

INTRODUCTION



Maxwell Anderson

(1888-1959)

James Maxwell Anderson is second only to Eugene O'Neill in the annals of American theater, being perhaps less original than O'Neill but more versatile and commanding in his use of language. He was born near Atlantic, Pennsylvania, on December 15, 1888, the son of Baptist lay minister William Lincoln Anderson and Charlotta Perrimela Stephenson. During the first few years of Anderson's life, the family moved frequently from parish to parish in Ohio and Pennsylvania. He started high school in 1904, but had already begun to receive an informal education through constant reading--a habit that was to stay with him throughout his life. By the time he was graduated from Jamestown High School in North Dakota in 1908, he had discovered John Keats, Percy Bysshe Shelley, William Shakespeare, and other great poets. He had also begun to write poetry, which became a lifelong avocation.

During his ensuing college days at the University of North Dakota, Anderson became increasingly involved in poetic and dramatic studies. He was a charter member of a theatrical group organized by professor Frederick H. Koch, he edited the school yearbook, and he wrote the class play in 1911. These formative experiences prepared Anderson to pursue a theatrical career and, especially, to focus on poetic drama for the modern stage,

After marriage to classmate Margaret Haskett, Anderson began a short-lived career in education as a teacher and high school principal. Graduate study in English at Stanford University, several teaching jobs, and copyediting work with two San Francisco newspapers preceded an offer from *The New Republic* to become a staff writer in New York City. There, from 1919 to 1922, Anderson published numerous poems and essays while working on the editorial staff of two newspapers. He was also cofounder and editor of *Measure*, a monthly poetry magazine that published many of the best poets of the time.

Beginning in 1923, however, Anderson turned his attention to drama. His first produced play was *White Desert*, a verse tragedy about hardship and jealousy on the North Dakota plains. Although it ran for only twelve New York performances, it showed his determination to bring verse to the American stage, as well as his concern over the viability of ideals in modern society. Anderson continued to study the failure of idealism in *What Price Glory?*, a prose play based on war stories told to him by Laurence Stallings and written during evenings at the New York Public Library. It debunked romantic views of warfare that emphasized honor and glory, stressing instead less abstract reasons for fighting, such as the need for survival and commitment to comrades. The play was a critical and financial success, thus allowing

Anderson to establish himself and his family in Rockland County, New York, where he dedicated himself to writing as a full-time occupation.

Anderson's works span a remarkable range of forms and subject matter. For example, his penchant for social criticism emerged in *Saturday's Children*, *God's of the Lightning*, and *Both Your Houses*, which won for Anderson the Pulitzer Prize in drama in 1933. These plays merged strong characters with insightful analysis of contemporary institutions and supple dramatic prose to capture the attention of his audiences. At the same time, however, Anderson was arguing in his essays for a more 'exalted' theater--a dramatic experience that depended on heightened emotion and language to lift the audience above ordinary life.

Anderson's focus on language led him to write verse dramas whose flexible iambic pentameter allowed them to be popular on the New York stage. At first, he concentrated on historical tragedies, including *Elizabeth the Queen*, *Mary of Scotland*, and *Valley Forge*. Yet even in these 'history' plays, he developed characters with modern sensibilities and confronted complex political realities, which had their counterparts in present-day society. Eventually, Anderson turned his attention to writing verse plays on contemporary themes--generally considered his greatest achievement. *Winterset* and *High Tor*, two plays on modern themes, each ran for more than 170 performances, and both received the Drama Critics Circle Award for dramatic excellence.

In addition to his achievement in social drama and verse tragedy or comedy, he also wrote two distinguished musicals with composer Kurt Weill. Anderson's most notable musical drama was an adaptation of Alan Paton's novel, *Cry, the Beloved Country* (1948). The adaptation, entitled *Lost in the Stars*, ran for 250 New York performances and won for Anderson the Brotherhood Award from the National Conference of Christians and Jews; it is a sensitive treatment of the apartheid problem in South Africa.

Between 1925 and 1951 Maxwell Anderson became one of the most eminent and exciting playwrights in the United States. His original productions during that period amazed his contemporaries with their versatility and poetic power. He believed that playwrights must celebrate whatever is good and worth saving from the often-confused events of their own time. His high sense of purpose drove him to try to rise above contemporary acclaim--to write plays with the power to move audiences over the ages. According to most critical opinion, the results were impressive even when Anderson fell short of his own high standards. Anderson's moral purpose, facility with language, experimentation, and very real accomplishments across a range of dramatic forms have made him one of the preeminent American playwrights of the twentieth century.

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