

Prompt Corner

Lawrence Harbison

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Take a glance at what's on in London and you will see a list heavy with American musicals but few American plays – while in any given season in New York we see several plays from the U.K., but few musicals apart from the occasional import of a re-imagined classic American musical from the likes of the Menier Chocolate Factory.

While I am glad that you Brits get to see hit musicals from Broadway, I often wonder why there are so few American plays on your side of the pond. When one crops up, it is usually not nearly so successful as it was in New York.

A case in point: Jerry Sterner's *Other People's Money*, which ran for 1000 performances in New York but died the death in London – while we go crazy over here for British plays, such as *Farinelli and the King*, *King Charles the Third*, *Amadeus*, *Betrayal* (which has been produced three times on Broadway), anything by Alan Ayckbourn or David Hare and, this season, Martin McDonagh's *Hangmen*, which has just concluded an acclaimed, extended run at Off Broadway's Atlantic Theatre Co..

In April we're getting a new play written and directed by Alan Ayckbourn, *A Brief History of Women*, at 59E59, a cozy complex of three Off Broadway theatres which has seen the American premiere of several Ayckbourn plays as part of their annual Brits Off Broadway series. But where is the London equivalent? How about "Yanks Off West End?"

We love revivals of great British plays, such as Priestley's *Time and the Conways*, produced this season by Roundabout on Broadway, or *Present Laughter* last season; three seasons ago we had Shakespeare's *Richard III* and *Twelfth Night*, both with an authentically Elizabethan all-male cast, with Mark Rylance as both Richard III and the funniest Olivia I have ever seen. Five years ago we had another *Richard III*, starring Kevin Spacey and directed by Sam Mendes.

Admittedly, you have a much longer list of great plays to draw on than we do, but come on..! Where are your productions of plays by Kaufman and Hart, Neil Simon and other playwrights of more recent vintage? You like Tennessee Williams, Tony Kushner and Arthur Miller, but that's about it – well... you seem to be attracted to the plays of JT Rogers, Bruce Norris and Richard Nelson, and you did have a production in the West End of Anna Ziegler's *Photograph 51*, starring Nicole Kidman... But there are many other contemporary playwrights who are highly-regarded here but little-known in London. I admit that I don't follow the London theatre scene as closely as I should, but it does seem to me that many of our best playwrights would appeal to your audiences as much as yours do to ours.

Here are some wonderful American playwrights worthy of being better-known in England:

- Theresa Rebeck. Everything she writes gets a major production here in the USA (three of them on Broadway), but I think only *The Water's Edge* (Aeschylus' *Agamemnon* with a contemporary spin) has been done in London.
- Gina Gionfriddo. Never produced on Broadway but several plays (one of which was a finalist for the Pulitzer Prize) have had acclaimed Off Broadway productions.
- Neil LaBute. Sure, *The Shape Of Things* started in London before coming to Off Broadway, but he's written several terrific plays since, such as the "Reasons to Be" plays and my personal favorite, *The Break of Noon*, about a man who claims to have heard the voice of God during a horrific workplace massacre, telling him to stay where he is and he will be safe. This play puzzled many New York critics, who couldn't ascertain LaBute's satirical point. Those who understood that he was serious, such as myself, were bowled over.
- Lynn Nottage, who has won two Pulitzer Prizes.
- The late A.R. Gurney, an extraordinary and prolific playwright. He was our supreme chronicler of WASP culture and mores. You still have a lot of white Anglo-Saxon protestants over there, despite your right-wing ideologues' rants, who would I think appreciate Gurney's characters and craft.
- Terrence McNally. Sure, you've had his libretti for Broadway musicals, but he's written a lot of wonderful plays, too. Mostly, he writes gay plays, which are as popular over there as they are here, such as *Some Men*, a cavalcade of gay life in the 20th Century.
- And finally, my personal favorite, Don Nigro. While he hasn't had a major New York production in a while, his plays are done all over the world. In the past year he has had several major productions in Eastern Europe and Finland, for instance. Samuel French (New York) publishes everything he writes, and they're up to over 400 titles, at least 80 of which are full length plays. Almost all of Nigro's plays are set in the past, which tends to be of more interest to you than to New York theatres, and many of them are set in London, such as his brilliant *Waste Land*, about T.S. Eliot, his crazy wife Vivienne and Ezra Pound.

If there is more British interest in American plays, let me know and I'll stand corrected.

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