

American Drama & Theater

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Modern American Drama

Realism is primary form of dramatic expression in the 20th century, even as **experimentation** in both the content and the production of plays became increasingly important.

Modern American Drama

Such renowned American playwrights as **Eugene O'Neill**, **Tennessee Williams**, and **Arthur Miller** reached profound new levels of psychological realism, commenting through individual characters and their situations on the state of American society in general.

Modern American Drama

As the century progressed, the most powerful drama spoke to broad **social issues**, such as civil rights and the acquired immunodeficiency syndrome (AIDS) crisis, and the individual's position in relation to those issues.

Modern American Drama



Individual perspectives in mainstream theater became far more diverse and more closely reflected the increasingly complex demographics of American society.

1900-1914

Realism reached new levels in the prewar work of **David Belasco** and **Clyde Fitch**, both of whom directed their own plays.



1900-1914

Belasco's *The Girl of the Golden West* (1905) sentimentally recreated a rural California town of the mid-19th-century Gold Rush days, while Fitch's *The City* (1909) explored the evils of shady business deals and drug addiction.

Realistic portrayals of sensational subjects also flourished in many plays of this era.

For example, *The Easiest Way* (1909), by Eugene Walter, dramatized the situation of a kept woman whose acceptance of financial support from one man leads to her rejection by the man she loves.

Before the War

Social tensions in the United States began to preoccupy dramatists in the years leading up to World War I (1914-1918).

Before the War

The most prolific of prewar playwrights with a social agenda was Rachel Crothers, who addressed such issues as **society's double standard for men and women** in *A Man's World* (1909).

The New York Idea (1906), a social satire by Langdon Mitchell, managed to entertain while commenting meaningfully on **divorce**.

Before the War

The American family, and its development and disintegration, was a recurring theme of playwrights at this time, and it would dominate much American playwriting for the rest of the 20th century.

From World War I to World War II: 1914-1939


With World War I, European developments in modern drama arrived on the American stage in force.

A host of American playwrights were intent on **experimenting with dramatic style and form while also writing serious sociopolitical commentary.**



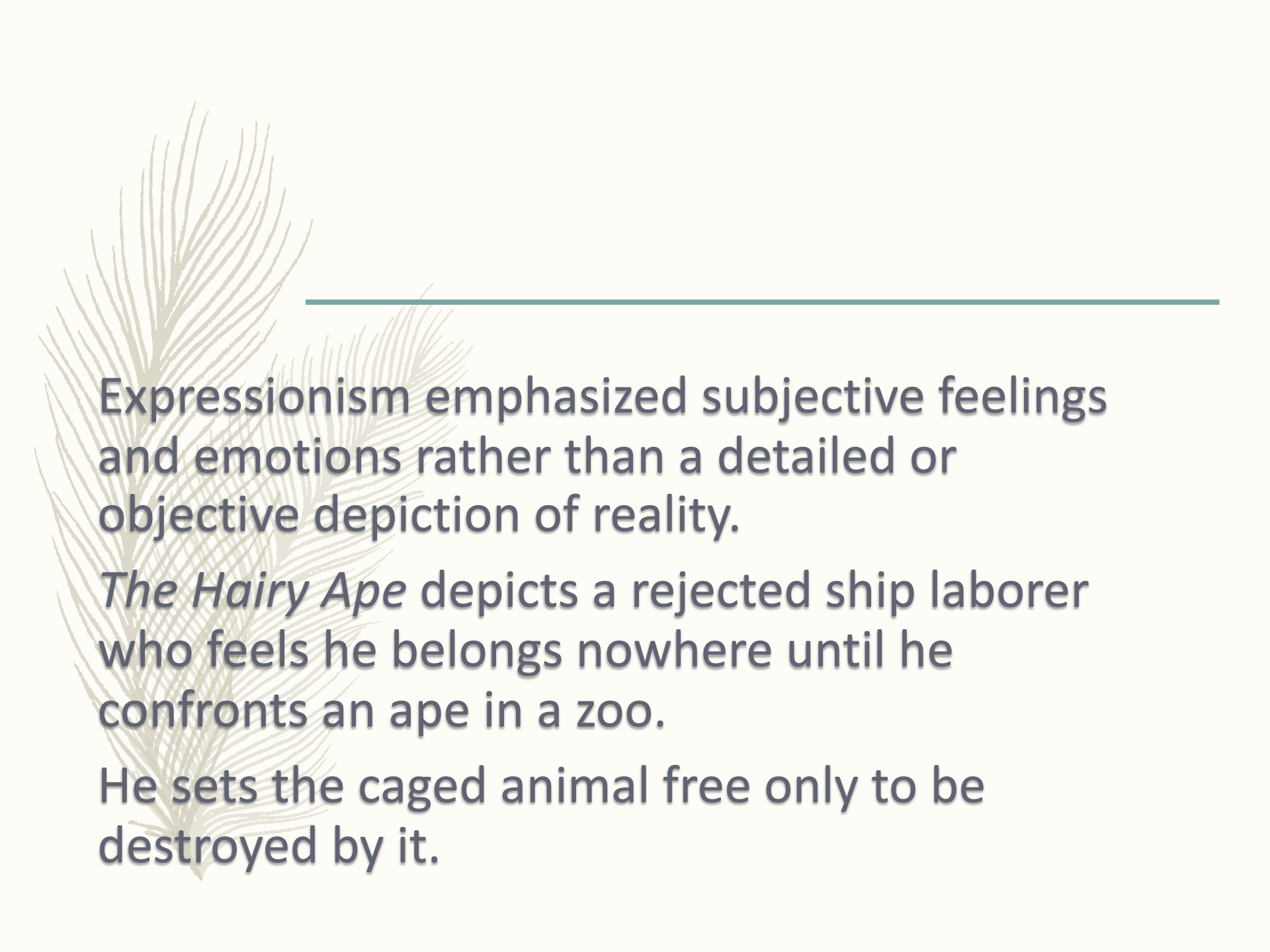
One of the first groups to promote new American drama was the **Provincetown Players**, founded in 1915 in Provincetown, Massachusetts.

The company's star was **Eugene O'Neill**, the most experimental of American playwrights in the 1920s.



O'Neill's *The Hairy Ape* (1922) was one of the first plays to introduce **expressionism** in America.

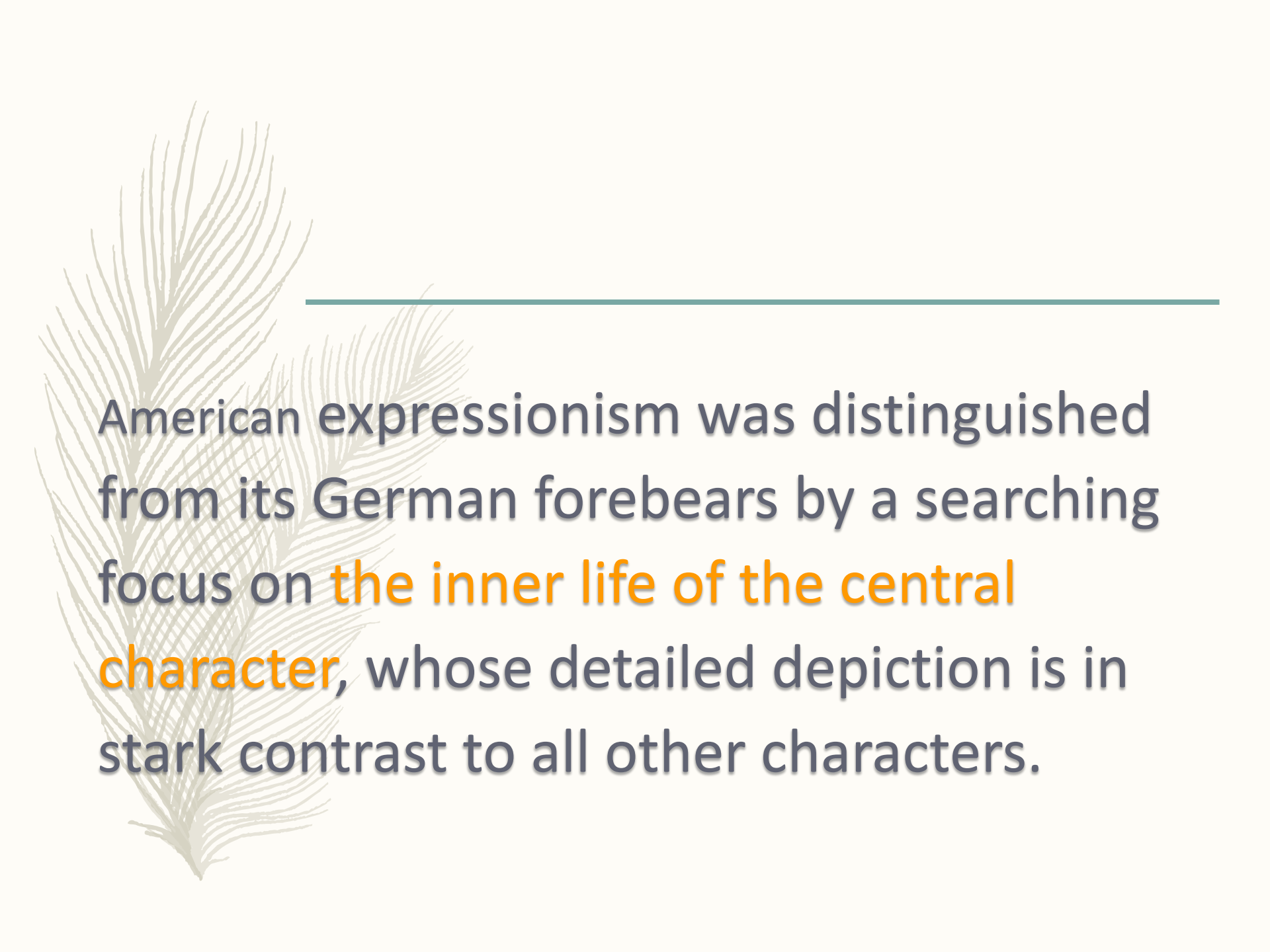
Expressionism was a movement in the visual, literary, and performing arts that developed in Germany in the early 20th century, in part in reaction against realism.



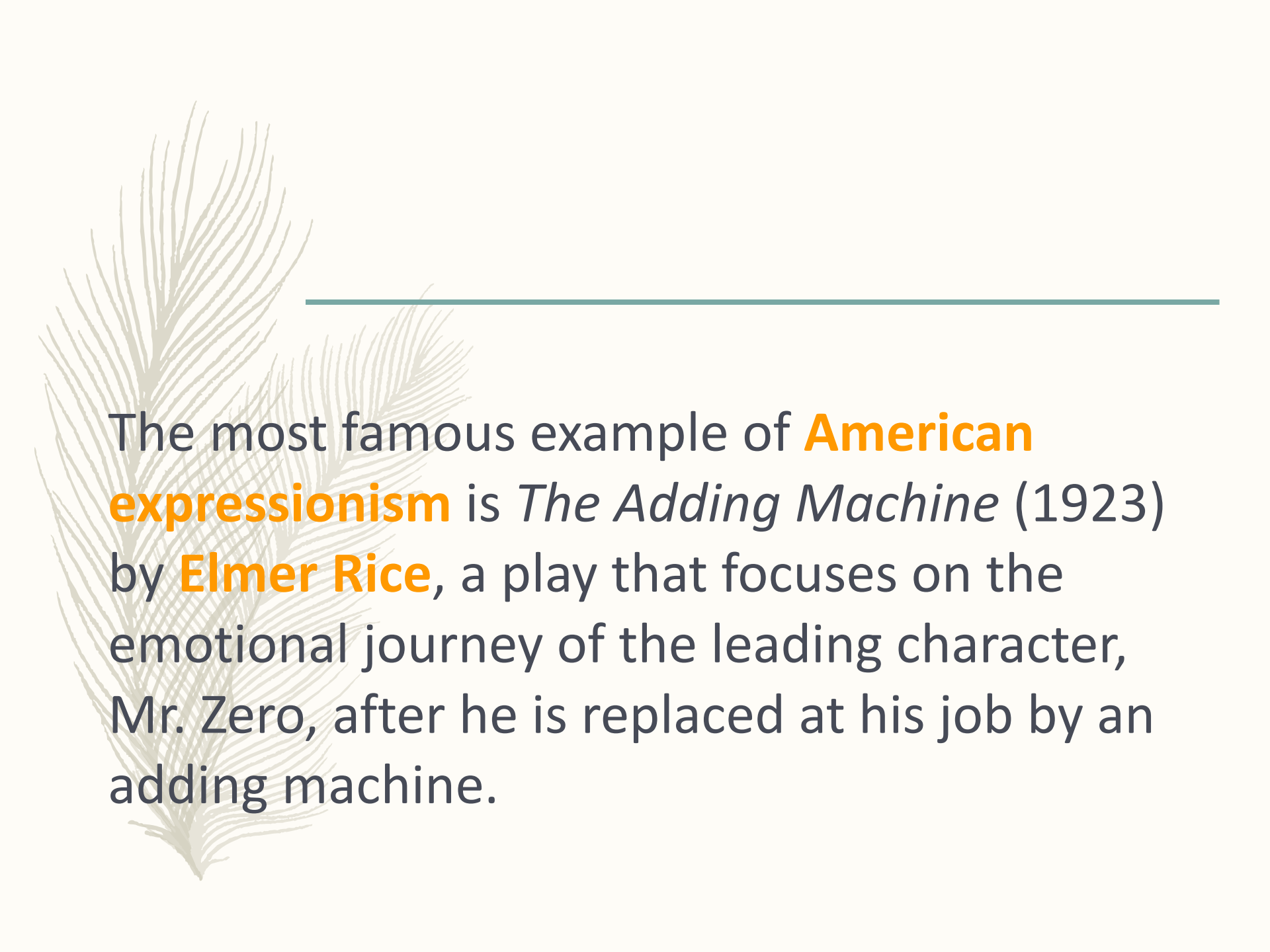
Expressionism emphasized subjective feelings and emotions rather than a detailed or objective depiction of reality.

The Hairy Ape depicts a rejected ship laborer who feels he belongs nowhere until he confronts an ape in a zoo.

He sets the caged animal free only to be destroyed by it.



American expressionism was distinguished from its German forebears by a searching focus on **the inner life of the central character**, whose detailed depiction is in stark contrast to all other characters.

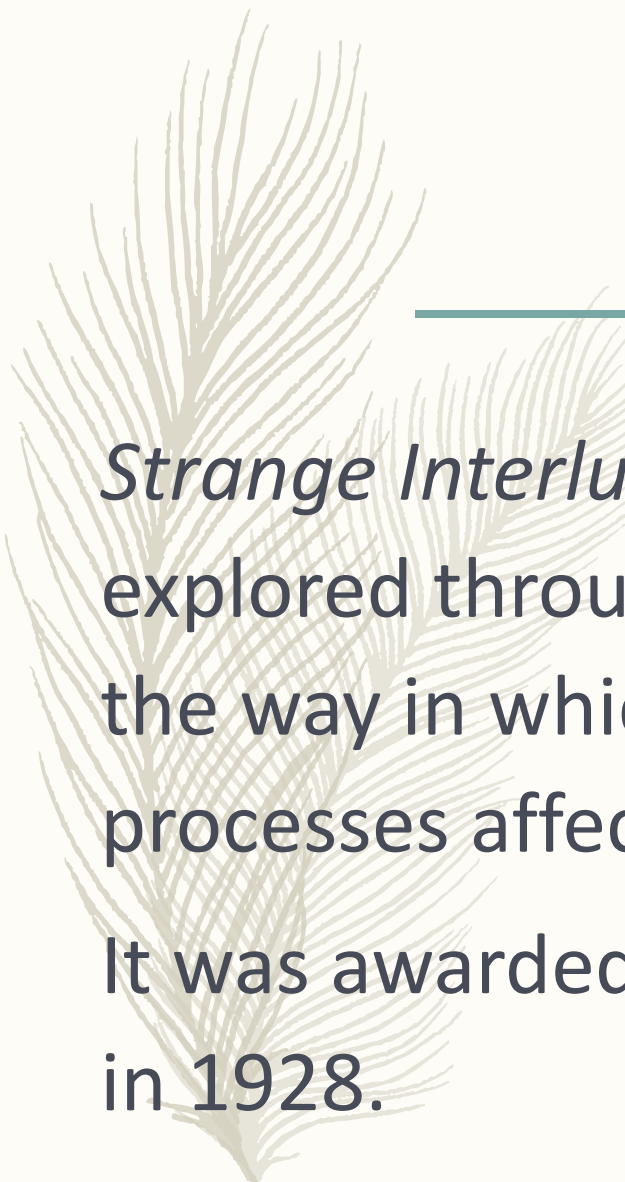


The most famous example of **American expressionism** is *The Adding Machine* (1923) by **Elmer Rice**, a play that focuses on the emotional journey of the leading character, Mr. Zero, after he is replaced at his job by an adding machine.

The Glory Days

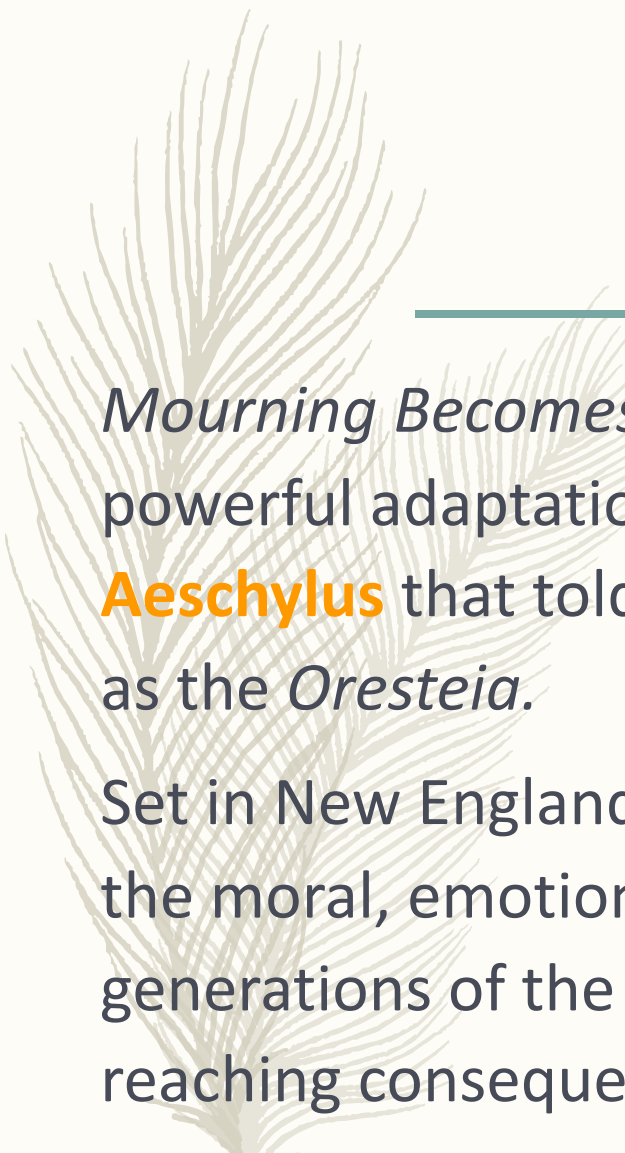
The 1920s was the most prolific decade for professionally produced plays on the New York City stage.

During this period **Eugene O'Neill** reached for greatness with vast five-hour plays.



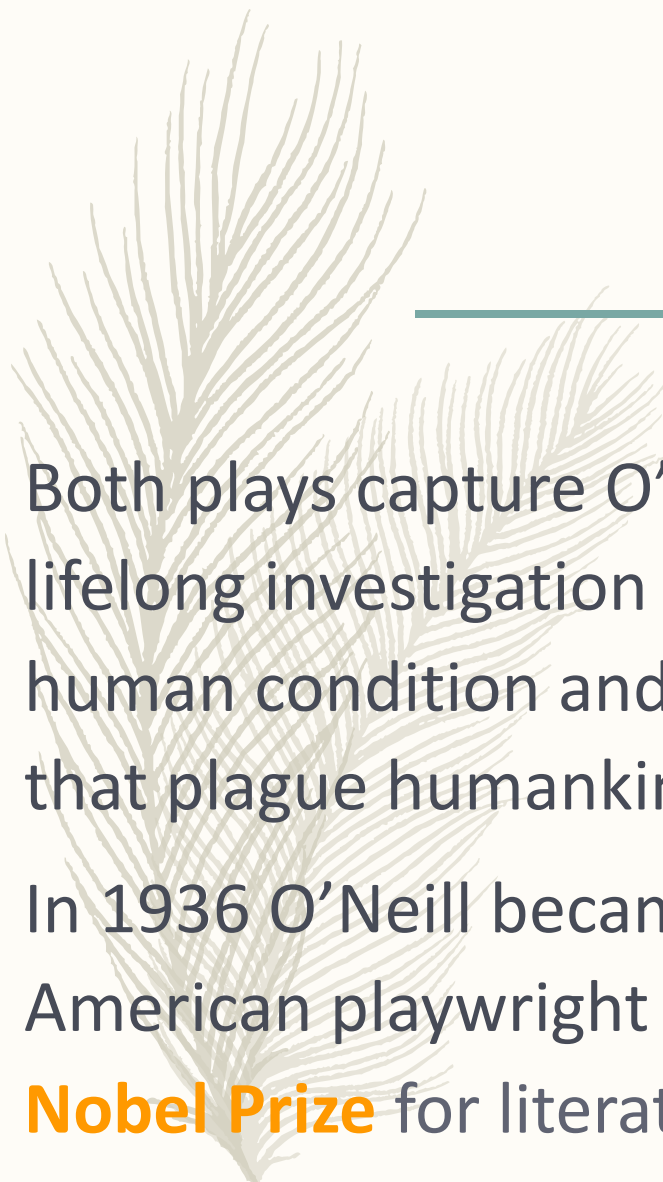
Strange Interlude (1928), a nine-act play, explored through its leading female character the way in which hidden psychological processes affect outward actions.

It was awarded the **Pulitzer Prize** for drama in 1928.



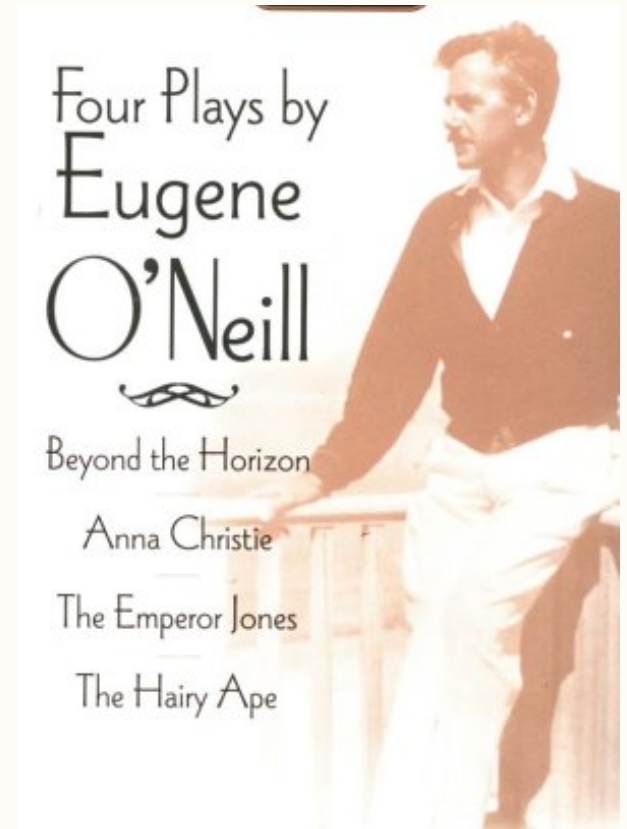
Mourning Becomes Electra (1931), a trilogy, was a powerful adaptation of three ancient Greek tragedies by **Aeschylus** that told the story of **Orestes** and are known as the *Oresteia*.

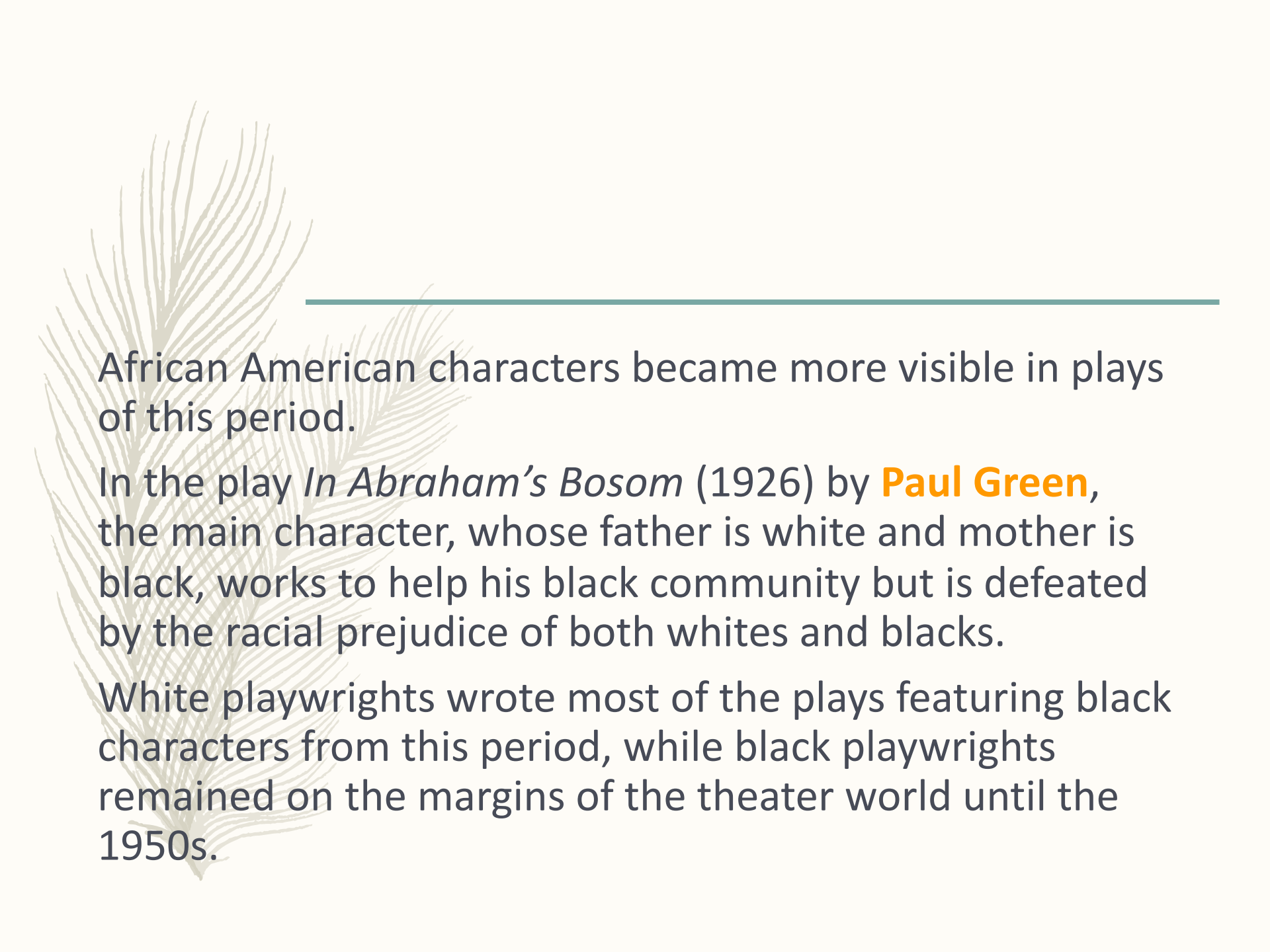
Set in New England after the Civil War, the play recounts the moral, emotional, and physical destruction of two generations of the Mannon family, emphasizing the far-reaching consequences of **adultery, incest, jealousy, and vengeance.**



Both plays capture O'Neill's lifelong investigation of the human condition and the forces that plague humankind.

In 1936 O'Neill became the first American playwright to win a **Nobel Prize** for literature.





African American characters became more visible in plays of this period.

In the play *In Abraham's Bosom* (1926) by **Paul Green**, the main character, whose father is white and mother is black, works to help his black community but is defeated by the racial prejudice of both whites and blacks.

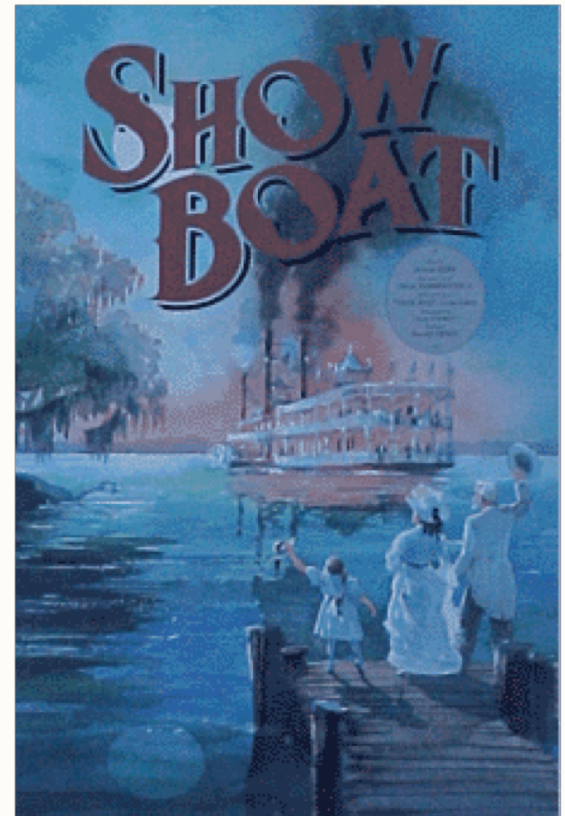
White playwrights wrote most of the plays featuring black characters from this period, while black playwrights remained on the margins of the theater world until the 1950s.



Even the musical was overhauled in the bustling theatrical activity of the 1920s and early 1930s.

Most notably, lyricist **Oscar Hammerstein II** and composer **Jerome Kern** teamed up to create *Show Boat* (1927).

This was the first American musical to fully integrate a musical score with meaningful and consistent dialogue and lyrics.

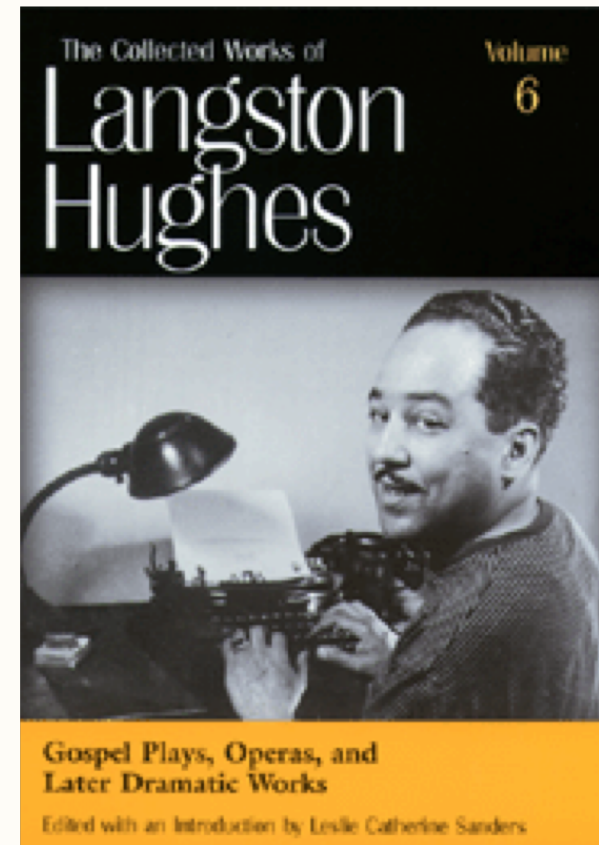


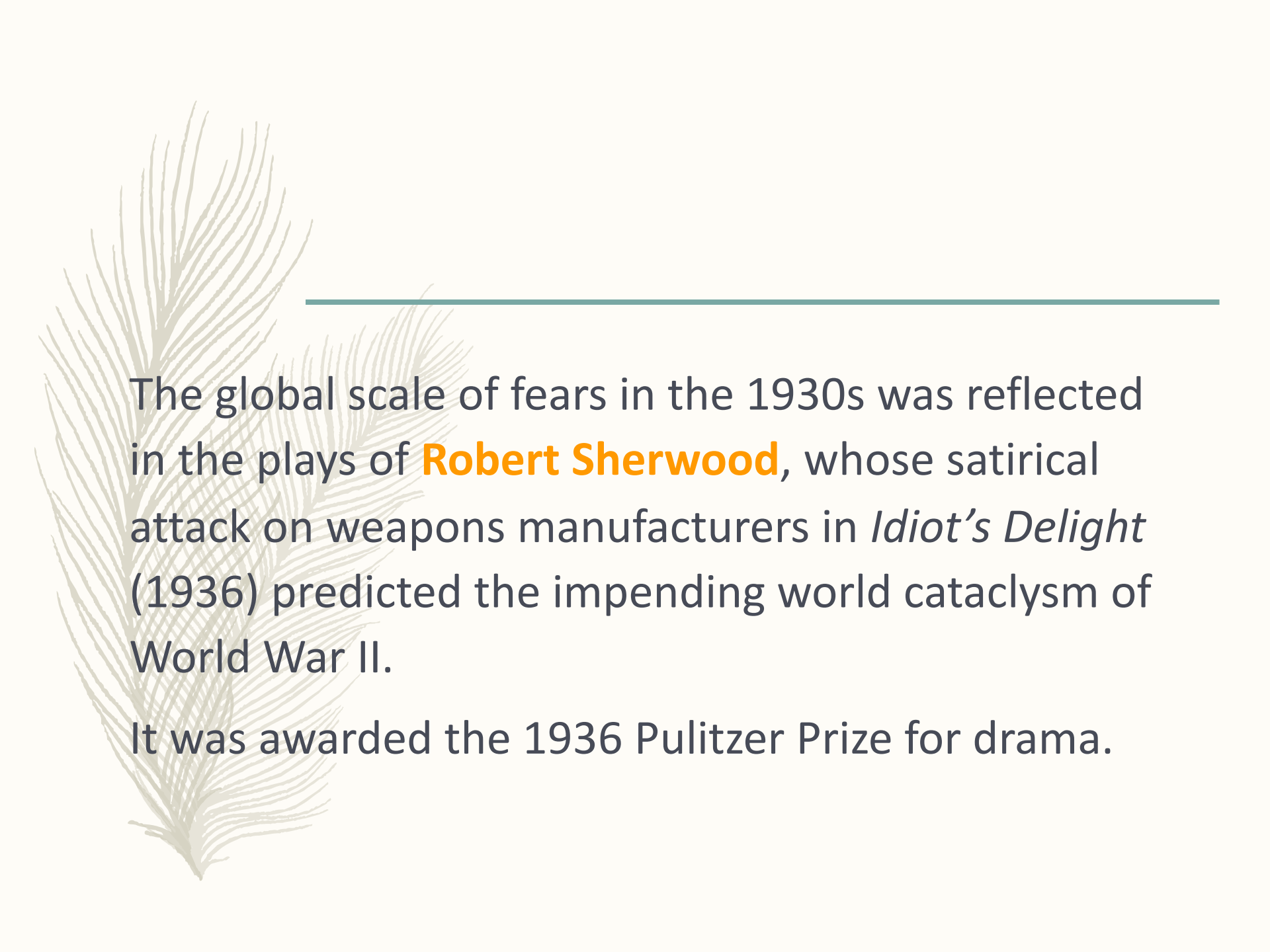
The Great Depression

American theater attendance declined severely in the 1930s and after, primarily as a result of new sound technology that gave motion pictures a voice.

The economic collapse of the Great Depression of the 1930s closed many theaters permanently.

Langston Hughes paved the way for acceptance of African American drama with his successful play *Mulatto* (1935), about the complexity of race relations.





The global scale of fears in the 1930s was reflected in the plays of **Robert Sherwood**, whose satirical attack on weapons manufacturers in *Idiot's Delight* (1936) predicted the impending world cataclysm of World War II.

It was awarded the 1936 Pulitzer Prize for drama.

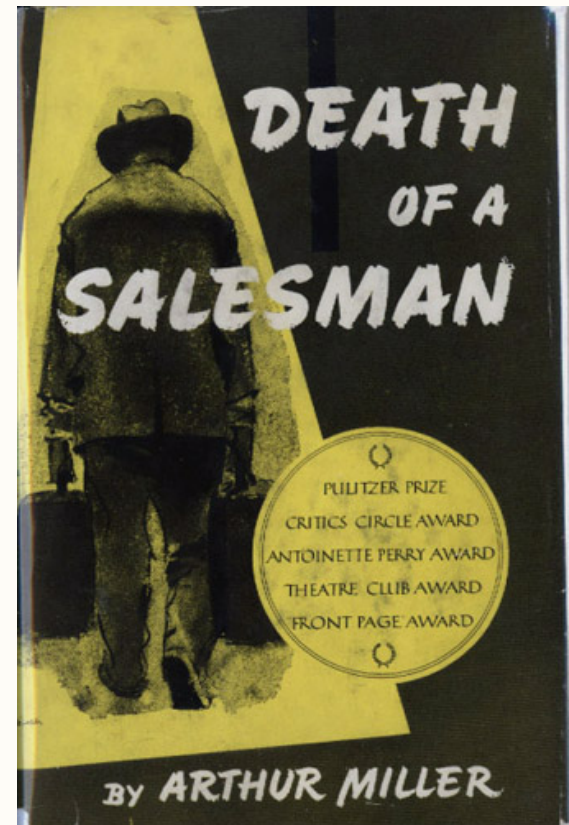
Postwar Drama 1945-1960

During World War II (1939-1945) little drama of note appeared that was neither escapist fare nor wartime propaganda.

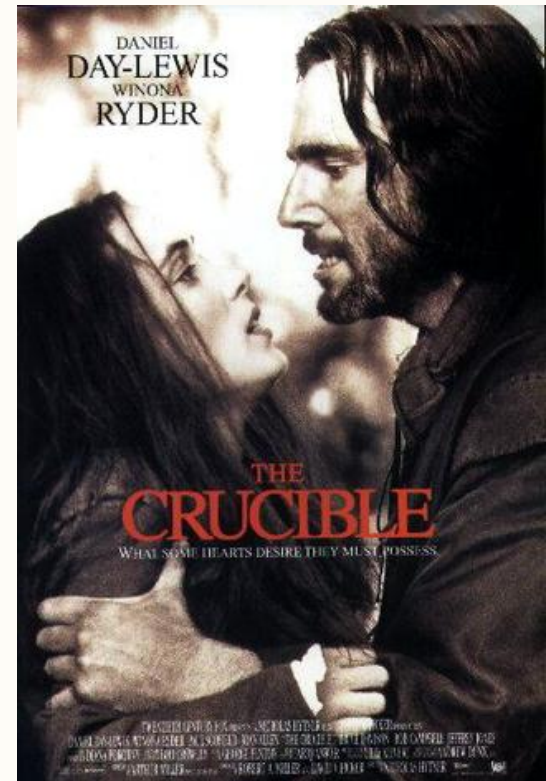
With the end of hostilities, however, two playwrights emerged who would dominate dramatic activity for the next 15 years or so: **Arthur Miller** and **Tennessee Williams**.

Postwar Drama 1945-1960

Miller combined realistic characters and a social agenda while also writing modern tragedy, most notably in *Death of a Salesman* (1949), a tale of the life and death of the ordinary working man Willy Loman.



Miller's *The Crucible* (1953), a story about the 17th-century Salem witch trials, was a parable for a hunt for Communists in the 1950s led by Senator **Joseph R. McCarthy.**



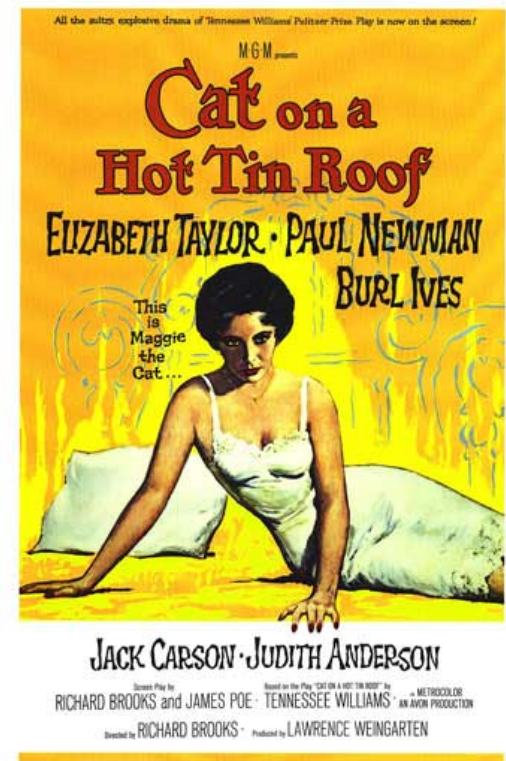
Tennessee Williams,
one of America's
most lyrical
dramatists,
contributed many
plays about social
misfits and outsiders.



• In *A Streetcar Named Desire* (1947), a neurotic, impoverished Southern woman fights to maintain her illusions of gentility when forced to confront the truth about her life by her sister's working-class husband.



Williams's *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* (1955), which won the Pulitzer Prize for drama, similarly focused on pretense and its destructiveness and destruction in an unhappy family



The 1940s also launched lighthearted musicals, most notably a series with lyrics and score by the productive partnership of composer **Richard Rodgers** and librettist **Oscar Hammerstein**.



Their first collaboration, the love story *Oklahoma!* (1943), set the style for musicals until the 1960s with its thorough integration of text and music.



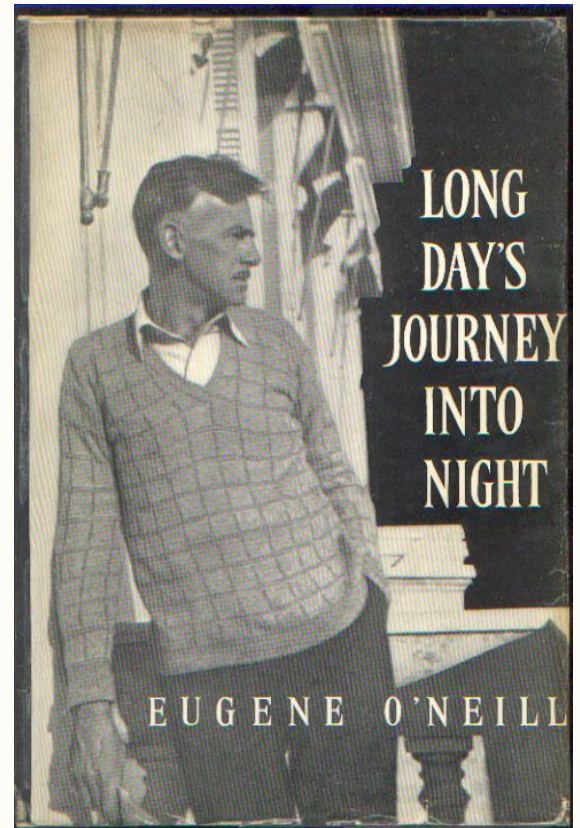
Realism continued strongly in the 1950s with character studies of society's forgotten people.

Come Back, Little Sheba (1950) by **William Inge** told the story of the unfulfilled lives of an alcoholic doctor and his wife.

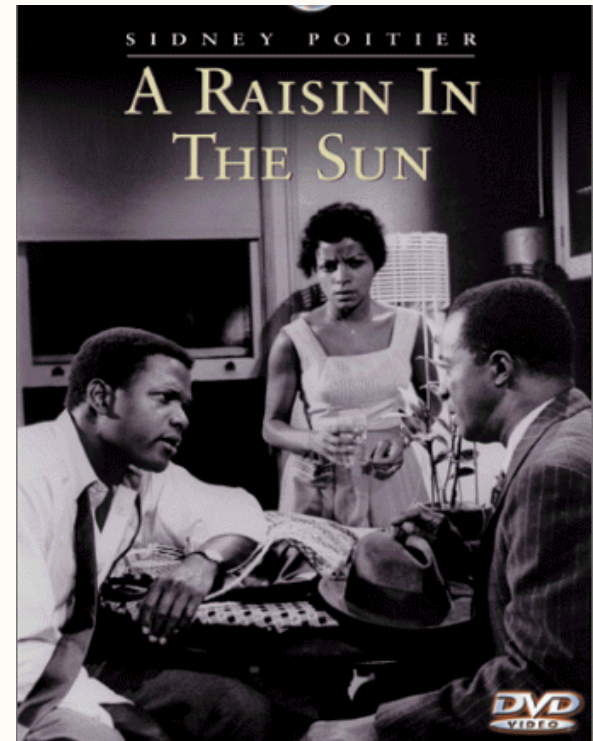


O'Neill's painful autobiographical play, *Long Day's Journey into Night* (1956), considered his masterpiece by many critics, premiered after the playwright's death in 1953.

The play chronicled a day in the life of the Tyrone family, during which family members inexorably confront one another's flaws and failures.

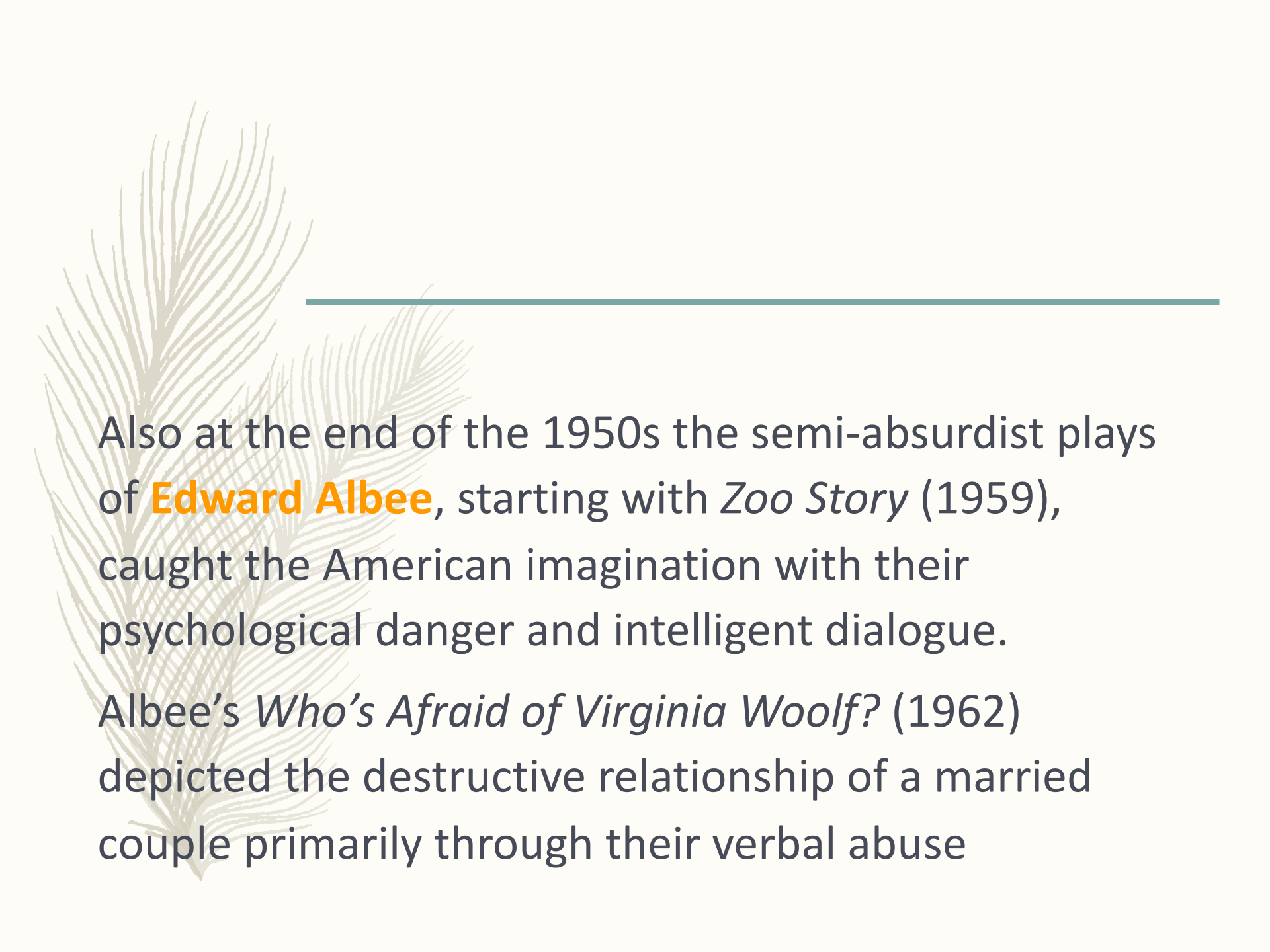


In the late 1950s African American playwriting received a tremendous boost with the highly acclaimed *A Raisin in the Sun* (1959), the story of a black family and how they handle a financial windfall.



Written by **Lorraine Hansberry**, *A Raisin in the Sun* was the first Broadway production to be directed by an African American, Lloyd Richards.





Also at the end of the 1950s the semi-absurdist plays of **Edward Albee**, starting with *Zoo Story* (1959), caught the American imagination with their psychological danger and intelligent dialogue.

Albee's *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* (1962) depicted the destructive relationship of a married couple primarily through their verbal abuse

1960s



The civil rights movement and antiwar protests of the mid-1960s triggered an explosion in American drama as regional and experimental theaters proliferated and many talented new dramatists came to the fore.

Experimental theater companies, including the **Living Theater** and the **Open Theater**, experimented with group dynamics by placing performers and audience members in the same physical space.

1960s

The Serpent (1968) by **Jean-Claude Van Itallie**, which used this elimination of physical barriers between actors and audience, recreated Biblical stories through the depiction of modern events such as the assassination of John F. Kennedy.

Megan Terry's plays, such as *Calm Down Mother* (1965), experimented with traditional dramatic structure through actor transformations, in which one actor plays multiple roles and switches between characters without apparent transition.

1960s

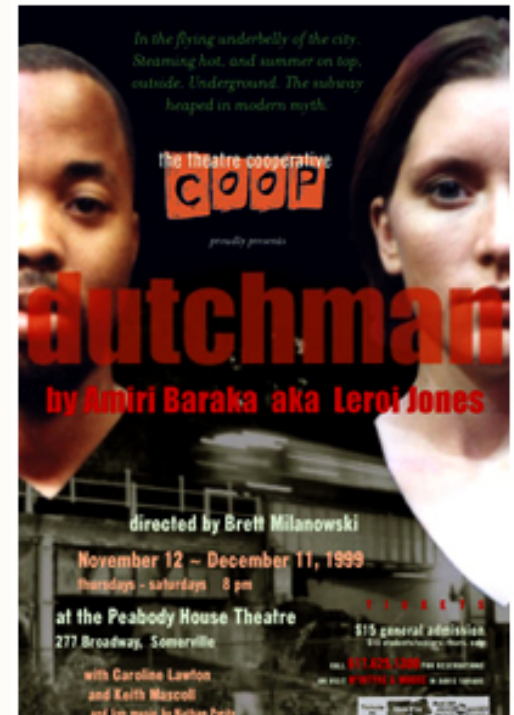
The political turbulence and social change in America during the 1960s impacted the drama of the period and in the ensuing decades.

A number of playwrights of the time challenged contemporary social codes of behavior in their presentation of different points of view, giving voice to traditionally disenfranchised members of American culture.

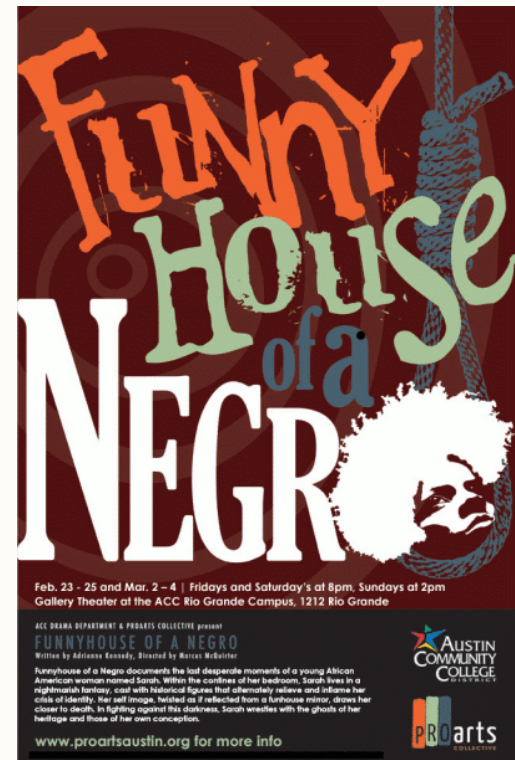
1960s

Many African American dramatic voices of the 1960s had a confrontational edge.

In his violent play *Dutchman* (1964), **Amiri Baraka** portrayed white society's fear and hatred of an educated black protagonist.



The autobiographical
Funnyhouse of a Negro
(1962) by **Adrienne
Kennedy** addressed the
difficulties of being an
American of mixed racial
ancestry



1970s and 1980s

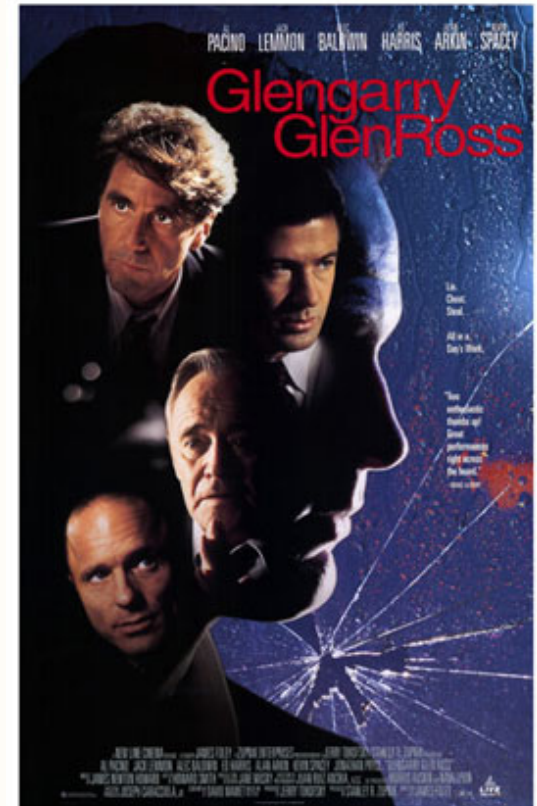
Sam Shepard and **David Mamet** loomed large in American drama of the 1970s and 1980s, much as Arthur Miller and Tennessee Williams had in the 1950s.

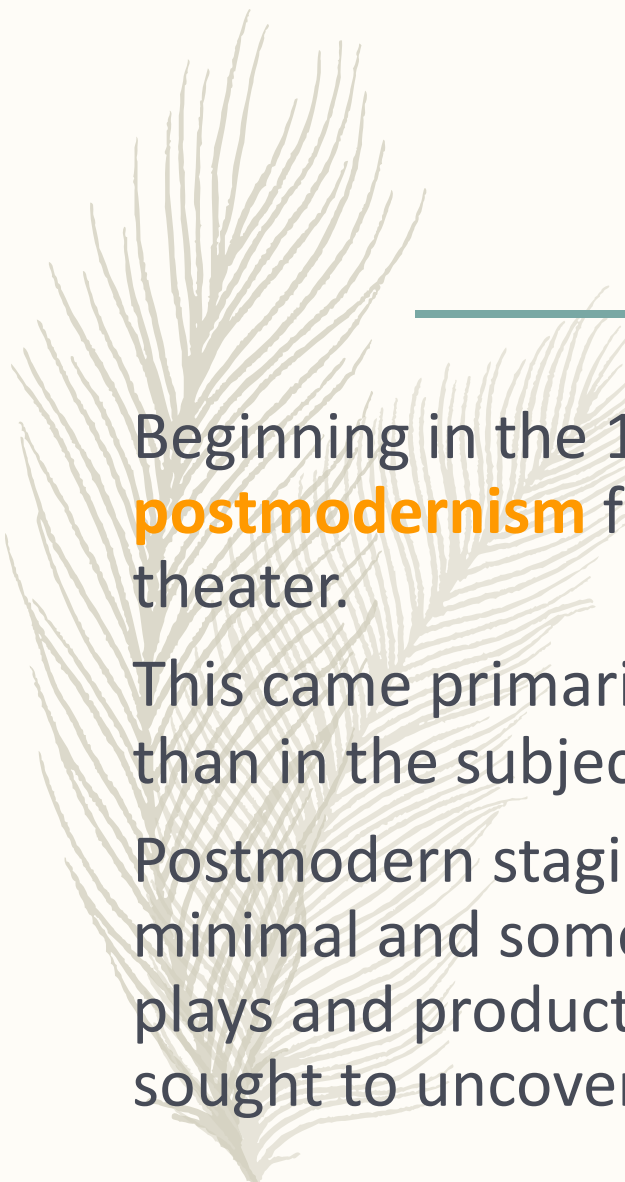
Shepard's hard-edged drama, which explored the American family and the often-destructive myths of the American West, was most biting in *Buried Child* (1978) and *True West* (1980).

1970s and 1980s

Mamet created a darkly comic style that imitated the fragmented speech of the inarticulate and employed profanity as nearly every part of speech.

Mamet's Pulitzer-Prize winning *Glengarry Glen Ross* (1983) depicted the moral decay brought about by the win-at-all-costs ethic of the American salesman.

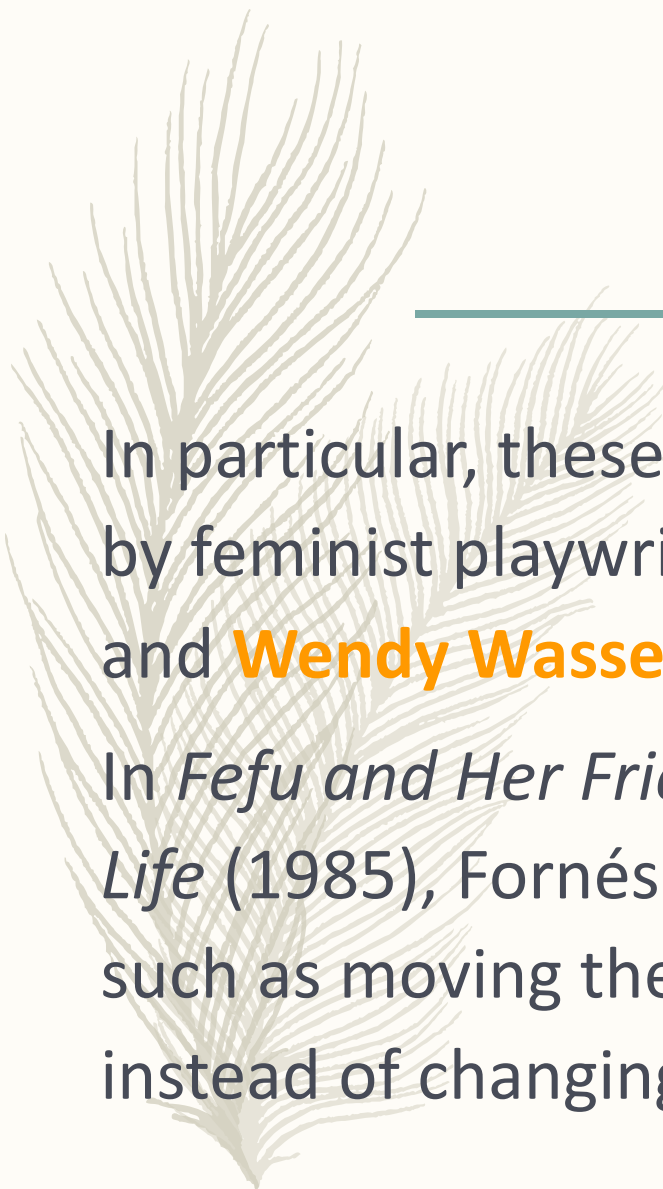




Beginning in the 1970s the movement known as **postmodernism** found expression in the American theater.

This came primarily through **staging and direction**, rather than in the subject matter of the plays themselves.

Postmodern staging and design tended toward the minimal and sometimes incorporated images from earlier plays and productions, while postmodern directors sought to uncover multiple layers of meaning in a play.



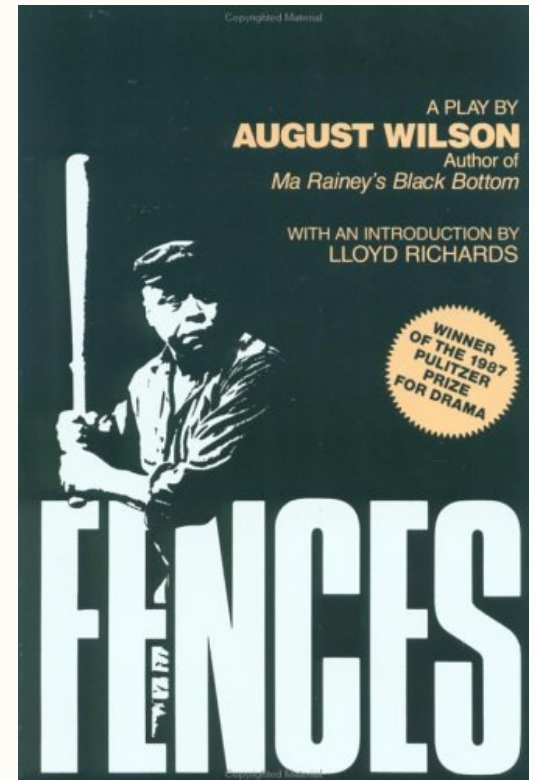
In particular, these approaches were effectively used by feminist playwrights such as **Maria Irene Fornés** and **Wendy Wasserstein**.

In *Fefu and Her Friends* (1977) and *The Conduct of Life* (1985), Fornés employed spatial experiments such as moving the audience from room to room instead of changing stage scenery.

August Wilson was another American playwright who came to prominence in the 1980s.

Fences (1985), portrays the conflicts between a father and son, and *The Piano Lesson* (1987), focuses on the dispute between a brother and sister over selling a family heirloom to buy the land that their ancestors worked as slaves.

Both plays won the Pulitzer Prize.



1990s and Early 21st Century

The 1990s saw the return of exciting domestic drama by two celebrated playwrights whom critics thought had finished their careers: **Arthur Miller** (*Broken Glass*, 1994) and **Edward Albee** (*Three Tall Women*, 1994).

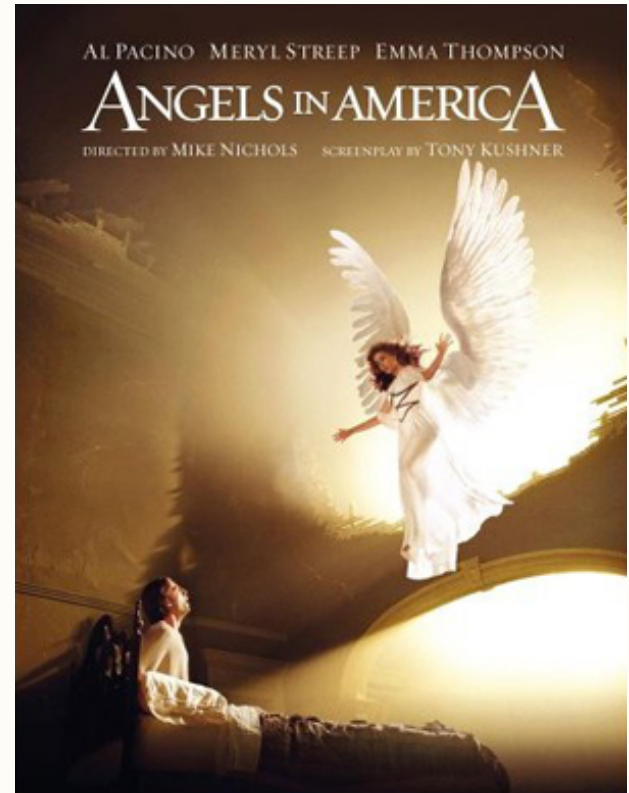


Another important young playwright of this period was **Tony Kushner**.

His *Angels in America* was one of the most successful dramatic events of the 1990s.

The two-part story chronicled the effects of the AIDS epidemic on the lives of eight characters over a six-year period.

Kushner was
awarded the
Pulitzer Prize for
Angels in America
in 1993.



In the mid-1990s and the beginning of the 21st century, revivals of older plays and blockbuster musicals dominated new commercial theater in the United States.

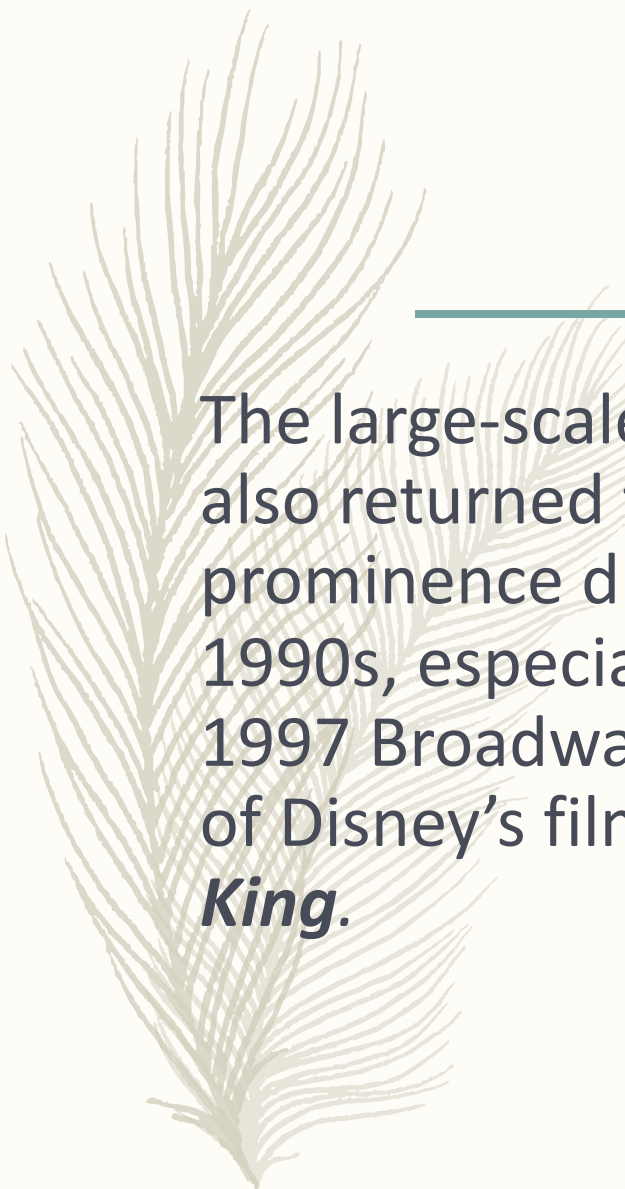


Beginning in 1996 with the success of **Jonathan Larson's** *Rent*, many contemporary plays and musicals began to target younger audiences that had been wooed away from the theater by film, television, and computer entertainment.



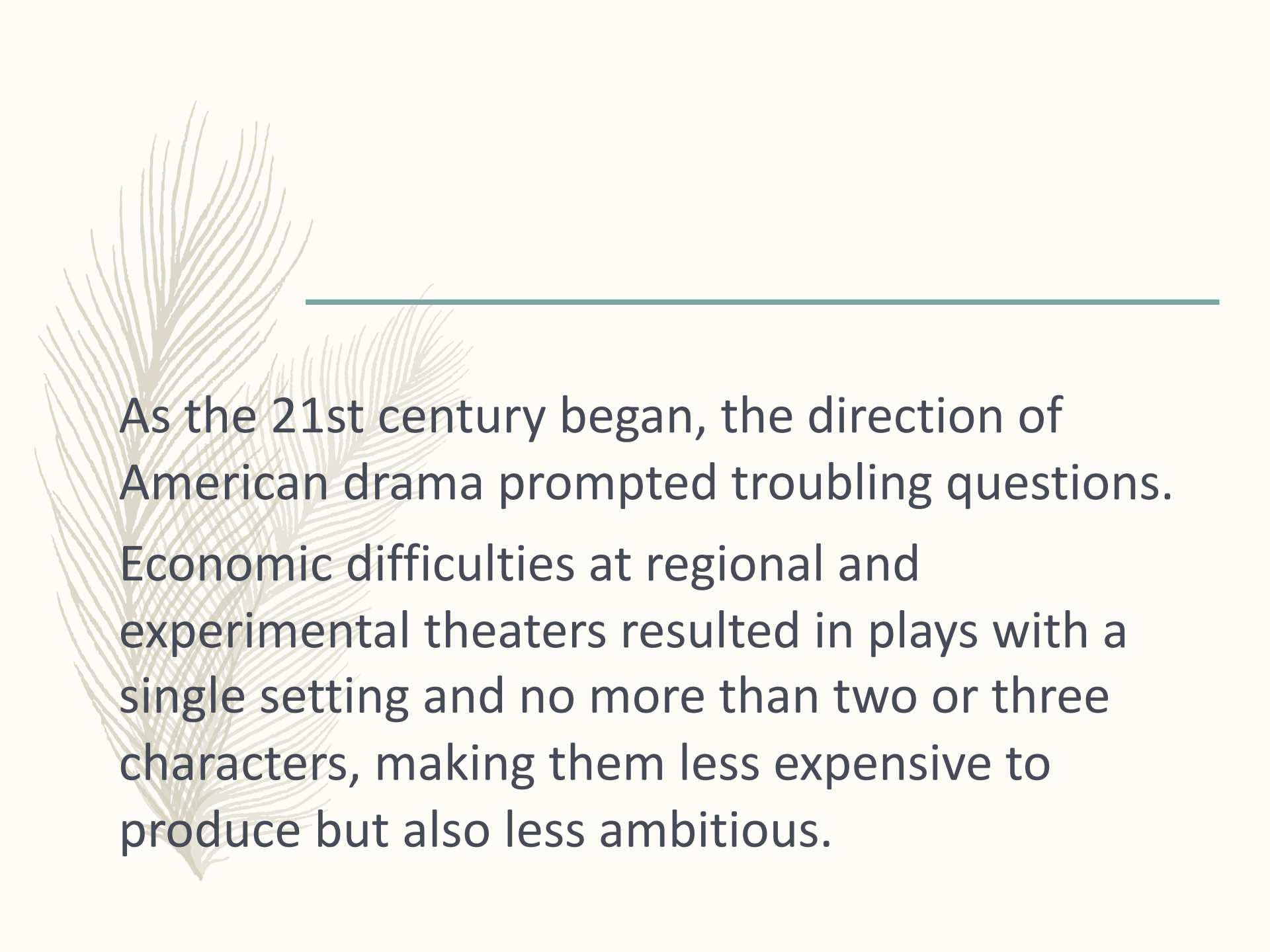
A musical inspired by Puccini's 1896 opera *La Bohème*, *Rent* examines the experiences of disillusioned young Americans looking for meaning in their lives.






The large-scale musical also returned to prominence during the 1990s, especially with a 1997 Broadway version of Disney's film *The Lion King*.






As the 21st century began, the direction of American drama prompted troubling questions. Economic difficulties at regional and experimental theaters resulted in plays with a single setting and no more than two or three characters, making them less expensive to produce but also less ambitious.



The aging of American theater audiences and competition from other forms of entertainment also threatened drama's future.

Theaters were rejecting many large-scale plays as too risky and unlikely to cover production expenses.

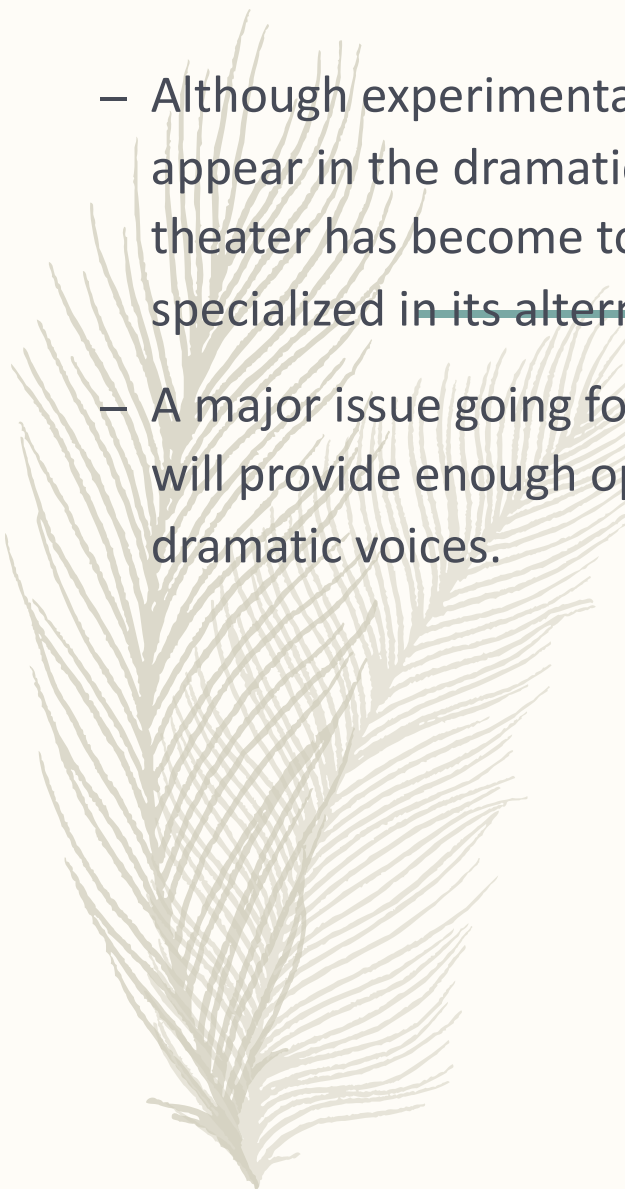
Consequently, crowd-pleasing musicals and revivals dominated Broadway.



Almost all nonmusical plays today originate in regional theaters.

The expense of touring productions means that most new plays reach a geographically diverse audience only if they are adapted to motion pictures or television.

Many playwrights write with film or television adaptation in mind, a tendency encouraged by the fact that motion-picture studios own many theaters and dramatic production companies.

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- Although experimentation and poignant subject matter continue to appear in the dramatic world, many playwrights worry that American theater has become too conservative in its mainstream work and too specialized in its alternative productions.
 - A major issue going forward is whether the theater of the 21st century will provide enough opportunity for original work and strong new dramatic voices.
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Sources



http://encarta.msn.com/encyclopedia_761596670_2/American_Literature_Drama.html