

## ANALYSIS

### *The Adding Machine* (1923)



Elmer Rice

(1892-1967)

“Mr. Rice’s vision of the world may infuriate you....You cannot miss it; you cannot withdraw yourself from its coherence and completeness. Examine his play (*The Adding Machine*) scene by scene, symbol by symbol. The structure stands. There are no holes in its roof. It gives you the pleasure of both poetry and science, the warm beauty of life and love, the icy delight of mathematics. I am aware of the fact...that my profound sympathy with Mr. Rice’s substance necessarily colored my reaction to his play. Not, however, to its form, not to the heartening fact that here is an American drama with no loose ends or ragged edges or silly last-act compromises, retractions, reconciliations. The work, on its own ground, in its own mood, is honest, finished, sound.”

Ludwig Lewisohn  
*Nation*  
(4 April 1923) 399

“In everything he has written--melodrama, smart drama, Expressionist drama, Realist drama, he has shown himself a perfect technician.... With this equipment, and the gradual deepening of purpose which is evident through his writing, it is not idle to expect that Elmer Rice’s major work in the theatre is yet to be done. The least that he can give is a chronicle of American scenes, done in an American way, a procession of characters whose externals of manner and speech are perfectly reproduced...but in his latter plays he had given evidence that he has the power to quicken these characters with the kind of life that makes ‘pure music’ out of ‘program music’.”

Meyer Levin  
*Theatre Arts*  
(January 1932) 62

“Elmer Rice is a heavy-set man with reddish hair who does not look anywhere near fifty-one. A serious, conscientious person, he still has a lot of humor--the wry, understated kind--and his quietness makes it hard to imagine him ever blowing up about anything. Nevertheless he has always been mixed up in controversies; he is a great man for taking a stand about anything, from the destructive influence of the critics on the theatre to world problems of today.... Politically Elmer Rice has always been firmly and vocally to the Left. Which is consistent, because it would be odd if a man who has always been a persistent experimentalist in art forms should turn out to be, ideologically, a conservative” [Like T. S. Eliot?]

Elizabeth R. Valentine  
*New York Times Magazine*  
(12 September 1943) 15

“*The Adding Machine* is a ruthlessly satirical portrait of Mr. Zero, a white-collar nonentity hopelessly submerged in the mass of humanity in a large modern city. Employed for twenty-five years in a dull and futureless job as an accountant, Zero is bored with his henpecking wife and their banal friends (who have numbers, from one to six, instead of names) but lacks the character to break out of his monotony. He flirts briefly with a prostitute who lives in the same building, but when his wife discovers this he surrenders to her will and betrays the girl to the police; she is sent to prison for six months. He also considers an affair with Daisy Diana Dorothea Devore, a rather unattractive fellow-worker in his office, but lacks the initiative to do anything about this either.

Dreaming idly of the day the Boss will reward him by elevating him to a high position in the office, he is rudely awakened when the Boss instead fires him to make way for a mechanical adding machine. In a temporary fit of insanity Zero murders the Boss and is executed for the crime. Coming to himself in the Elysian Fields, he finds there Daisy, who has committed suicide in order to be with him, and meets a new friend, Srdlu, a proofreader who has murdered his mother and now yearns for punishment in a conventional hell—a punishment which to his disappointment is not forthcoming. Zero, in a conversation with Daisy, learns that she has loved him for many years and regrets the opportunities he has passed up in life. Then, in Scene Seven, in an interview with Charles, a kind of heavenly bureaucrat, Zero learns that there is no permanent repose even in death and that he is soon to be reincarnated as a super-nonentity in a new super-society. He learns, in fact, that he is the archetypal slave-soul, who has been reborn all through history as slave, serf, and employee.

When he understands this horrible truth Zero at first refuses to be born again, but Charles easily turns his head by convincing him that a voluptuous girl named Hope awaits him in the life (i.e., an illusory hope keeps the nonentities and slaves of the world content with their lot). The third scene of the six which form this play is an amusing satire on lower-middle-class social life, a conversation between Zero and his friends in which every cliché and banality of the bourgeoisie is parroted in singsong fashion. *The Adding Machine* owes much to the school of continental Expressionism; plays which it particularly resembles are Kaiser’s *From Morn to Midnight*, written in 1916 and produced in America by the Theatre Guild the year before Rice wrote his play, and Capek’s *R.U.R.*”

Donald Heiney  
*Recent American Literature* 4  
(Barron’s Educational Series 1958) 353-55

“This satiric attack on the half-men produced by the ‘machine age’ tells how Mr. Zero, discharged when adding machines are introduced into his office, kills his employer in a fit of insanity and is joined in suicide by a middle-aged worker in the same office, Daisy Diana Dorothea Devore. Finding his company in heaven too indecent (Swift and Rabelais, for instance), although he enjoys operating a celestial adding machine, he is consigned back to earth to become the perfect industrial slave. Known as one of the best examples of Expressionistic drama in America, the play uses the techniques of fantasy to depict inner states usually hidden by surface appearances.”

Max J. Herzberg & staff  
*The Reader’s Encyclopedia of American Literature*  
(Crowell 1962)

“Except for O’Neill, no permanently important playwright was introduced through any one of these three theaters until the Theater Guild produced Elmer Rice’s *The Adding Machine* in 1923.... Held in high esteem both by critics and by a large public...[it was] directly inspired by those same Expressionistic experiments which influenced O’Neill’s *The Hairy Ape*. *The Adding Machine* is a theatrically effective exposition of a nihilistic fable concerning a certain ‘Mr. Zero,’ who remains hopelessly insignificant even after he has been transported to heaven.... Plays like *The Adding Machine* or *The Hairy Ape* were somewhat baffled considerations of the spiritual poverty of the underprivileged rather than revolutionary protests, and a change in point of view did not come until the crash of 1929.... Thus Elmer Rice, who had just before

written in *Street Scene* a completely nonpolitical though completely sympathetic tragedy-melodrama about life in the slums, came out with a series of propagandistic plays.”

Joseph Wood Krutch  
*Literary History of the United States*, 3<sup>rd</sup> edition  
(Macmillan 1946-63) 1243, 1317, 1319, 1326-27

Michael Hollister (2015)