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# Chicago Newspaper Theater Critics of the Early 20th Century

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## Chicago Newspaper Theater Critics of the Early Twentieth Century

*In the early years of the twentieth century, when live theater dominated the entertainment world and print media led public discourse, each without competition from electronic forms, the daily newspaper theater critic mediated ideas and values quite differently than today's critics, whose main function has been reduced to that of a consumer guide. This article examines the corps of theater critics who served ten Chicago newspapers about 100 years ago. At a time when news editors were reluctant to cover new ideas and social movements, such as the push for women's suffrage, theater critics were encountering radical new social ideas from European playwrights. Whether they approved or disapproved—and they did both, vehemently—their open debate with each other provided a level of public conversation of incalculable value in their own time, and largely missing today.*

The arts and entertainment industry at the beginning of the twenty-first century is huge and growing. And yet the number of critics is declining in two ways: when newspapers cease publication, as they have in great numbers in recent decades; and by abdication, as the role of the critic diminishes from a leader of public debate on the largest issues to a consumer guide, from a fully engaged brain to a thumb pointing up or down. Given this situation, it is worth remembering what critics once were, and not merely in isolated cultural capitals such as Paris, London, and New York.

In 1951, long after he had solidified his reputation as a playwright, screenwriter, and novelist, Ben Hecht wrote an essay for *Theatre Arts* magazine in which he heaped praise on the local theatre critics of his Chicago period “from 1910 to 19 twenty something.” The co-author of *The Front Page* based his recollections of the Chicago press of this period upon his experiences as a budding playwright and as a newspaper reporter. He described the Chicago of his early days as being both dramatically and journalistically backward. “But, oddly enough, we had the finest group of drama critics I have ever known,” he wrote. “I am quite certain that I am writing out of fact and not nostalgia.”<sup>1</sup>

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While Hecht may not have relied merely on blind nostalgia, he surely depended more on distant memory than research. Although his assertion about the quality of the critics is unprovable, it does identify a critical environment worthy of scholarly attention. This article shows that these Chicago critics were important to the cultural development of their city by serving as mediators for important ideas that found more direct expression on Chicago stages than in any other forum. Without competition from electronic media—both artistic and journalistic—the theater and the critics who wrote about it dominated public life; figures from the time indicate that nearly 50,000 people attended the city's theaters daily.<sup>2</sup> The Chicago critics may or may not have had great influence on dramatic art, but they did serve a crucial role in the development of the prevailing climate of opinion. An accurate depiction of that role serves to highlight what now appears to be largely missing from contemporary cultural life. Without exploring current issues *per se*, this article seeks to lay a useful historical foundation by showing the phenomenal vitality of the corps of critics that served Chicago newspapers about 100 years ago. In the process, it is hoped that this exploratory first step will demonstrate the value of further research on the role of working critics as mediators, augmenters, and censors of ideas and values as they flow in various directions among artists, thought leaders, and the citizenry.

Finding the proper theoretical approach can be difficult for those who set out to study twentieth century American critics. Interest in the influence of newspaper reviewers does not fit easily into the three major camps of history: intellectual, social, and cultural. Intellectual

historians look at the ideas that issue from the minds of select leaders; since critics comment on the ideas of playwrights, they are at least one step removed from the primary action (and two steps if you figure in the contributions of the performers and producers). It is an exceedingly rare critic who is looked upon as an originator of artistic ideas (art critic Clement Greenberg comes to mind). More often than not, prescriptive criticism is denounced as the tail wagging the dog. The perspective of intellectual history may serve studies of a few critics who stand out from the crowd but not the function and influences of the crowd itself. Social historians, on the other hand, concentrate on the other end of the spectrum, the economic details and movements of social classes.

Cultural history would seem to be the natural place for a discussion of the impact of critics, and it may yet prove to be a hospitable home for such study. In practice, however, cultural historians have tended to define culture in a way that leaves out traditional art and its critics. As Raymond Williams pointed out, "Culture is one of the two or three most complicated words in the English language." Over the course of six brilliant but etymologically dense pages, he detailed multiple definitions of the word.<sup>3</sup> For this article, one might prefer to define culture as "the words and practices of intellectual and especially artistic activity." Much less useful is a second definition: "a particular way of life, whether of a people, a period, a group, or humanity in general." And yet, it is this second definition that is most often employed, according to Williams: "It is along this line of reference that the dominant sense in modern social sciences has to be traced."<sup>4</sup>

Hence, a field that one might hope to be teeming with discussions of art and its reception as mediated by critics turns out not to be. Recent emphasis on popular culture, although refreshing and valuable in its explication of cultural trends, has led researchers even further away from paying attention to the role of working critics, especially critics of traditional art forms such as theater. Certainly theater is at times elitist and reactionary, especially when it is priced beyond the means of the average citizen. Historically it also is often the opposite of elitist and reactionary, as are its critics. Whatever the reasons, the research is thin.

And yet there is some research worth noting on theater critics and their influence. Much of the early research involved biographies of particular critics, predominantly from New York.<sup>5</sup> Most of this was historical in nature. Tice L. Miller wrote the leading book on American drama critics of the Victorian era.<sup>6</sup> Wilma Jane Dryden and Jan Charles Czechowski wrote dissertations on Chicago theater in the early twentieth century in which they relied heavily on the work of the Chicago critics without focusing on their work *per se*.<sup>7</sup> More recently, several researchers have looked at the effects of reviews on readers. Robert O. Wyatt and David P. Badger began a stream of such research with an experimental study that identified high information content as having a greater effect on reader interest than opinion.<sup>8</sup> In the late 1990s, marketing researchers tried to determine if critics influence arts buying or merely predict it. Jehoshua Eliashberg and Steven M. Shugan found evidence of prediction without influence in film reviews.<sup>9</sup> Looking at New York drama critics, Srinivas K. Reddy, Vanitha

Swaminathan, and Carol M. Motley found strong evidence of critical influence, particularly on the part of the dominant newspaper, the *New York Times*.<sup>10</sup> Regarding larger issues of arts coverage, Robert Dawson Scott looked at the question of gatekeeping on the part of arts editors and writers in England.<sup>11</sup> The most promising development in the field was the 1999 report of the National Arts Journalism Program, *Reporting the Arts*. What this study lacked in standard scholarship (for example, there was no bibliography or footnotes) it made up for in its comprehensive and multifaceted snapshot of fifteen dailies in ten cities across the country.<sup>12</sup>

Taken as a whole, this literature tells us something of the effects of individual reviews and a good deal more about the lives of the most famous theater critics of the twentieth century in New York and London. In contrast, this article begins to fill a gap in the knowledge of the mediating role of arts critics in America by exploring the work of the theater critics who wrote for Chicago's ten daily newspapers at the beginning of the twentieth century, a period full of challenge and change, both artistic and structural. The focus is on the first decade.

The greatest obstacle to research in this field is not the paucity of prior research but the almost complete lack of indexing of reviews and other articles on theater appearing in Chicago newspapers at the beginning of the twentieth century. Most of the newspapers are available on microfilm, but finding reviews is a matter of plodding through the haystack of news and advertising. This

is difficult but not impossible. By limiting the period of inquiry, this study has begun creating a comprehensive index of reviews in Chicago newspapers that should be of value to researchers seeking documentation on critics, plays, playwrights, actors, and theaters. This database will be searchable from the web by late 2001.<sup>13</sup>

The method employed was to read hundreds of these reviews in search of common themes and issues, comparing critical response when appropriate. When to start such an inquiry was a crucial consideration. In 1910, at the beginning of his Chicago period, Hecht observed a critical milieu in mid-stride. To understand what he was looking at—and to focus on the period that Czechowski and Dryden had suggested was challenging from a critical perspective—this study's analysis began ten years earlier in 1900. Thus, the focus was on that decade, although one issue—the little theater movement—was followed into the second decade.

For most of the nineteenth century, most reviews were printed without bylines, but by 1900, every Chicago paper gave bylines to its theater critics except for the *Tribune*, which soon followed suit. The onset of bylines coincided with newly expanded coverage of the arts. With the circulation wars of the late nineteenth century came attempts to broaden appeal by introducing new features: columns, comics, and pages devoted to arts and amusements. On July 4, 1900, William Randolph Hearst printed the first issue of his *Chicago American*, introducing the city to a free-wheeling style of journalism marked by frequent editions, many illustrations, towering headlines, colors, more comics, serial fiction, signed articles, and trust-busting. All this may have had mixed results for the quality

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of straight news in Chicago newspapers, but it increased emphasis on feature material, including theater criticism.<sup>14</sup> Ironically, while the *American* broadened the definition of Chicago journalism and thereby opened the door for improved coverage of the arts, its theater criticism was the worst in the city. The *American* did not settle on one or two critics but preferred to use whomever was on hand at the moment, regardless of qualifications.<sup>15</sup>

Despite the example of the *American*, the first years of the twentieth century were a golden age for Chicago critics. Their numbers were as great as any period before or since; they worked for ten growing, competitive newspapers with mass readership; and the theater was plentiful, varied, and blissfully unencumbered by electronic competition. Most invigorating to the local climate of opinion were the various controversial issues that brought out the best—and the worst—in the corps of critics.

The most interesting controversy which divided turn-of-the-century critics involved the “problem plays” of Henrik Ibsen and George Bernard Shaw among others. In retrospect, it is clear that the Chicago theater scene was due for some fresh air, despite its apparent vitality. In the 1899-1900 season, eighty-six plays, forty four of them new to Chicago, were presented at the four major downtown theaters: the Powers, Grand Opera House, Lyric, and McVickers, according to a report in the *Chicago Tribune* on June 3, 1900.<sup>16</sup> Many of the plays were star vehicles. Many others were machinery plays—that is, plays that built their appeal on the use of spectacular machinery that put on stage such phenomena as storms, heavenly ascensions, sea battles, and eye-catching scene changes.

Chicago led the nation in summer productions—perhaps because of the cooling effect of Lake Michigan—meaning it also was preeminent in the musical plays that traditionally dominated summer schedules.<sup>17</sup> The cheaper neighborhood circuit theaters—that is, those theaters that featured lesser-known touring actors and companies performing melodramas, spectacles, vaudeville, and burlesque—outdrew the downtown theaters. In 1902, the *Tribune* reported that the outlying theaters drew 30,000-plus patrons daily, while downtown theaters drew less than 20,000.<sup>18</sup> Coverage of the neighborhood circuit theaters, when there was any, tended to be derisive. The neighborhood stock theaters, however, received generally friendly reviews for their presentations of moral melodramas and the occasional Shakespeare play. The calling card of these theaters was suitability for the delicate sensibilities of women and children. Special promotions abounded. For example, the People’s Theater, which opened on Labor Day, 1901, at various times gave away sponge cake and coal, and, on one occasion, a man’s watch.<sup>19</sup> Added to the mix were Yiddish and assorted foreign language national theater groups (particularly Scandinavian), all of which received limited critical coverage.

The *Tribune* led in circulation and in theater coverage, usually devoting an entire Sunday section, “At the Play.” Coverage among most of the newspapers, regardless of size, included news, changes of bills, new plays, gossip, reviews, and feature articles. The *Daily News*, lacking a Sunday edition, printed its big theater section on Saturday, a common practice in features packaging to this day. Many of the papers also included regular coverage of the New York theater, including personality gossip and news of upcoming tours. Burns Mantle eventually made his way to New York for the *Tribune* to provide such stories.<sup>20</sup>

Thus, theater was in a happy financial position at the turn of the century, as historian Barnard Hewitt points out: “As the 20<sup>th</sup> century opened, the theatre was a big and prosperous business. On all levels, from serious drama to burlesque and vaudeville, it was the country’s

chief medium of entertainment.”<sup>21</sup> But when it came to drama of lasting artistic merit, the pickings were slim.

Never is the critic’s role in establishing a climate of opinion more important than when a new style of theater hits town. In New York, the moralistic Victorian stand against what was thought of as those gloomy problem plays was led by William Winter, who rallied followers in a group called the Defenders of the Ideality. The club found its Chicago branch in Lyman B. Glover of the *Times-Herald* (later the *Record-Herald*), Major George McConnel of the *Chronicle*, and, most vociferously, Barrett Eastman of the *Evening Journal*. The latter took his stand shortly after arriving at the *Journal*: “In America, still, we are able to be amused by something else than . . . the permutations of pruriency. That does not seem to be the fact as regards London, and it is certainly not the fact as regards Paris. But it is yet the fact as regards Chicago.”<sup>22</sup>

Eastman was fearless. While some others—especially society gadfly Amy Leslie of the *Daily News*—paid court to the leading actors of the day, he was unrestrained in his attacks on such stars as Minnie Maddern Fiske, Mrs. Patrick Campbell, and Henry Irving. Of the latter, appearing in *The Bells*, he wrote: “Surely no healthy adult . . . was moved to anything but a kind pitying ridicule by the play’s childish futility and the actor’s grotesque mouthings, grimaces, and contortions. The play itself is beneath contempt.”<sup>23</sup> In this case, Eastman was attacking a melodrama, and thereby escapes the censure of history. But he also skewered plays that have stood the test of time, including those of Ibsen. Of a 1904 production of *Hedda Gabler* starring Mary Shaw, he wrote: “Evidently Chicago does not contain very many playgoers so ignorant and uncultivated as to be interested in Ibsen’s discussions of the petty problems of a crude, young, immature civilization.”<sup>24</sup>

Eastman was not alone in his disgust for Ibsen. When Blanche Bates did *Hedda Gabler* at the Powers’ Theatre in 1901, she drew the following responses:

“a bitter, unwholesome tragedy.” — Amy Leslie, *Daily News*<sup>25</sup>

“an nauseous, horrifying affair.” — Winifred Black, *American*<sup>26</sup>

“an example of diseased mentality.” — Lyman Glover, *Record Herald*<sup>27</sup>

“a drama of pessimism gone mad.” — Major McConnel, *Chronicle*<sup>28</sup>

“a dramatic nightmare.” — Barrett Eastman, *Evening Journal*<sup>29</sup>

E.L. Bickford of the *Inter Ocean* was dubious but wrote, “It must be granted that the performance was dramatic. It was realism, but not uneventful realism. Ibsen is an adroit manipulator of plot even if it leads to overwhelming horror.”<sup>30</sup>

The only critic who wholeheartedly supported Ibsen at this time was young (in his 20s) Delancey Halbert, who was as appalled by the small-minded reactions of his fellow critics as he was enthralled by Ibsen. Although he felt the above-mentioned production of *Hedda Gabler* had been performed too melodramatically by the lead actress and her company, he strongly defended the play: “On the whole Miss Bates is to be thanked. The preachers of perpetual sunshine in theater forget *Hamlet* and *Othello* and *Macbeth*.”<sup>31</sup>

Late in 1902, Lyman Glover left the *Record-Herald* to become the manager for actor Richard Mansfield. Although Glover was “the dean of Chicago’s critics,”<sup>32</sup> writing about the theater apparently did not pay the rent as readily as working in it. He was replaced by James O’Donnell Bennett, a strong supporter of Ibsen. Bennett called a production of *Ghosts* featuring Mary Shaw at the McVickers a “master

work of art and morals.”<sup>33</sup> But after seeing the same play, Major McConnel concluded that if it represented any truth about society then it was time for the final purification of humanity by fire.<sup>34</sup>

Until Bennett’s arrival on the scene, however, Halbert led a lonely crusade for the new drama. In his slim volume, *The Story of a Theater*, Glover called fellow critic Halbert “one of the young and growing critics with a liberal education and a scholarly disposition.”<sup>35</sup> That liberal education consisted of a secondary education at Phillips Academy at Andover and a short stint at Harvard. He began as a general staffer on the *Evening Post* in 1893 at the age of nineteen and within a few years became music and theater critic.<sup>36</sup>

Halbert was continually derisive of other critics’ preference for the mindlessly optimistic popular theater of the day and never stopped championing the new, so-called “pessimistic” plays: “It will require a stretch of time before many will be willing to admit that it is reasonable to expect thought in the theater,” he wrote in 1902. “. . . But the cant about pessimism has become habit.”<sup>37</sup>

One of the Halbert’s most pointed—and most personal—attacks on a fellow critic followed a column in which Glover praised the English for censoring Maurice Maeterlinck’s *Monna Vanna*. Within the week Halbert fired back that such ignorant commentary (Glover admitted he had not read the play) would, thankfully, only increase the popularity of “Maeterlinck’s beautiful play.” He continued that critics who attacked Maeterlinck as a “putrid mess” (Glover’s words) “are not fit for intelligent controversy. No one above the kindergarten stage of artistic and literary development cares to know what their opinions are.”<sup>38</sup>

When Glover retired three months later, Halbert paid homage in a piece that was cordial on its surface but managed to point out Glover’s shortcomings for those who cared to read between the lines. Rather than criticizing Glover for not supporting European dramatists, Halbert simply said that he had encouraged American writers. He was equally subtle about Glover’s boosterish attitude: “Mr. Glover has been writing about plays for twenty years or more . . . characterized by the utmost kindness of feeling.”<sup>39</sup>

In his continued support of realism, Halbert was never as inflexible or as dogmatic as his foes were in attacking it. He realized that realism was not the final apotheosis of theater: “In the last decade the mode of the real has had its sway. Much has been added to dramatic and histrionic art thereby. But the realistic is only one side of a many sided art. It has not displaced, nor will it ever displace, the poetic, the rhetorical, the ideal.”<sup>40</sup>

Halbert continued to rally support for Ibsen, and, with Bennett’s help, eventually made headway. A major battle was won with the help of what were apparently supremely successful portrayals by Fiske of Nora in *A Doll’s House* and the title role in *Hedda Gabler* at the Garrick in May 1904. But the raves for her often revealed a holdover of contempt for Ibsen, as Amy Leslie’s review illustrated: “She seizes the senses, captivates the intelligence and issues a pardon for Ibsen the

nobly tedious, Ibsen the coarsely natural, Ibsen the plenteously real, and Ibsen the limit of dramatic endurance.”<sup>41</sup>

Later that year, a production of Shaw’s *Candida* was so well received by the public that Halbert proudly claimed victory for his long campaign for a modern, literate theater:

The day is near at hand when those who admire Ibsen, Maeterlinck, Hauptmann, Sudermann, Shaw and the rest will not have to stand epithets; the audience is becoming so large that soon the only way to distinguish oneself will be to proclaim that one does not care for the new school, but prefers to remain true to Sardou, *The Silver King*, and *The Two Orphans*.<sup>42</sup>

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Halbert died suddenly of pneumonia two months later, on Christmas Eve, at the age of thirty, arguable the best critic Chicago would ever see. Alas, he committed the cardinal sin of any journalist who works for a paper without a Sunday edition: He died on a Saturday. The *Tribune* got the news first.

Ibsen died less than two years later and subsequent reviews of his productions in Chicago were well received by the critics there. Would his plays have made their way into the canon of modern classics without this rapid collective change of heart? Undoubtedly. The common assumption—like most common assumptions, untested by research—is that reputations are made in the largest cultural capitals, eventually spreading to secondary cities such as Chicago and, later, the hinterlands. The value of studying the Chicago critics of this period emerges only when one breaks out of the consumer-driven thumbs up/thumbs down perspective that has permeated so much reviewing in recent decades. When plays are more than mere entertainment, critics affect more than just the opportunity for profit and fame. At their best, they inform the climate of opinion that surrounds the most difficult

public and personal debates.

At the time plays such as *A Doll’s House* and *Hedda Gabler* were first performed in America, women still did not have the vote. Indeed, much of the early critical rejection of Ibsen was a rejection of the idea of women as intellectual equals to men, an idea which was brought to life in *Hedda and Nora* (the heroine of *A Doll’s House*). The battle for hearts and minds on this issue was national. Hence, the reception for such plays—and the ideas and debates they set loose—was important not just in New York but in other major cities such as Chicago. Given the lack of decent coverage of the suffrage movement in the news columns, reviews of plays by critics of the social order such as Ibsen and Shaw provided the only suggestion in the newspapers of the time that women’s station in life was not an entirely happy one. How critics received and framed these ideas might well have affected the climate of opinion by contributing to the gradual shift in public opinion on the range of issues surrounding the most



basic one of whether women should vote.<sup>43</sup>

Recent research is beginning to show that entertainment viewing has a strong effect on political attitudes, perhaps even more than news consumption.<sup>44</sup> One of the assumptions of this line of research is that people are reducing their consumption of traditional news products and engaging current issues only as they appear in the entertainment media. One hundred years ago, before MTV and talk radio, theater may well have served this function—particularly when it came to issues such as women's suffrage that were avoided in the news columns of daily newspapers. Tracking the flow of new ideas is a difficult endeavor; the next step might be to see whether the specialized suffrage publications of the time included specific mention of the plays of Shaw and Ibsen.

Two other issues confronted by the Chicago critics of this period support the idea that newspaper criticism functioned differently, that it was more of an open debate than it is today. These involve the New York theatrical Syndicate and the Little Theater movement. In both cases, while the Chicago critics failed to have much positive influence, there was no question that the stakes were high. If the Chicago critics had been more forceful, not to mention prescient, they might have done something to help forestall the forty-year drought in local production soon to descend on Chicago stages.

Formed in New York in 1896 when producer Charles Frohman joined forces with five powerful booking agents and theater owners, the Theatrical Syndicate took advantage of the nation's transcontinental railway system to mass produce theater in a way that threatened (and eventually largely demolished) local stock companies. Had America not been so totally in thrall to realistic scenery, the Syndicate might not have been so successful. As it was, it was able to construct lavish scenery for each play and transport it to city after city, thereby vastly increasing the return on its initial investment. This gave it both an economic edge, and the ability to improve the quality—at least visually—of the product.<sup>45</sup>

Some critics—Eastman of the *Evening Journal*, Glover of the *Record-Herald*, McConnel of the *Chronicle*, and Mantle of the *Inter Ocean* (and later the *Tribune's* New York critic)—saw nothing wrong with the syndicate's modernization of the theater business. If they could find a way to produce better theater more cheaply, more power to them. Other critics—Halbert, Bennett, Percy Hammond and W. L. Hubbard of the *Tribune*, Tiffany Blake (Eastman's predecessor at the *Evening Journal*), and Howbert Billman (an early *Record* critic)—objected to the Syndicate for a variety of reasons. Some attacked it as a purveyor of immoral plays. Others objected to the way that the Syndicate reduced the art of the theater to a crass economic equation. Not content to make its profit and let others make theirs, it bought up the best theaters in New York and (to the best of its ability) other cities and tried to freeze out independent productions. Several Chicago critics accused the New York critics—individually (by name) and as a group—of being a “tool of the syndicate,” as Halbert wrote of Franklin Fyles of the *New York Sun*.<sup>46</sup>

New York's stranglehold on professional theater in Chicago continued and strengthened, unfazed by dissent from journalists and actors. The only successful major attacks on the Syndicate's monopoly came from other New York-based producers, beginning with the Shubert brothers. Early on, the formation of the Syndicate actually served to encourage Chicago playwrights. Because it was reluctant to release the rights to plays it had on tour, Chicago's stock companies needed to find their own scripts. In the 1902-03 season, there were still enough such companies around that the demand for scripts was high. Several of these scripts were successful enough that they could then go head-to-head with Syndicate properties in New York, a situation that gave Chicago critics considerable

(if somewhat boosterish) glee.<sup>47</sup> Chicago critics would proclaim similar sentiments at various times in the 1970s and 1980s, in much the same words, when Chicago again would become a source for new scripts.<sup>48</sup> By the second decade of the twentieth century, however, it was rapidly ceasing to be a source of origin and was becoming a destination, a marketplace for goods from New York theater factories. This made life much less interesting for Chicago critics. They gradually were reduced to being consumer advocates, insisting on original stars, strong companies, and well-maintained production values in shows that toured Chicago; complaining when the city was used as a tryout town for properties that were far from ready for Broadway; and, on the other hand, begging for Chicago to be included early in the tour of a Broadway success that everyone was eager to see.<sup>49</sup>

In the non-commercial arena, however, Chicago theater in the decade preceding World War I had considerable spirit left in it, for those who cared to notice. It was a leader in what was variously called the “Art” or (more often) “Little” Theater Movement. In Chicago, the movement consisted of the New Theater (begun in 1906), vari-

ous companies led by Donald Robertson, the Hull House Players, and the Chicago Little Theater. The positions the critics took on the issues mentioned earlier, realism and the Syndicate, give an indication of how they lined up on the Little theaters. Mantle and Hammond were opposed and Hubbard initially was cool, but he warmed to the movement by the time of his retirement from the *Tribune* in 1909. Most of the others supported the Little Theater, although not as persuasively as Halbert might have, had he lived. These theaters were determinedly amateur, wanting nothing of the slick tricks and posing of mercenary professionals. Despite much critical support, Hammond notwithstanding, audience support was low.<sup>50</sup>

One by one, Chicago's art theaters folded, in part because they were never really designed to support the people who worked in them and in part for lack of public enthusiasm. The overriding myth of the American theater in the twentieth century is that it shrank in response to the technologically seductive onslaught of radio, film, and television. As far as Chicago theater is concerned, however, an alternative thesis bears looking into: the Syndicate killed the theater with its single-minded pursuit of profit. As early as 1906,

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the *Tribune's* Hubbard was commenting on the falling public regard for the theater in an article, "Managers and the Star System Ruin American Drama."<sup>51</sup> His noted prudishness may have led him to overstate the case somewhat, but a much more perceptive critic, Bennett of the *Record-Herald*, noted the same trend a few years later in an article, "The Ungrateful Playgoer." "The public may have thought that it wanted to be amused, but the fact is that there is nothing people tire of so quickly as just being amused," he wrote.<sup>52</sup> As downtown fare became mere amusement, crowds turned to neighborhood vaudeville, where they could get a similar level of entertainment much cheaper. Those who wanted more substance "ceased to think about the theatre," he wrote.<sup>53</sup>

One reason the Chicago Little Theatre was able to premiere so many serious plays in the years following Bennett's comments was that commercial theaters were not premiering them. When they were still in the hands of a diverse group of independent producers and actor-managers, there was a successful mix of art and spectacle, of poetry and fire-eating. By leaving the field of serious drama to amateurs, the Syndicate (and its subsequent partners) made quick profits but eventually alienated a large segment of the American public. Rather than defect *en masse* to the amateur art theaters, this segment gave up on theater. It was in this already splintered, weakened condition that the American stage found itself when film was born—an industry designed to go the Syndicate one better in the business of mass producing entertainment.

By World War I the popular theater had given up on dramatic literature and devoted itself to putting stars in front of sumptuous, realistic scenery. The easy road to success appeared to lie in steadily increasing the realism of the sets and trying to keep patrons in Chicago and other places happy when stars took sick or dropped out and had to be replaced. Film solved those problems: its mastery of realism was photographic (literally), and once filmed, its stars were available for viewing everywhere and simultaneously. There are things that theater can do that film cannot, but at a crucial moment in its history, the theater was in no position to take advantage of them.

Whether a few more Halberts in the journalistic ranks might have encouraged the theater to take another path at this vital juncture is speculation. The knowable truth is that in 1920, Chicago critics were beginning a period of nearly forty years in which their main role was to chronicle a gradual decline of the American theater incrementally as it reached them by train, bus, and truck from New York.<sup>54</sup>

Clearly, Chicago had an active and varied corps of theater critics working for its many newspapers in the opening years of the twentieth century. At their best, they were literate, responsible, idealistic, and even courageous. Of the three main battles they engaged, they seem to have lost two: one against the Syndicate and one for the Little Theaters. But the third battle was won, the one for a new social realism in the dramas of Ibsen, Shaw, and their European contemporaries. This battle was not fought solely by the critics, however, and Chicago was only one battleground in a larger cultural war. The impact of these critics on Ibsen's reputation is an open but secondary question. More crucial is the role critics played in leading public debate on the issues raised by revolutionary thinkers such as Ibsen. In *Building a Bridge to the 18<sup>th</sup> Century: How the Past Can Improve Our Future*, Neil Postman persuasively restates a longstanding justification for paying attention to history.<sup>55</sup> We seek a shorter, narrower bridge leading to the model provided by the Chicago critics and the milieu they served in the early twentieth century. One need not agree with Hecht that

Chicago had "the finest group of drama critics" to see the value in studying the ways in which those critics responded to and mediated new ideas as they appeared on stage in front of a public not yet distracted by film, television, and the Internet. As people attempt to exert some influence on today's rapidly unfolding culture, they should examine not just the producers and the consumers, the Disneys and the culture surfers. Attention also should be paid to the critics who occupy a key part of the middle ground, both now and historically, in terms of where they fit, why they do and do not matter, and how they might matter more.

#### NOTES:

<sup>1</sup> Ben Hecht, "Wistfully Yours," *Theatre Arts*, July 1951, 13.

<sup>2</sup> "Outlying Theatres Where Most of Chicago's Play-Goers See Plays," *Chicago Tribune*, February 16, 1902.

<sup>3</sup> Raymond Williams, *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society*, revised edition (New York: Oxford University Press, 1983), 76-82.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 87, 90.

<sup>5</sup> An overview of the leading New York theater critics of the mid-twentieth century is provided by Lehman Engel in *The Critics* (New York: Macmillan, 1976). Three dissertations stand out among the several written on individual theater critics of the twentieth century: Donald Haffly Cunningham, "Eric Bentley's Dramatic Criticism: Background and Theory" (University of Michigan, 1982); Richard Martin Goldstein, "The Dramatic Criticism of Robert Charles Benchley" (University of Michigan, 1980); and Patricia Lenehan Kihn, "Kenneth Tynan and the Renaissance of Post-War British Drama" (Wayne State University, 1986).

<sup>6</sup> Tice L. Miller, *Bohemians and Critics: American Theatre Criticism in the Nineteenth Century* (Metuchen, N.J.: Scarecrow Press, 1981).

<sup>7</sup> Wilma Jane Dryden, "Chicago Theatre as Reflected in the Newspapers, 1900 through 1904" (Ph.D. diss., University of Illinois, 1960). Also see Jan Charles Czechowski, "Art and Commerce: Chicago Theatre 1900-1920" (Ph.D. diss., University of Michigan, 1982).

<sup>8</sup> Robert O. Wyatt and David P. Badger, "Effects of Information and Evaluation in Film Criticism," *Journalism Quarterly* 67, 2 (Summer 1990): 359-68.

<sup>9</sup> Jehoshua Eliashberg and Steven M. Shugan, "Film Critics: Influencers or Predictors?" *Journal of Marketing* 61 (April 1997): 68-78.

<sup>10</sup> Srinivas K. Reddy, Vanitha Swaminathan, and Carol M. Motley, "Exploring the Determinants of Broadway Show Success," *Journal of Marketing Research*, XXXV (August 1998): 370-83.

<sup>11</sup> Robert Dawson Scott, "Bridging the Cultural Gap: How Arts Journalists Decide What Gets onto the Arts and Entertainment Pages," *Critical Quarterly* 41 (Spring 1999): 46-55.

<sup>12</sup> Michael Janeway, Daniel S. Levy, Andras Szanto, and Andrew Tyndall, *Reporting the Arts: News Coverage of Arts and Culture in America* (New York: National Arts Journalism Program, Columbia University, 1999).

<sup>13</sup> The Sunday arts sections are easy to find. Individual reviews in this period, however, are buried midweek among unrelated items, invariably without mention in the front page index. The first stage of compiling this database involved culling references to reviews in existing sources: The dissertations mentioned above by Czechowski and Dryden, an index to the *Record Herald* for 1904 to 1912 (the only known copy is at the Chicago Historical Society), and a scrapbook of theatrical clippings for the *Chicago Daily News* from 1898 to 1935 (which also is at the Chicago Historical Society). A few references to Chicago reviews were also found in Robert A. Schanke's *Ibsen in America: A Century of Change* (Metuchen, N.J.: Scarecrow Press, 1988). Finding a review in one newspaper points the way to the likelihood of reviews in competing newspapers on the same day. The second stage of this effort involved scanning newspapers and logging entries to fill in the blanks, newspaper by newspaper, year by year. The online database will begin with hundreds of reviews that could grow to thousands if users of the index contribute their own findings. The url is: <http://www.jour.missouri.edu/fosdick>

<sup>14</sup> *Chicago American*, July 4, 1900. Also see Czechowski, "Art and Commerce."

<sup>15</sup> For example, note the review of a John Drew performance written by the women's page writer, Elissa Armstrong, under the headline, "He Should Look Younger, Oh! Much Younger to Please the Matinee Girls!" *Chicago American*, January 24, 1901.

<sup>16</sup> "The Drama," *Chicago Tribune*, June 3, 1900.

- <sup>17</sup> Czechowski, "Art and Commerce," 33.
- <sup>18</sup> "Outlying Theatres Where Most of Chicago's Play-Goers See Plays."
- <sup>19</sup> Information of this sort comes from the advertisements that sometimes appeared on the same pages as the reviews.
- <sup>20</sup> Mantle also wrote for the *New York Evening Mail* and later the *Daily News*. He remains known mostly for the annual *Best Play* series that he began and edited for eighteen years. See Tice L. Miller, "Mantle, (Robert) Burns," *Cambridge Guide to American Theatre* (Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 301.
- <sup>21</sup> Barnard W. Hewitt, *Theatre U.S.A.* (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Co., 1959), 280.
- <sup>22</sup> Barrett Eastman, "A Useless Expedient," *Chicago Evening Journal* November 16, 1900.
- <sup>23</sup> Barrett Eastman, "Irving in 'The Bells,'" *Chicago Evening Journal*, December 6, 1901.
- <sup>24</sup> Barrett Eastman, "Ibsen Once More," *Chicago Evening Journal*, March 5, 1904.
- <sup>25</sup> Amy Leslie, "At an Ibsen Matinee," *Chicago Daily News*, September 21, 1901.
- <sup>26</sup> Winifred Black, "'Hedda Gabler' a Study from the Social Morgue," *Chicago American*, September 21, 1901.
- <sup>27</sup> Lyman Glover, "Mrs. Dane's Defense and Other Plays of the Week," *Chicago Record Herald*, September 22, 1901.
- <sup>28</sup> Major McConnel, "Music and the Drama," *Chicago Chronicle*, September 21, 1901.
- <sup>29</sup> Barrett Eastman, "The Mimic World," *Chicago Evening Journal*, September 21, 1901.
- <sup>30</sup> E.L. Bickford, "An Ibsen Matinee," *Chicago Inter Ocean*, September 21, 1901.
- <sup>31</sup> Delancey Halbert, "Music and the Drama," *Chicago Evening Post*, September 21, 1901.
- <sup>32</sup> Dryden, "Chicago Theatre as Reflected in the Newspapers, 1900 through 1904," 29.
- <sup>33</sup> James O'Donnell Bennett, "Current Comment," *Chicago Record-Herald*, May 10, 1903.
- <sup>34</sup> Dryden, "Chicago Theatre as Reflected in the Newspapers, 1900 through 1904," 116.
- <sup>35</sup> Lyman B. Glover, *The Story of a Theatre* (Chicago: Donnelly, 1898), 96.
- <sup>36</sup> "Rites for D. M. Halbert," *Chicago Evening Post*, December 27, 1904.
- <sup>37</sup> Delancey Halbert, "Beyond Human Power," *Chicago Evening Post*, January 6, 1902.
- <sup>38</sup> Delancey Halbert, "Music and the Drama," *Chicago Evening Post*, July 12, 1902.
- <sup>39</sup> Delancey Halbert, "Music and the Drama," *Chicago Evening Post*, October 4, 1902.
- <sup>40</sup> Delancey Halbert, "Music and the Drama," *Chicago Evening Post*, October 18, 1901.
- <sup>41</sup> Amy Leslie, "Mrs. Fiske at Garrick," *Chicago Daily News*, May 17, 1904.
- <sup>42</sup> Delancey Halbert, "Music and the Drama," *Chicago Evening Post*, October 25, 1904.
- <sup>43</sup> Michael Emery and Edwin Emery with Nancy L. Roberts, *The Press and America: An Interpretive History of the Mass Media* (Boston: Allyn and Bacon, 1996), 215.
- <sup>44</sup> See: R. Lance Holbert, Dhavan V. Shah, and Nojin Kwak, "Entertainment Media Use and Attitudes Concerning Women's Rights: A Process Model," paper presented at the annual convention of the Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication, Phoenix, Ariz., August 2000.
- <sup>45</sup> Douglas McDermott, "Syndicate, Theatrical," in *Cambridge Guide to American Theatre*, (Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 456.
- <sup>46</sup> Delancey Halbert, "Music and the Drama," *Chicago Evening Post*, October 5, 1901.
- <sup>47</sup> Major McConnel wrote, "It is a great change, indeed, from the time, only two or three seasons ago, when New Yorkers calmly rested in the belief that Chicago didn't even 'know a good thing' to say nothing of being able to create one, to find four Chicago productions at once." See Major McConnel, "Music and the Drama," *Chronicle*, June 5, 1903.
- <sup>48</sup> The height of the late-twentieth century migration of Chicago theater product to New York was reached in 1985. See Scott Fosdick, "A Festival Challenges Chicago's Theater Style," *New York Times*, June 28, 1992.
- <sup>49</sup> Perhaps the most noted, and feared, critic to play that role was Claudia Cassidy. See Richard B. Gehman, "Claudia Cassidy—Medusa of the Midwest," *Theatre Arts*, July 1951, 14.
- <sup>50</sup> Czechowski, "Art and Commerce," 97.
- <sup>51</sup> W. L. Hubbard, "Managers and the Star System Ruin American Drama," *Chicago Tribune*, April 15, 1906.
- <sup>52</sup> James O'Donnell Bennett, "The Ungrateful Playgoer," *Chicago Record-Herald*, December 5, 1909.
- <sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>54</sup> Scott Fosdick, "Chicago," in *Cambridge Guide to American Theatre* (Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 106-08.
- <sup>55</sup> Neil Postman, *Building a Bridge to the 18th Century: How the Past Can Improve Our Future* (New York: A. A. Knopf, 1999).