto, who is silent most of the time, singing the folk song of his people as protection against the danger lurking in the deep waters of the ocean, and who only speaks when called upon, is the true mystery of the play. Accused of stealing water, suspected of involvement in the shipwreck and questioned on how he could have gotten on the boat, the Indian is a symbol not only of the oppressed part of the society but thanks to his persistent non-participation in the discussion between the gentleman and the dancer, also as a bringer of acceptance of reality and of a realistic view of things and the world. The latter appears prominently especially at the very end of the play, when the dancer tries to lure from the sailor the rest of the water, that was allegedly hidden by him. She tries first with feminine wiles, then in exchange for a diamond necklace. The sailor rejects these offers by repeating over and over, "I have no water (ibid. 46)," which turns out to be true.

According to O'Neill's original text, the character of the sailor was actually written for someone of a different ethnicity, but in the first Provincetown production, he was played by a white man. O'Neill returned to the topic of race and the persistence of racism in American society with regularity; his last play written for the company, *The Emperor Jones*, had the greatest success and received acclaim, even though, or because of the fact, that an actual black actor played the central role. The play went on tour around the United States and eventually relocated to Broadway. From *Thirst* to *The Emperor Jones*, O'Neill has come a long way, improving the form of his plays without betraying himself and his mindset.

THE GENTLEMAN—[...] Sailor! (*The negro stops singing and looks at them with wide, bloodshot eyes.*) Did the Second Officer order you to take this lady away from the ship?

THE SAILOR—(*sullenly*) I do not know.

THE GENTLEMAN—Did he tell you to take no one else with you but this lady—and perhaps himself afterwards?

THE SAILER—(*angrily*) I do not know. (*He turn away again and commences to sing.*)

THE DANCER—Do not speak to him any more. He is angry at something. He will not answer.

THE GENTLEMAN—He is going mad I think. (41)

The final scene, where the girl dances on the edge of insanity, and the gentleman with horror and the sailor with hope watch as the boat tilts from side to side, is a prime example of O'Neill's brilliance in displaying a controversial idea on the stable background of universally accepted topics. After the dancer sinks down in a state of complete exhaustion, and the gentleman after a moment of recovery from the shock of the view before him, realizes that the girl is dead, the sailor finally rises from a deep sleep. He is pleased with the girl's death, as they suddenly have hope for survival. The gentleman does not understand—the girl was often unbearable, and her death can save lots of men's nerves—and that is why the sailor indicates that her body can provide food. The connection and combination of the universality of the theme of life and death, how fate and fatality fit into it all, and the controversy of the motif of racism and cannibalism are projected here. End of the play, when the gentleman tries to throw the body of the dancer into the sea and the sailor tries his best to prevent him from doing so until they fall together into the ocean, where

they both drown and the only thing left on the abandoned boat is the diamond necklace, is a combination of the absurdity of reality and surreal emotional experience.

*Thirst* was one of O’Neill’s first plays which combined realism with at that time emerging expressionism. Those contrasting styles and movements were both a connection and an obstacle when rehearsing the play. William Zorach was originally supposed to participate in the set design, but due to differences of opinion with O’Neill about how the production should be presented visually, they eventually parted ways on this project (Kennedy). The scenographer wanted to follow up on previous successful projects in which they often reached the usage of avant-garde elements; however, the author was fundamentally against it. O’Neill wanted the stage to show the purest possible realism—Edna Kenton then described that “by some fine trick of lighting and by sliding the stage back through the rear door, the players playing over the sea seems to be literary floating in it on their perilous raft (26)”. Thus, experimentalism manifested itself here, only in a different way than others expected it to.

Expressionism, on the other hand, manifested itself in the transfer of written text into spoken word and its success depended on precise body language in acting. It was during this turbulent period of time when John Reed joined the production. He not only tried to be a mediator between the designers and the author but also interfered in the actors’ work. Thus his assistance and cooperation were significantly reflected in the development of the play (Kennedy). Louise Bryant took on the role of the dancer, Jig Cook played the gentleman and Eugene O’Neill joined in as a sailor.

THE DANCER—Oh, why will you keep up this subterfuge? Am I not offering you price enough? (*putting her arm around his neck and half whispering in his ear*) Do you not understand? I will love you, Sailor! Noblemen and millionaires and all

degrees of gentleman have loved me, have fought for me. I have never loved any of them as I will love you. Look in my eyes, Sailor, look in my eyes! (*Compelled in spite of himself by something in her voice, the negro gazes deep into her eyes. For a second his nostrils dilate—he draws in his breath with a hissing sound—his body grows tense and it seems as if he is about to sweep her into his arms. Then his expression grows apathetic again. He turns to the sharks.*) (O’Neill, 47)

We do not know much about how the production turned out. O’Neill, who took the role of the sailor because Bryant asked him to do so (Kennedy), primarily wanted emotionality of the characters and realism of acting, he did not strive for stylization or other experiments. Originally, there was a note in the stage directions that in the scene towards the end of the play, when the dancer tries to seduce the sailor, she would tear her blouse and expose her chest; in the end, an explicit scene was cut, although Bryant was said to be willing to do so if the play called for it. The relationship between O’Neill and Bryant was also boldly reflected in the building of characters and their connection. Many members of the company said that if anyone doubted that something was going on between them until then, “it was erased after their explicit, passionate performance in *Thirst* (Egan 199).” The openness of this newly born couple, the ongoing friendship between O’Neill and Reed, and actually the trio’s entire effort to make as little straightforward commentary as possible on account of this matter, and the greater effort for their artistic connection, symbolized their mutual relationship and respect for each other, which the artistic community could not understand.

One of the prominent symbols that runs through all three works is the figure of the dancer. While they appear explicitly in Bryant’s and O’Neill’s plays, in Reed’s work, their existence is only indirectly implied and thus they are shrouded in greater mystery. All three dancers (both male

and female) have common feature—they are in maniac dance with love and life, and trying their very best not to step on their feet, as the(ir) loss is distant only the length of the toe of their shoes.



## Conclusion

The first chapter of the thesis introduced the basic and essential genres of the European theatre of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, which significantly contributed to what would American art look like in the following century. We focused mainly on the description of genres of romanticism, realism and the avant-garde, their main ideas and what they emphasized in their works. After that, we moved to North America, where we briefly narrated the development of theatre. We showed the state in which American drama was and how commercialism, efforts to divide society and ongoing conflict with the church prevailed. We ended the first part with an introduction of the newly emerging Little Theatre Movement, which tried to create new, independent, purely American drama, which would result in the revival of the theatre, but also could start changes in society. We mentioned that among the most important companies of this movement were the Washington Square Players and The Provincetown Players.

The second chapter was fully focused on the work of the Provincetown Players. We went through the entire history of the company, from its early beginnings in Provincetown to its move to New York, where it all came to an end. During the 1910s, many artists flocked to the seaside town, including one particular group of friends from New York. During the summer of 1915, influenced by changes in society and culture, they decided to found their own amateur theatre company. Within two years, they created the basic framework for the later official creation of the Provincetown Players. In the summer of 1916, Eugene O'Neill arrived in town and presented his very first play, *Bound East For Cardiff*, which became a sensation and one of the company's biggest successes. Subsequently, the Players moved to New York, and in the very heart of the art mecca, in Greenwich Village, they opened their theatre. Until 1922, they resided here, and, in the meantime, they created one of the most important chapters of the American modern theatre. During

the nine years of its existence, the company wrote and produced almost a hundred plays by little less than fifty authors. Their decline was caused by their success—by the transfer of Eugene O’Neill and some plays by other authors to Broadway and thus a departure from their main ideas.

The third chapter dealt with the lives and work of Eugene O’Neill, Louise Bryant and John Reed. This trio, consisting of one playwright and two political, mainly communist activists, was characterized not only by strong friendship, but also by romantic relationships. The chapter first introduced their individual paths before they arrived in Provincetown and their subsequent time spent with the group, we dealt with their shared moments and experiences, their work during the time spent together, and how their relationships influenced the representation of the company.

In the last part of this thesis, we analyzed three of their works which were all produced during the summer of 1916, namely *The Game* by Louise Bryant, *The Eternal Quadrangle* by John Reed and *Thirst* by Eugene O’Neill. We were not only concerned with the analysis of the plot, the search for main themes and motifs, and the explanation of symbolisms, but we were also interested in whether there was any connection between fiction and reality, between the imagined and the experienced. In the work of Louise Bryant, we found the connection mainly in the characteristics and actions of the individual characters, where the relation between the dancer and the poet seemed to reflect the newly forming love affair between Bryant and O’Neill. *The Eternal Quadrangle* blurred the differences by showing the love quadrangle between the upper and lower classes of society. Reed reacted both critically and satirically to the reaction of his friends and colleagues to the developing relationship between Reed’s then-girlfriend Louise and Eugene O’Neill, the main star of the company. O’Neill’s *Thirst*, which combined realism and expressionism, did not respond to their relationship; it was all manifested in the rehearsing of the

play itself when Bryant played the main role and Reed participated in the preparation of the production.

After more than 100 years since the disbandment of the Provincetown Players, their true significance and importance in the history of American drama is somewhat lost under the incredible number of newly emerging plays, theatres and movements.

This thesis aimed to indicate that not only thanks to this group but also the entire Little Theatre Movement, great changes took place in American culture and the perception of the role of theatre in society. The Provincetown Players brought many great things to the world of theatre; they were behind the discovery of important playwrights such as Susan Glaspell or Eugene O'Neill; they significantly pushed the limits of possibilities within the scene and costume design of productions; they were not afraid to experiment with the form and content of individual plays; and above all, thanks to the effort to cross the boundaries to realism and the avant-garde, they were behind the revival of the American theatre scene, which until then was largely composed of commercial plays and European drama.

Among other things, the uniqueness of the group was hidden in the relationships that prevailed in it. Many of the members were spouses, lovers and long-time friends, and although there were problems and conflicts throughout its history, there was always a general togetherness within. The relationship that formed between Eugene O'Neill, Louise Bryant and John Reed contained love, admiration for the others, ability to help each other and complete trust. This unbounded bond between the three artists resulted not only in shocked and dismissive reactions from those around them but also in interesting artistic endeavours by the trio and an intense, free love affair that became the definition of bohemian life in Provincetown.

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