

The Oxford Handbook of American Drama (Oxford Handbooks)

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When one thinks of American Drama, names like Eugene O'Neill, Arthur Miller, and Tennessee Williams readily come to mind. However, as *The Oxford Handbook of American Drama* shows, the U.S. has a deep and varied tradition that extends back to the years before the Revolutionary War. The essays gathered here trace U.S. dramatic history, ranging from plays by Mercy Otis Warren to Tony Kushner.

The volume opens with an exploration of the trials and tribulations of strolling players in the colonial era, before shifting to a discussion of the ways plays were deployed for political ends during the Revolution, most notably by the patriot Mercy Otis Warren. The narrative extends to the post-Revolutionary period when plays were used as vehicles to promote republican virtue. Contributors also explore the vibrant drama to emerge during the nineteenth century, when blackface performers and stars such as Edwin Forrest, Charlotte Cushman, and Edwin Booth dominated the stage. The period also witnessed the arrival of the first piece of musical theater, *The Black Crook*, which is productively situated in a musical tradition that extends to Rodgers and Hammerstein. *The Handbook* offers a complex treatment of melodrama - the most popular genre of the century. The volume traces the rise of the country's first black acting company in the 1820s, as well as the growing number of ethnic characters presented on the stage. Several of the contributors also highlight the role of women playwrights such as Anna Cora Mowatt in the development of American drama.

At the turn of the twentieth century, the Provincetown Players helped to usher in the era of modern drama, which allowed playwrights such as Eugene O'Neill, Susan Glaspell, and Edna St. Vincent Millay to experiment with the form and attempt topics regarded as taboo at the time. As melodrama gave way to realism, exemplified in the work of O'Neill and Rachel Crothers, other dramatic techniques such as naturalism and expressionism were introduced to the stage. Other topics covered in the *Handbook* include: the political plays of Arthur Miller; the major freedoms brought to the American stage since the 1960s; the new generation of playwrights, such as Tony Kushner and Harvey Fierstein, who created plays dealing explicitly with topics like AIDS and homosexuality; and

the rich genealogy of the African American family play in works by Lorraine Hansberry, August Wilson, and Suzan-Lori Parks. The volume concludes with the bold performance art of the Living Theatre and the new multiculturalism that arrived on the contemporary stage, with various ethnic communities --Mexicans, Puerto Ricans, Asians, and Native Americans--becoming the focus of the action. *The Oxford Handbook of American Drama* presents a comprehensive introduction to the form in all its guises.

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Editorial Review

Review

"There are more than a few 'handbooks,' 'guidebooks,' or 'companions to' out there, but *The Oxford Handbook of American Drama* is uncommon in its thorough and wide-ranging presentation of multiple topics.... Most impressive are the ways in which the book merges the familiar with the more shadowed corners of the American canon, and, in most cases, individual topics are each engagingly unpacked by a major scholar specializing in a particular subject.... The often astonishing, politically and emotionally wrenching, and riotously entertaining theatrical heritage of the United States is fully present here in chapters immersing the reader in the work of diverse artists, companies, historical issues, and recurring themes emerging from 350-plus years of the nation's still comparatively young existence." --*Journal of Dramatic Theory & Criticism*

"Lead editor Jeffrey H. Richards, along with coeditor Heather S. Nathans, who completed the book after Richards's death...are among the leading scholars of the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century American stage, with a strong interest in surveying the rich and complex dramatic landscape before the modernist era.... [A] conspicuous feature of this collection is its thematic interconnections, with several key topics and issues treated in multiple essays spanning different historical periods." --*Eugene O'Neill Review*

"*The Oxford Handbook of American Drama* gathers short, evocative essays by well-known scholars into a comprehensive overview of the field.... Short, tightly focused essays balance the need for clear outlines and introductions with creative and probing forays into the field's central questions. Up-to-date citations and generous lists of sources ably guide scholars toward materials for further research. In short, it is—as one would expect from a major press—a well-conceived and executed handbook, a useful starting place for scholars new to the field and a valuable tool for those wishing to revisit the field's central ongoing discussions." --*Early American Literature*

About the Author

Jeffrey H. Richards was Eminent Professor of Literature at Old Dominion University. He was the author of *Drama Theater, and Identity in the American New Republic* and the editor of *Early Plays: Eugene O'Neill and Early American Drama* (Penguin; 2001, 1997).

Heather S. Nathans is Professor of Theatre at the University of Maryland and the new President of the American Society for Theatre Research.

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