HERBERT BLAU: DIRECTING A REVOLUTION IN AMERICAN THEATRE, 1952-1965

BY

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DISSERTATION

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ABSTRACT

Herbert Blau is more widely known in theatre history as a theorist and less as a director who strove to identify his directorial style during a time when American values were evolving and American regional theatres were gaining recognition, specifically 1952-65. Using many of Blau’s books and articles - most notably his first book, The Impossible Theater: A Manifesto - plus a wide range of newspaper critiques, personal interviews, articles on Blau and on the Cold War, this dissertation examines Blau as a practical director behind the theory and defines the Blauian style of directing. It explores the journey of Blau from theatre novice to professional director and ponders whether he effectively engaged his personal theories, thoughts and political views to his work on stage. And, in the process, did he maintain, service, and advance the artistic integrity of the work itself?

The chapters highlight Blau’s attempts to realize his theoretical ideas through his practical directorial work onstage through three key productions: Bertolt Brecht’s Mother Courage and Her Children (1956); Samuel Beckett’s Waiting for Godot (1957-58); and, Georg Büchner’s Danton’s Death (1965). These productions represent the arc of Blau’s directing career from beginning theory through the avant-garde and onto the national stage. They are presented, in conversation with Blau’s own writings, in order to prove or disprove what he has said about his work and to offer an objective viewpoint.

The probing work accomplished by Herbert Blau as he developed his directorial style at the height of the Cold War has not been given due credit in
American theatre history texts. Blau’s goals as a director were to: 1) emulate and keep strong the ensemble ideas forged by Harold Clurman and the Group Theatre; 2) utilize discussion as a way to delve into the text at a time when discussion was looked upon as borderline subversive; 3) introduce to American theatre through production such new playwrights as Bertolt Brecht, Samuel Beckett, Marie Irene Fornes, and Harold Pinter; and, 4) to ultimately change the direction of American professional theatre. This dissertation presents a clearer portrait of a man whose later theoretical writings have been described by Tony Award-winning director Daniel Sullivan as “impenetrable,” but have ultimately been used by noted theatre theorists such as Richard Schechner, Elin Diamond, and Phillip Zarrilli to launch new theories that are currently reshaping and redefining the American theatre in the twenty-first century.¹

¹ Daniel Sullivan, personal interview, 2 April 2007.
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INTRODUCTION

On the night of February 28, 1952, in a dilapidated loft above a Judo academy on Divisadero Street in San Francisco, a group of actors performed a workshop production of Philip Barry’s *Hotel Universe* for an invited audience of fifty people. The co-founder and self-appointed dramaturg of the group, Herbert Blau, explained to the gathered crowd that what they were about to see was the start of a new theatre, The Actor’s Workshop of San Francisco (TAW). It was also the start of a new style of theatre - an actor’s workshop where ideas were first, analytical critique was accepted as a way to explore the work, and polished production and glowing reviews were not a priority. Their “modest aim,” Blau explained, was to “provide the circumstances in which actors could practice their art.”¹ After the performance, the enthusiastic audience urged the group to perform the play again and offered donations to help them start their theatre. Buoyed by the response of the audience, the group nonetheless refused both offers and went on to another project, keeping intact their commitment to slow, thorough explorations of the works they carefully chose.²

Thirteen years later, on the evening of October 21, 1965, the atmosphere inside the glitteringly new Vivien Beaumont Theatre was charged with wary anticipation and more than a little self-righteous indignation as the New York City audience awaited the

¹ Herbert Blau, *The Impossible Theater: A Manifesto* (New York: Macmillan, 1964) 140. This is Blau’s first book and is an important source for his subjective view of the early events of his directing career. This book is introduced more thoroughly later in this introduction.

start of Georg Büchner’s *Danton’s Death*, adapted and directed by Herbert Blau. The cast, a combination of transplanted actors from Blau’s Actor’s Workshop of San Francisco and actors remaining from the previous directorship of the Repertory Company at Lincoln Center (LCR), also awaited the start of the play with nervous anticipation. The Beaumont, with its massive stage, large acoustical dead spots, and innovative stage machinery, was difficult to perform on at best. At worst, it could completely overwhelm even the strongest actor. Along with these problems was the added pressure on the company to succeed where prominent others before them had failed. There were high hopes for LCR when it opened two years prior under the directorship of Elia Kazan and Robert Whitehead, hopes that had not, as yet, been fulfilled. The theatre society in New York waited to see if the new directorship of Herbert Blau and his partner, Jules Irving - two exported Californians and their mixed company of Broadway and non-Broadway actors - could turn what was viewed as a disappointment into a viable, exciting company. The curtain rose, the cast performed, and the disappointment remained. The new regime had failed to impress and, a scant two years later, Blau left Lincoln Center.

This span of thirteen years, beginning with the humble opening of an actor’s workshop dedicated to the exploration of the craft and ending with the highly criticized entrance of an evolved version of that workshop onto the national stage, represents the professional theatrical career of Dr. Herbert Blau, currently the Byron W. and Alice L. Lockwood Professor in the Humanities for English and Comparative Literature at the

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3 This is a compilation of facts taken from newspaper critiques of *Danton’s Death*, a personal tour of the Vivian Beaumont Theater, and from Blau’s book *Take Up the Bodies: Theater at the Vanishing Point* (Urbana: U of Illinois P, 1982).
University of Washington. What happened in the years between those two vastly different opening nights has fascinated and bewildered Blau for most of his over sixty-year involvement in the theatre. Theatre critic Robert Brustein explicitly defines the metamorphosis of Blau and his company, from committed workshop to overreaching Theatre Company, in his November 6, 1965 review of Danton’s Death: “Their ads pronounce their theatre a shrine; their program notes are full of inspirational pieties about Civil Rights, the Human Spirit, and the Advance of Culture…a lot of creative energy that might be more effectively channeled into a rigorous confrontation of the plays is now being wasted in public posturing.”

Blau would have been appalled had he been able to read this 1965 critique of his work when he started in 1952. Brustein’s comments sum up exactly what Blau was desperately trying to work against throughout his thirteen-year tenure as co-director of The Actor’s Workshop: 1) the lure of the New York stage; 2) the temptation to overreach the talents of the group; and, the most devastating point of all, 3) the sacrifice of direct, artistic commitment to the work for self-glorification.

Blau’s experiences as a director have garnered him accolades as well as condemnation and have provided fertile ground for his prolific theoretical and personal writings about theatre. He relates these experiences in his many writings with keen observations on society, politics, and, more specifically, the state of American theatre as he views it:

What I shall say comes out of more than a decade of experience in trying to create a theater in America, during which time I have tried to understand the meaning and place of theater in American cultural

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history, the behavior and purposes of the people in it, and the relation of theater to other arts.\(^5\)

According to Blau, American theatre, whether onstage or in the classroom, was void of intelligent inquiry and filled with, as he states, “prolific activity and non-ideas.”\(^6\) Thought has always driven Herbert Blau and the ever elusive answers to the questions, “why” and “what is beyond the answer?” The thesis of Blau’s work, from the start of his theatrical career to the present, is to investigate the why behind the words, translate his discoveries onto the stage through his direction of the live actors, and constantly seek out what is beyond the finished work on stage. As he sees it, he would much rather be the “man who follows the words where they’ll take him” and not “the man who pontificates… as if the meanings were always there beyond a doubt.”\(^7\) Blau always questions and challenges the material and, in the process, constantly questions and challenges himself.

In Blau’s opinion, theatre is to hold up to scrutiny the foibles of human nature, especially during a politically charged time like the Cold War, and not capitulate to popular taste or easy money. In his first and most important book on his work in the theatre, The Impossible Theater: a Manifesto published in 1962, Blau describes what it was like to be a theatre artist during the paralyzing apathy of the Cold War. He describes American theatre during this time as “not so much a reflection of the Cold

\(^5\) Blau, Impossible 4.

\(^6\) Blau, Impossible 6.

War as one of its worst symptoms, having abdicated to other arts the task of dealing with the paralysis that has beset the world."\(^8\)

The paralysis that Blau spoke of historically began when America exploded the first atomic bomb over Hiroshima, Japan on August 6, 1945. Three days later, American forces exploded a much larger, more powerful plutonium weapon above Nagasaki, Japan. The total annihilation of these two cities wrought by the bombs was undeniable. Emperor Hirohito’s concession speech, broadcast on August 14, 1945, contained ominously prophetic words, the import and meaning of which would come to full realization in the decades to come. He said: “Moreover, the enemy has begun to employ a new and most cruel bomb, the power of which to damage is indeed incalculable…but also it would lead to the total extinction of human civilization.”\(^9\) The emperor verbalized what rapidly developed into the underlying theme of the Cold War - the atomic bomb made the extinction of the human race a very real possibility.

Moral questions arose as to the meaning and purpose of the destruction caused by the two bombs and the effect it would have on mankind. Blau pondered his own answers to these questions by equating Gloucester’s desire to jump off the cliff and end his life in Shakespeare’s King Lear with Albert Camus’s discussion of suicide in The Myth of Sisyphus: “given the rational barbarity, the civilized reduction of men to things; given our common complicity - why not suicide?”\(^10\) If life could end so quickly and average citizens were powerless to stop it, what was the impetus to go on trying?

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8 Blau, Impossible 24.


10 Blau, Impossible 228.
Blau’s thoughts spoke directly to what was to become known as the Silent Generation of the 1950s; a generation of people who, according to an article in The New York Times Magazine, knew that “the world cannot be made safe for democracy in one war or one peace settlement.”¹¹ As the editors of Time magazine stated in an August 1945 article: “With the controlled splitting of the atom, humanity, already profoundly perplexed and disunified, was brought inescapably into a new age in which all thoughts and things were split - and far from controlled.”¹² A pervasive feeling of “what happens next?” crept into American society exacerbated by The House Un-American Activities Committee, McCarthyism, and the unsettling foreign policy of Brinkmanship. American statesmen, eager to allay the fear created when the American military exploded the bombs over Japan, quickly set to the task of establishing a postwar identity for the country that emphasized unity, peace, and progress for humankind.

Blau’s directorial style gradually took shape during the intense first decade of the Cold War. Though Blau was primarily concerned with the art of the theatre he was creating at TAW, especially in his neophyte years, and not with the political scene, he conceded that “that is not irrelevant, because the theater is a social art.”¹³ He did not set out to specifically examine American Cold War values and their effects on society through his work as a director in American theatre. However, the events and sociological effects of the Cold War rendered Blau an increasingly political and critical way to examine the work, the purpose of TAW, and his own style as a director.


¹³ Blau, Impossible 8.
This study examines the personal journey of Herbert Blau from theatre novice to professional director, and his struggle to articulate his own style as an American director during the heightened years of the Cold War. For purposes of the discussion presented in this study, style - as it pertains to Blau - is defined as: his interpretation of the material he chose to direct; the staging methods he used to gain the effect he wanted through his work with actors; and, the overall impact and purpose of the production as a whole on the audiences. The study’s time frame, 1952-1965, focuses on three key productions that helped define Blau’s directorial style: Bertolt Brecht’s *Mother Courage and Her Children* in San Francisco (1956); Samuel Beckett’s *Waiting for Godot* at San Quentin prison (1957), in New York and in Brussels (1958); and, Georg Büchner’s *Danton’s Death* in New York City (1965). How did these productions reflect and challenge Blau’s developing directorial style and budding theories? This dissertation provides the groundwork - from an objective, outside point of view - to prove or disprove Blau’s own recollections in *The Impossible Theater* and other writings and defines the Blauian style of directing in order to better understand the practical roots of Blau’s later theories.

Each of the remaining four chapters in this historical study focuses on a particular time in Blau’s early development as a director and relates the significance of Blau’s directorial style to twentieth-century American theatre. The chapters are arranged in chronological order to understand the progression of Blau from novice to professional director. Each chapter contains contextual information that is unique to the specific production(s) discussed in the chapter. Sample contextual topics include: the progress of TAW as a company; San Francisco’s theatre scene at the time of Blau’s production of
Mother Courage; and, particular events of the Cold War that influenced Blau’s
developing directorial style. The political and social atmosphere Blau was working in
while directing the productions at TAW and LCR helped to shape his directorial style as
much as his inner talent and thoughts.

The biographical information contained in Chapter One, “Off the Balcony and Into
the Abyss,” highlights certain people and events that influenced Blau in the beginning of
his theatrical career and, most importantly, explains his initial thoughts on theatre and
his naïve attitude about his place in it. The formation of TAW with his partner, Jules
Irving, and the very first productions the company did gave Blau the opportunity to work
with and observe theatre artists. From the Workshop’s first presentation of Hotel
Universe to Blau’s directorial debut with Playboy of the Western World, the early years
at TAW gave him time to study, analyze scripts, and watch the basic mechanics of
theatre production. These tenets, like those of the Group Theatre that Blau admired,
became the cornerstones of his directorial style.

Blau challenged himself to find something new and innovative to explore with
each production he directed. This point is illustrated in Chapter Two’s analysis of the
first key production in Blau’s directing career - the American premiere of Bertolt Brecht’s
Mother Courage and Her Children. Blau stated that working on the play “brought us
face to face with the countenance of the Cold War.”

14 The Cold War was prominent once again in the newspaper headlines due to John Foster Dulles’s foreign policy of
Brinkmanship. The news broke on the Secretary of State’s questionable policy at the
same time TAW opened Mother Courage. Though Blau did not direct Mother Courage
in response to Brinkmanship, the timely announcement of the policy helped open Blau’s

14 Blau, Impossible, 17.
awareness to the political ramifications his work had on San Franciscan society. He was becoming more aware of what it meant to be a director and what each play had to offer in terms of lessons for society. Blau focused on understanding the message of *Mother Courage* which he and many others felt Paine Knickerbocker, the theatre critic of the *San Francisco Chronicle*, clearly missed. The negative responses received by Knickerbocker concerning his critique caused a mini-controversy the likes of which neither Blau nor the theatre society in San Francisco had ever experienced. Indeed, the fact that there was a controversy was exciting and new to Blau. He discovered that his work could cause action and, most importantly, reaction. The effect this discovery had on his developing directorial style was immense and changed Blau from director of a play to director of the message of the play. This absorption into then through the text and onto the stage would be fully realized in the next important milestone in Blau’s directing career—his production of Samuel Beckett’s *Waiting for Godot*.

Chapter Three, “*Waiting for Godot*: ‘A Transforming Event,’” analyzes Blau’s production of *Godot* at The Marine’s Memorial Theatre in 1957; San Quentin prison in 1957; at the York theatre in New York City prior to their departure for the Brussels World’s Fair; and, at the fair itself in 1958. The various productions of *Godot* offer a unique opportunity to study the reactions to Blau’s work in four very different situations and how these reactions, in turn, affected his directorial style. The surprising and overwhelming success of Blau’s *Godot* at San Quentin garnered TAW much praise and, in later years, renown. More importantly, the acclaim of the production prompted an invitation from the State Department to represent American regional theatre at the Brussels World’s Fair in 1958. Prior to their performance at the fair, TAW presented
Godot at the York theatre in New York City for six weeks. The company received a negative reception from the critics even before they arrived for their choice of a European avant-garde play to represent American theatre on the international stage. The production itself received polite applause from the audiences but mixed reviews from critics who felt that the production was too over-the-top physically and that many meaningful nuances were lost. This first foray into New York theatre is important in two ways: 1) the critical reception of Blau’s work caused him much consternation and questioning of his abilities as a director; and, 2) it foreshadows Blau’s move to LCR and the reception his work received in 1965. The final section in this chapter places Blau’s work within the larger picture of American identity as it was represented in the American Pavilion at the Brussels World’s Fair. American statesmen were hoping to represent a different image of America from the destructive force it presented in World War II, one that introduced the country - its people and ways - to the international community. The concerts, plays, and exhibits displayed in the American Pavilion were to exemplify American life and put an innovative spin on technology and capitalism. Into this hopeful arena, Blau, Irving and company brought their production of Waiting for Godot. The production received warm audience responses. Even though many disagreed that Waiting for Godot was the right choice to represent American regional theatre at the fair, Blau’s direction of the piece (though criticized as overriding the subtleties of the play) and the sheer courageousness of choosing a popular European avant-guard play lends credence to the notion that his production did indeed represent the innovative spirit of American regional theatre.
Chapter Four entitled “Danton’s Death: ‘Risking the Baroque,’” addresses the surprise move by Blau and Irving to assume directorship of the Repertory Theatre at Lincoln Center in New York. The Vivien Beaumont Theatre is a monster of a venue. The technical marvels of the theatre alone would be enough to swallow any company - amateur or professional. Putting aside the physical challenges the Beaumont presented, the expectations for Blau and Irving’s directorship to create a national repertory company of the highest standard were very high, as noted earlier. Added to this was the fact that they were from a regional theatre in San Francisco and brought ten of their actors with them, thereby taking up spaces normally filled by New York actors. Did Blau forgo fidelity to the work, one of the earliest tenets of TAW, in order to impress New York theatre society and the corporate money that supported LCR?

One main reason for taking on a study such as this is the fact that Herbert Blau is a theatre artist and a scholar who has been looking for ways to combine theory with practice in a more meaningful presentation of the material. Can theory successfully combine with theatre practice as Blau attempted to do? Why was he so successful in San Francisco and why was he not successful in New York? And ultimately, what can be learned from Blau’s experiences as a director and how can modern theatre artists and scholars use his experiences to advance the understanding, directing and performance of American theatre?

There are many ways to tell this story of Blau’s development as a director. Researchers can choose to use reliable sources such as newspaper critiques of the productions (though they should be careful of the objectivity of such critiques) and secondary sources written after the fact. However, as unreliable as memory can be, it
is still the most powerful resource when writing a history such as this. Researchers must take care not to make hasty conclusions reliant upon the memory alone. That is why the research conducted for this study engages with these questions by utilizing contemporary sources of the time - such as comments and critiques - with the main purpose of seeing the work of Blau, as much as possible, in the purity of its moment, not the interpretation of it years later. This study takes a reversed, Benjaminian Janus-faced look at history where the newer reflections are forced to turn and face the work done at the time in a flash moment of recognition. New reflections are useful but time changes memory and, as Blau stated, “To write about what one has done in the theatre can be nothing but afterimage and afterthought.”\textsuperscript{15} This is clearly evidenced, for example, by the three different versions of how TAW was actually formed back in 1952 - one from an unpublished dissertation completed in 1969, one from \textit{The Impossible Theater} written in 1962, and one from a personal interview with Blau conducted in 2008. In this study, though the recollections of Blau and others have been most helpful, they have been supported or denied through extensive use of other archival sources, some of which are outlined below.

Herbert Blau is more widely known in theatre studies as a theorist and less as a director who struggled to identify his directorial style in a time when American values were evolving and American regional theatres were developing. A fair sampling of the many subjects that intrigue him about theatre are found in his 2002 collection of essays entitled, \textit{The Dubious Spectacle: Extremities of Theater, 1976-2000}. Three of his most important works—\textit{The Impossible Theater: A Manifesto}, \textit{Take Up the Bodies: Theater at the Vanishing Point}, and \textit{Blooded Thought}—deal mainly with Blau’s theoretical

\textsuperscript{15}Blau, \textit{Take Up the Bodies}, preface xii.
discoveries birthed from his practical experiences in the theatre. Though Blau has indeed written a great deal about his directing experiences with TAW and LCR, his writings are intricately mingled with the theories he devised. His recollections morph over time so that some of the facts get confused and his thoughts on the work change.

The Impossible Theater: A Manifesto published in 1962 is the most important source for this study and is consistently quoted because it is filled with Blau’s own reflections and thoughts concerning his early years as a budding director with TAW. The book places his work within the atmosphere of the Cold War and is an intriguing assessment of the prevailing attitudes and fears of society at that time. It should be noted that the book was written in the early 1960s, after the experiences and productions discussed in chapters one, two and three of this study. Blau wrote this book after he had a chance to reflect on his work and appropriately apply it to the events of the Cold War and though still an important source, should be read with that idea in mind. On the other hand, The Impossible Theater was written before the move to Lincoln Center in 1965. Therefore it is an important source for Blau’s attitude and thoughts moving into the New York years.

There are three main problems when using this book as a starting point to interpreting Blau’s early directorial style. Firstly, as stated above, this is a book of Blau’s reflections on his own work. Trying to piece out what is an objective personal assessment and what is, in essence, a subjective apology for things he feels he did wrongly is difficult. That is why it is necessary to round out Blau’s recollections with more objective critiques, articles, and interviews of his colleagues. Secondly, Blau’s thoughts are intricately woven into what can only be described as a complex and, at
times, convoluted writing style. Sentences often run-on to half a page without a punctuation mark and thoughts skip back and forth at will so that one gets the sense that they are reading Blau's unedited train of thought. Lastly, it is fairly easy to get caught up in Blau's recollections and opinions and to take them at face value. This study re-tells the recollections found in The Impossible Theater in order to give an objective look at Blau's work as a director from someone other than Blau himself. It is not this study's purpose to merely agree with what he has written. This study utilizes The Impossible Theater to clarify and analyze moments when Blau's theory combined well with his practice and moments when it did not so as to define the Blauian style of directing.

To date, there has been very little objective analysis of Blau as a practical American theatre director during the Cold War. Keith Franklin Fowler, for example, wrote a dissertation on the history of The Actor's Workshop in 1969 entitled, “A History of the San Francisco Actor's Workshop.” His purpose was to chronologically log the facts concerning TAW’s evolution as a company. He considers certain productions in terms of different criteria such as play selection, acting, directing, and financial concerns. His broad focus does include analysis of Blau’s direction but is equally concerned with Jules Irving's directing skills as well as the business dealings of the company. Rather than give a broad history of the Workshop as Fowler does, this study focuses solely on Blau and his development as a director in the time of the Cold War as exemplified by three important productions in his career. The productions highlight Blau's developing directorial style which includes his thoughts on the material and his work on the staging with the actors. Contextual content about the Workshop, the
theatre scene in San Francisco, or events of the Cold war, for instance, is added only when it justifies a certain point being made about Blau’s developing directorial style.

Blau intersperses bits of biographical information and stories about the formation and early years of TAW throughout many of his writings. Another quirk of Blau’s writing is that he often cuts and pastes writing from earlier works into his newer works. It is not bothersome and often helps scholars who are researching Blau to remember important points he has made earlier. Some of the most concentrated sources for biographical information and the start of TAW, aside from The Impossible Theater, are the articles “The Theatre Journal Auto/Archive: Herbert Blau,” in Theatre Journal and “On Directing Beckett: An Interview” located in Blau’s Sails from the Herring Fleet. His recently published autobiography, As If: An Autobiography, Volume 1 examines the first half of his life in greater detail than The Impossible Theater and gives a more complete picture of Blau’s childhood and family. This book would have been used more frequently in this study to provide more background on Blau’s thoughts and upbringing had it been available during the research process. Take Up the Bodies: Theater at the Vanishing Point is a good source for his work at Lincoln Center and Blooded Thought: Occasions of Theatre is an examination of Blau’s theory on the language of gestures and the importance of words. Anthony Kubiak gives a thorough summary of Blau’s early theories contained in these two books in his article entitled, “Impossible Seductions: The Work of Herbert Blau.” Kubiak focuses on interpreting what he terms as “the more salient points in Blau’s work” and identifies Blau’s paradoxical writing style and thought processes. As mentioned above, The Dubious Spectacle: Extremities of Theater,
1976-2000 gives a fair sampling of Blau's theories on theatre and is an excellent introduction to his theoretical work.

There is a Master's thesis by Ronald John Bazarini entitled, "The Organization and Management of the Actor's Workshop of the San Francisco Drama Guild Incorporated," written in 1957 that offers business aspects of TAW but is also a good source for cast lists of early productions. Three other dissertations contain sections on Blau. Chapter three of Sheila Rebecca McNerney's 1999 study entitled, "Institutionalizing the American Theatre: the Ford Foundation and the Resident Professional Theatre, 1957-1965," examines key grant programs using TAW's grant as one of the models. Saraleigh Carney analyzes LCR as part of the larger Lincoln Center Corporation in her 1976 study entitled, "The Repertory Theater of Lincoln Center: Aesthetics and Economics, 1960-1973. Chapter Eight of her dissertation focuses on Blau and Irving's tenure as directors. Lastly, Jan Karen Cronacher studies Blau's interpretation of the Theatre of the Absurd in his book The Impossible Theater as part of her study on re-visualizing Absurdist theatre. Her 1993 study is entitled, "These Missiles Should Be Comic or Absurd': Absurdist Drama and the Bomb." All of these studies are useful in that they provide information on various aspects of Blau and his work with TAW and LCR. None of these dissertations provide a detailed examination of Blau's evolution as a director, from novice to professional, in terms of his developing theories, attitude, and encounters as an American director during the time of the Cold War. This study rounds out the picture of Blau by clearly focusing on his directorial trajectory from his beginnings at TAW, through three of his most important productions.
in terms of directorial development, and, finally, as a nationally recognized, highly controversial director.

Aside from these scholarly studies, there are several interviews with Blau that were conducted for scholarly journals. One of note is Bonnie Marranca and Gautam Dasgupta’s interview with Blau entitled, “The Play of Thought: An Interview with Herbert Blau,” published in a 1992 issue of Performing Arts Journal. This is a thorough and engaging interview in which Blau discusses his directorial work, writing, and theories.

The numerous articles and critiques of Blau’s directorial work in newspapers such as The San Francisco Chronicle and The New York Times are invaluable sources for information on how others viewed and analyzed his work as a director. The critiques and articles about TAW’s early years by Luther Nichols and Paine Knickerbocker of The San Francisco Chronicle are especially useful because they offer outside opinions of Blau’s work in relation to other San Franciscan theatres. Luther Nichols was also a contributor to the Burns Mantle Yearbook series of best plays published by Dodd-Mead. His assessment of San Franciscan theatre as opposed to New York theatre greatly aided this study’s understanding of how the two compared.

Jacob Adams’s documentary film on Waiting for Godot at San Quentin prison entitled “The Impossible Itself,” has interviews with Blau and cast members Eugene Roche (deceased), Robert Symonds (deceased), and Alan Mandell. The men offer priceless insights into what it was really like to play Godot for an audience of prisoners. This excellent film is also filled with poignant shots of the prison with snippets of dialogue from the play voiced over the scenes. Adams wrote, produced, and filmed the
documentary for his Master’s degree project. Though the film is not in distribution, it can be tracked down via the internet.

This study, though focused on Blau and his directing career, also concerns the Cold War and America’s search for an identity after World War II. Many articles, books, and government pamphlets were utilized in order to gain an understanding of this all important time period. Noted Cold War historian John Lewis Gaddis’s, *The Cold War: A New History*, is a straight forward, easy to read account of the reasons behind the Cold War - its beginnings, purpose, and ending. This book is highly recommended as an excellent and informative read.

Newspaper articles and assessments of the Cold War contained in *The New York Times* and *The San Francisco Chronicle* as well as the articles in *Time* and *Life* magazines define the thoughts, attitudes, and happenings of American society at that time. Newspapers and magazines are somewhat notorious for being slanted toward a certain viewpoint. Researchers must remain as objective as possible when reading the material, no matter what their personal political leanings might be. For this reason, this study also includes books written by American statesmen and diplomats that give a fairer, firsthand account of the happenings of the Cold War. Examples include the works of George F. Kennan, Edward R. Barrett, and Chester Bowles. The government documents, particularly the reports on the United States Information Agency (USIA) and the brochures for the Brussels World’s Fair, assess the hopes for America’s postwar identity.

The personal phone interview with Herbert Blau answered many initial questions and included his introduction to and contact information for people connected with the
Workshop. Blau answered pertinent questions that came up throughout the research period via subsequent emails and sent his program notes and his translation of *Danton’s Death* through the mail. His willingness to help in the research for this study has been invaluable.

A research grant from the University of Illinois, Urbana/Champaign enabled a trip to New York City and the New York Public Library at Lincoln Center. Caution is suggested to any researcher hoping to find program notes or production notebooks listed in the library’s online catalogue as “The Actor’s Workshop Collection.” Despite the herculean efforts of the research librarians to locate the materials listed in the online catalogue, most of the material was gone. When queried, Blau said that he had taken back most of the important materials in order to aid in the writing of his autobiography, which was recently released. What are contained in the few boxes the diligent librarians were able to locate in a storage unit down Broadway are budget sheets, rejection notes for submitted plays, and subscriber information. There were also pictures of some of the productions that were quite helpful in imagining the production values of the shows at TAW.

Though the collection at the library was disappointing, the personal backstage tour of the Vivien Beaumont Theatre was very illuminating and made the trip worthwhile. The stage manager and lighting designer for the Beaumont were both very helpful. The opportunity to walk the massive stage, try out the acoustics, and explore the underground passages of the theatre greatly aided the understanding of the criticism of Blau’s production of *Danton’s Death* presented at the Beaumont in 1965. The same personal experience aided in the discussion of The Marine’s Memorial Theatre in San
Francisco. The ability to see the space, walk the stage, and explore the backstage areas added depth and understanding to the discussions of TAW’s productions at that theatre.

The personal interviews conducted with Josephine Harris, a friend and colleague of Blau’s, and Tony Award winning director and member of TAW, Daniel Sullivan, provided many insights into Blau as a person as well as a director. Harris’s interviews were especially helpful in understanding the type of person Blau was to his students, his actors, and his friends. Daniel Sullivan, apart from offering his experience as a cast member of Danton’s Death, gave many insightful thoughts on Blau’s direction of the play and why Blau’s brand of theatre did not work in New York. Personal interviews with other members of TAW have been difficult to come by as most of the people who worked with Blau at that time have, sadly, died. However, I was able to contact a few people via mail and email through the generous help of Dick Blau, Blau’s son. Bert Brauer, Priscilla Pointer, and Helen White (friend of Beatrice Manley) responded enthusiastically to my requests. Though the information from these sources is slight due to their advanced age, the comments were concise and loaded with meaning that helped round out the picture of Blau as a young director.

Lastly, the library at the University of Illinois - one of the largest research libraries in the country - provided many resources, books, and knowledgeable research librarians. The newspaper archives provided the critiques of the shows at TAW and LCR, although a more thorough, ready collection of Bay area newspapers, such as the Sacramento Bee and the San Francisco Examiner, would have been helpful. The
sources on the Cold War, books as well as newspaper articles, were ample and aided greatly in this research.

Even with these rich sources to draw from, there are limitations that must be placed on this study. As mentioned above, the purpose of this study is to pinpoint the evolution of Blau’s directorial style in relation to three important productions of his career within the context of the Cold War. This study, therefore, does not explore every production Blau directed at TAW from 1952-1965.

The seeds of Blau’s theoretical writings are evident in his development as a director even from his earliest days as a Chemical Engineer major at New York University when he saw one play and simply thought that he could do better. Blau has been trying to better his understanding of theatre throughout his long association with the medium. This study, because it examines three important productions, offers a more focused view of Blau as a director and his efforts to find a directorial style that was uniquely his own. Blau’s work is not placed in context with other important experimental theatre directors of the time, like Zelda Fitzlander, José Quintero, or Judith Malina and Julian Beck. Though these directors were also seminal in the decentralization of American theatre, it is Blau’s work alone that is the focus at this time. This study ends with Blau’s first production at LCR in the fall of 1965. Blau remained at LCR for two years and directed other shows that are not included here. It is not necessary to analyze these productions as it is fairly evident that Danton’s Death set the tone for the rest of his tenure at LCR.

This study introduces theatre scholarship to the practical director behind the theory and examines areas such as: Blau’s directorial approach to theatre, specifically,
the non-traditional material he chose; whether or not the pervading fear and uncertainty created by the Cold War infected his artistic work; and, whether he lost sight of his original goal to present thought-provoking, intelligent theatre once he hit the national stage. The timeframe - 1952-65 - while not encompassing all of Blau’s directorial work, covers his start in theatre and his many early successes to, for all intents and purposes, his end as a professional director and his inability to translate his particular brand of theatre to the national stage. This analysis of Blau includes his now famous production of Beckett’s *Waiting for Godot* at San Quentin prison but more importantly, gives a thorough examination of his American premiere of Brecht’s *Mother Courage*, a seminal moment in American theatre history that is often overlooked in theatre scholarship. Through this study, theatre scholars will learn about the sociopolitical atmosphere Blau was working in at the time and what he thought about his work in relation to these times and the limitations imposed on him.

The probing work accomplished by Herbert Blau as he developed his directorial style at the height of the Cold War has not been given due credit in American theatre history texts. He desired, along with Jules Irving, to: 1) emulate and keep strong the ensemble ideas forged by Harold Clurman and the Group Theatre; 2) utilize discussion as a way to delve into the text at a time when discussion was looked upon as borderline subversive; and, 3) introduce to American theatre through production such new playwrights as Bertolt Brecht, Samuel Beckett, Marie Irene Fornes, and Harold Pinter, playwrights whose works have since become staples in theatre. These areas, when examined closely in the following chapters, present a clearer portrait of a man whose later theoretical writings have been described by Daniel Sullivan as “impenetrable” but
have ultimately been used by noted theatre theorists such as Richard Schechner, Elin Diamond, and Phillip Zarrilli to launch new theories that are currently reshaping and redefining the American theatre in the twenty-first century.\textsuperscript{16}

\textsuperscript{16} Daniel Sullivan, personal interview, 2 April 2007.
Chapter One: Off the Balcony and into the Abyss

“Anything you put on stage is different from what’s up in my brain.”¹

“I don’t give a damn what you feel! Feelings are cheap, I only care what you think!”²

The experiences Herbert Blau has had as a director during his long relationship with the theatre have been dutifully recorded in the many books and articles he has written on the subject. He relates these experiences with sharp intellect and a keen eye, both justifying and condemning the work he has done in the theatre. His long, run-on sentences (at times filling half a page without any punctuation marks) explores his experiences and freely reveals his deep and varied thoughts on American theatre - its faults, follies, and unrealized potential. Blau’s belief that, “so far as it can go, the idea of theatre is - in its most carnal embodiments - to de-realize or de-materialize the world, though the most powerful thought of theatre, what drives the theatre mad, is that the world only lets it go so far,” is the essence of his definition of the word “impossible.”³ Blau felt the frustration he voiced in this statement most strongly during his years as a director in the theatre, where thought collided with practice and ideas succumbed to the limitations of the physical production.

The ways in which Blau expressed his thoughts on stage were very much a part of the fabric and philosophy of The Actor’s Workshop of San Francisco (TAW), the experimental theatre company that Blau created along with his partner, Jules Irving, in 1952. Dean Goodman states in his book, San Francisco Stages: “most people who

¹ Herbert Blau, personal interview, 17 July 2008.


knew them will concede that Blau was the intellect of the two, the iconoclast whose influence and choice of plays were daring enough to bring the Workshop to national attention. “It is true that, in time, Blau became an accomplished, albeit controversial, director and one of the defining voices of TAW. And, it would be faithful to the overall theme of this study to say that he had been actively immersed in theatre all his life and knew of its impossibilities and lack of direction at the time he started. However, this was not the case. Blau was eighteen when he saw his first Broadway play and simply thought he could do better. He did not know what type of director he wanted to be when he tentatively started in theatre or what styles or concepts would create his directorial style. He only had a vague feeling that something was missing from American theatre and that he could help change it for the better. By taking a look at his inauspicious beginning as an aspiring Chemical Engineer at New York University, through his years as a Master’s candidate in playwriting, to budding producer/director of a neophyte theatre company, this chapter identifies the key moments, plays, and people that helped Blau’s directorial style begin to take shape.

A Brief Biography

Herbert Blau was born in Brooklyn, NY in 1926 to Yetta and Joseph Blau. Joseph Blau was a hardworking plumber. In his recently published autobiography, Blau


5 In three different writings of Blau’s—The Impossible Theater, “The Theatre Journal Auto/Archive: Herbert Blau,” and As If: An Autobiography, Volume I—he mentions the play as being The Moon is Blue starring Barbara Bel Geddes. However, this play was not written until 1951 and then produced on Broadway from 1951-53, well after Blau had moved to San Francisco. The Internet Broadway Data Base lists another play with Barbara Bel Geddes, Mrs. January and Mr. X, an original play that ran from March 31, 1944 - May 6, 1944, that better fits the timeline: 1) Blau was eighteen in 1944; and, 2) the Burgess Meredith performance in Playboy of the Western World Blau saw after his first show, was on Broadway from 1946-47. It is therefore more likely that Blau’s first Broadway play going experience was Mrs. January and Mr. X.
describes his father as a non-religious Jewish man with a “unionized inclination to the Marxist Left, though he was hardly the bleeding heart you’d want to call a pinko.” 6

Joseph was a voracious reader who avidly read the newspaper from beginning to end each day - including the ads and the classifieds - only to definitively declare: “They’re all lying.” 7 Blau states that his own political instinct was subtly influenced by his father and his union leanings. 8 Blau describes his mother as a warm, caring woman who loved to wear heavy makeup and admire herself in the mirror. He also lovingly remembers her as the best shopper yet the laziest woman in Brownsville. 9

As a teenager, Blau had desires to be a ballplayer - specifically either basketball or football - but he did not have the height or the speed to do either on a professional level. By his own admission, Blau regards his younger self as being “shifty, tricky, heads-up, smart.” 10 At the age of sixteen he entered New York University (University Height’s campus) to pursue a degree in Chemical Engineering. He determined that if he could not play sports, he would write about them so he signed on to be the Sports Editor for the campus newspaper, the Height’s Daily News.

His college career was interrupted by a two year stint in the army as a paratrooper instructor during World War II. During this time he also wrote for the Fort Benning newspaper; which had two benefits according to him: 1) it kept him alive as he was a writer and not in active battle (although he laments not having seen any action);

6 Blau, As If 27.

7 Blau, Impossible 107.


9 Blau, As If, 13, 15.

and, 2) it made him realize that he could write well. When he returned to NYU to complete his degree, he became the editor-in-chief of The Daily News. His column, initially titled, “As the Wind Blaus” but quickly changed to “As the Wind Blows,” covered topics that typify the concerns of college students at that time. Yet, in a moment of reflection, Blau said he is surprised by how political his writings were, even back then. 11

Working on the paper not only proved that he could write but, by happy coincidence, it was the way in which Blau transitioned from a career in Chemical Engineering to one in the theatre. The previous editor of the paper was a man by the name of Leonard Heidemann, a budding playwright at the time, who encouraged Blau to write plays of his own. Blau did, Heidemann liked them, and suggested he submit them to Yale and Stanford as he had done to get a fellowship to write for a year or so. As it turns out, Blau did submit them and was accepted by both programs.12

Another happy coincidence occurred when Jules Irving walked into the newspaper office seeking publicity for an upcoming production he was directing. As Blau relates the story, he told Irving of his interest in playwriting so Irving suggested he learn more about the theatre by being an extra in his production of Robert Sherwood’s The Petrified Forest.13 Blau was not at all comfortable onstage but the friendship that sprung up between he and Irving would be life-changing for both men.

He remembers not liking Irving at first because, as he said, they were “totally different people.”\textsuperscript{14} Irving was a handsome, good natured young man who studied English Literature and had had moderate success on Broadway as a child actor. Blau was an aspiring Chemical Engineer from a decidedly non-artistic background. Despite these differences, the two men became great friends; a friendship that lasted until Irving’s death in 1978 which Blau has lamented as “too soon.”\textsuperscript{15} When Blau told Irving of his dilemma in choosing a school to attend, it was Irving who suggested Stanford because of the California sunshine and because he was going there for his Master’s in American Literature. Blau agreed and made his plans to move to California.

Feeling a bit apprehensive at the prospect of entering a Master’s program in a field he admittedly knew nothing about, Blau quickly read through an anthology of modern American plays and took himself to see his second Broadway production, the 1946 showing of \textit{Playboy of the Western World}, because it starred Burgess Meredith, a name he recognized from the movies. This incident was prophetic not because it suddenly opened his eyes to the power of the stage and gave him the inspiration to be a part of it all, but because: 1) he would later work with Burgess Meredith and come to regard him as “a pain in the ass” because he drank; and, 2) \textit{Playboy} was his choice for his directorial debut with TAW.\textsuperscript{16} Armed with his Chemical Engineering degree and a play-going experience of two plays in his back pocket, Blau headed to Stanford to take up a Master’s in playwriting.

\textsuperscript{14} Herbert Blau, personal interview, 17 July 2008.
\textsuperscript{15} Herbert Blau, personal interview, 17 July 2008.
\textsuperscript{16} Herbert Blau, personal interview, 17 July 2008.
Blau’s ultimate and very public discontent with the state of theatre in America started early on in his “Development of Dramatic Art” class at Stanford. He dutifully memorized a chronological listing of facts all the while thinking to himself that his teacher and fellow students had no idea about theatre history. There is an amusing story about when he learned that the Romans invented the auleum. When Blau asked why they did such a thing - to cover the action only to then reveal it - no one, not even his theatre professor, could answer. He knew at that point that they did not want to know. Blau stated that the theatre students were not interested in discovering “why the curtain,” the, as he termed it, “historical accretion of value” that caused the Romans to create such an invention. This lack of inquiry, anathema to Blau’s inquisitive nature, led him to quickly realize that there was “not too much intellectual in the theatre department” and added to his growing feeling of discontent with the way things were in theatre; ideas that he would later expound upon in his writings.17 Although he enjoyed sitting in on rehearsals and watching the actors work (especially, as he observed, the “lovely women among them”) he grew discontent by the lack of discussion after the rehearsals about the play itself.18 Discussions focused more on the technical quality of the production (lights, costumes, bits of stage blocking) and not the reasons for doing the play in the first place; a practice he did not agree with and would later rectify with his own company at TAW. This discontent or, more precisely, disillusionment with the theatre would lead him back to Brooklyn for a time to live with his parents and re-think his choice of careers.


One of the most important things Blau got out of the drama program at Stanford was an introduction to his future wife, Beatrice Manley. Manley, whom he described as “five years older and quite glamorous,” was an Equity actress from New York City.\(^{19}\) Manley was twenty years old when she had her Broadway debut in Maxwell Anderson’s original play, *The Eve of Saint Mark* in 1941. Manley was fortunate as a young actress to get involved with the seminal producing group, The Playwrights Company, founded by Anderson, Elmer Rice, S. N. Behrman, Robert E. Sherwood, and Sidney Howard in 1938. She did two other plays with the group: a new adaptation of Chekhov’s *The Cherry Orchard* directed by Eva le Gallienne (1944) and an original work, *Eastward in Eden*, by Dorothy Gardner (1947). It was shortly after the close of this play that Manley accepted a position in Stanford University’s new artist-in-residency program. It was at Stanford that Manley met Blau. He ran lights for the production of *As You Like It* in which she played the character, Rosalind. She allowed Blau to question and discuss the play with her and found him to be possessed of a curious and intelligent mind. When he took the break from Stanford and moved back to Brooklyn, he called Manley and they started dating.

While in New York, Blau and Manley attended plays together and would discuss them from an actor’s point of view, giving Blau an education into how an actor approaches the script and creates a character through emotional memory and physicality. This first-hand information from an accomplished Equity actress, like Manley, helped him begin to understand the actor’s role in theatre. Blau’s relationship with Manley - working and personal - would prove to be indispensable throughout his directing career.

\(^{19}\) Herbert Blau, personal interview, 17 July 2008.
Though this practical initiation into the theatre was a much needed component to his education, there was still the matter of his unfinished Master's degree back at Stanford where they were still producing the plays he had written. At the urgings of Hubert Heffner, Blau's playwriting professor at Stanford, Blau returned but refused to take any more classes in the theatre department. Manley, after a time, moved out to be with him and discovered he was happily engrossed in a poetry class in the English Department taught by noted poet and member of the New Critics, Ivor Winters. He completed his thesis play - a three-act drama entitled, "Out of the Rain" - and graduated with his Master's degree in 1949.

He obtained his PhD, also from Stanford, in 1954 in English/American literature under the tutelage of Winters. Blau credits Winters with having taught him that “the most abstract ideas are worth fighting about;” a conviction that would become part of Blau’s directorial arsenal against actors who resisted his ideas because they were abstract.\textsuperscript{20} Blau had many heated discussions with Winters about the theatre while writing his dissertation, “W.B. Yeats and T.S. Eliot: Poetic Drama and Modern Poetry.” Winters thought the dramatic form was “inferior” and the theatre “too silly to be corrupt.”\textsuperscript{21} Blau defended theatre to his mentor partly because he was married to an actress at the time and because he enjoyed the excitement of the live performance. But he also felt, even at this early stage in his theatre experience, that he was defending something in which he did not truly believe.\textsuperscript{22} As mentioned earlier, Blau had already

\textsuperscript{20} Blau, Impossible 115.

\textsuperscript{21} Blau, Impossible 115.

\textsuperscript{22} Blau, Impossible 115.
experienced the lack of inquiry into the “why” of theatre in his theatre classes at Stanford. He was also beginning to feel that much of the dramatic literature he read, specifically American drama, was not substantive enough to bother with. This feeling later grew into a strong conviction, based on these first experiences with theatre study, that American theatre was, as he has termed it, “a stronghold of non-ideas.”

While studying for his PhD, Blau became a tenure-track professor in English and World Literature at San Francisco State College. Irving, having also obtained his Master’s degree, became a professor of Theatre at SF State. One day, according to Blau’s written account in The Impossible Theater, Irving came to him and said that he and another teacher were planning to start a theatre in a town near San Francisco. Blau, as he was listening to Irving’s plans, envisioned the theatre would be a stock company with the usual fare of popular Broadway musicals and comedies offered. But his attention really piqued when Irving told him it would probably require about $20,000 to get started. In a moment that Blau has described as “invincible ignorance if not envy for my being left out,” he told Irving that they could start a theatre company together in San Francisco for practically nothing. However, instead of a stock company, they would create an ensemble company; one that would concentrate on experimentation and training. In his later recollections of the moment recorded in the 2004 article, “The Theatre Journal Auto/Archive: Herbert Blau,” Blau states that it was he who approached Irving first with the idea of starting up a theatre because he was fearful his wife would move back to New York. There is no mention of this story in The Impossible

23 Blau, Impossible 7.

24 Blau, Impossible 115.
Theater, though Blau did mention in a personal interview that his wife was rapidly growing discontent with the paucity of good theatres to work for in San Francisco and was on the verge of moving back to New York. Blau jokingly suggested to Irving that they “sit and talk for nineteen hours” about the idea, referring to the famous Stanislavski and Nemirovich-Danchenko eighteen-hour lunch meeting on June 22, 1897 that was the start of the Moscow Art Theatre. Blau successfully convinced Irving and The Actor’s Workshop of San Francisco began. Blau thought if they could create a theatre that provided training, experimentation and challenging roles for actors, Manley and other professional actors would be inclined to stay in San Francisco, thus creating a local pool of good talent to draw from for his theatre. Manley not only stayed but became, in time, one of the Workshop’s leading and most respected actors.

“A Policy of Slow Growth”

When Blau and Irving started The Actor’s Workshop of San Francisco, their purpose was simple - to give actors a place to experiment without the financial and artistic pressures of a full, public production. They envisioned a true workshop based on the ideals of The Group Theatre, the experimental theatre founded by Harold Clurman, Cheryl Crawford and Lee Strasberg in operation from 1931-1941. The Group Theatre worked off of the principals of the Moscow Art Theatre and the teachings of Constantin Stanislavsky. Ensemble acting and the importance of working together, not individually, was a key component of the Group’s philosophy. It is this idea that Blau and Irving hoped to incorporate into TAW. They wanted a place where actors could

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hone their craft under knowledgeable guidance and group critique; where they could experiment with good dramatic literature of their choosing; and, where they could feel free to explore who they were as artists within true ensemble fashion. That is the reason behind the singular possessive form, “Actor’s,” in the name. It signified that here was a theatre dedicated to the craft of the actor.

Their first official meeting was held on January 16, 1952 in an old loft above a Judo Academy on Divisadero Street. Blau and Irving each paid eighteen dollars a month out of their teacher’s pay to rent the space. Blau and Irving invited approximately six actors to attend the meeting: Beatrice Manley (Blau’s wife), Priscilla Pointer (Irving’s wife), Hal J. Todd (drama student at Stanford), Richard Glyer (teacher at SF State), Paul Cox (actor/playwright), and Dan Whiteside (student at S.F. State). Actors in the new group were not required to pay a fee (all expenses at the start were covered by Blau and Irving) nor were they required to work a certain number of hours painting sets or gathering costumes. Most of the daily labor tasks such as cleaning the loft, set construction, and so forth were handled by Irving and Blau. Blau was even in charge of hauling coal up to the loft’s fireplace for warmth. But, as indicated by the programs from some of the earlier productions, members of the company and subsequently, many friends and volunteers did help out with the tasks of running the theatre. The actors were required to have outside jobs that gave them some financial security so that they could give their full mental attention to rehearsals. They were not permitted to be part of

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27 Fowler 37-38. According to Fowler, Cox would leave the company after the first production, citing artistic differences between himself and Irving in the way the material was directed.

28 Fowler, footnote 13. Fowler’s dissertation gives an adequate explanation regarding the exact number of initial invited members. Blau states there were eight actors at the initial meeting in “The Theatre Journal Auto/Archive: Herbert Blau.”

29 Fowler 77.
any other theatre company or single production, even as a visiting artist, while they were connected to TAW. This policy was made to ensure the commitment of the actors to the ensemble; a lofty goal in the beginning but one that, sadly, did not survive the lure of a paying acting job and caused much shifting of actors through the years.

From the start, TAW was not an amateur group with amateur goals of putting on a show with whomever they could get to audition and for whatever money they could collect. The Workshop had grander goals in mind. It was created to be a study/experimental group where involvement was, at first, by invitation only based on qualities that the partners felt complimented the ensemble they were trying to build. They fitted themselves out to be a professional resident repertory theatre; something they felt was sorely needed but lacking in San Francisco’s theatre scene. Their hopes for the fledgling company were to put artistic integrity first; create a season of plays that was both experimental and engaging; to become an integral part of the artistic community in San Francisco; and, to prove that professional quality theatre could be produced locally, 3,000 miles off Broadway. They wanted to compete with Broadway by being different than Broadway; to distinguish themselves by their eclectic play selection and commitment to locally produced theatre using talented San Franciscan, not New York, actors. According to Josephine Harris, friend of Herb Blau and Bea Manley and professor of American Literature at SF State, Blau and Irving were both highly intellectual, talented men who saw the workshop as nothing less than a budding professional company. She admired the standards they set for the company from the start and became one of their most ardent supporters.30

30 Josephine Harris, personal interview, 20 June 2010.
In every working relationship there is usually (though, granted, not always) one partner who is more outspoken, gregarious, and who gets along with everyone yet keeps a firm hand on the operations of the business. The other partner is the quiet, observant one who is more comfortable being in the background. Jules Irving was by most accounts a very affable, energetic, and talented young man. He was the front man for the group; the visible spokesman and the savvy businessman who was also a wizard poker player. Daniel Sullivan recalled that when the Workshop had trouble meeting its budget, Irving would go to Reno and, as he admiringly stated, would “come back with the solution to the budget in $50 bills.”

Irving was known for his considerable acting abilities and his affable personality (his nickname was “Buddy”). He was a teacher/director/actor/businessman whose intelligence complemented Blau’s own. He was a practical man of the theatre in that performance technique was his main concern. He taught a full load of classes at SF State during the day and then spent nights rehearsing and conducting business for TAW. Even though this study focuses on Herbert Blau, it cannot be ignored that Jules Irving was as important, if not more so in the beginning, as Blau in getting TAW off the ground as a producing theatre. This study fully acknowledges this point.

Josephine Harris was quick to describe Herbert Blau as a “formidable intellect” who could not “keep his mind in abeyance.” She described him as an easily approachable man personally, but recalled that he seldom engaged in small talk (“he
made short shift of it”) and said that “he would never come down out of the imperium.”
Daniel Sullivan laughed when he remembered Blau’s “child-like fascination” whenever he spoke with someone: “His mind was working so quickly that he could almost speak along with you as you spoke. You would hear this constant echo of your own ideas as you talked with him because he would be repeating them back to you.” These few short statements give a clear picture of Blau as someone who is always thinking of the next thing to say or do. It seems there is little free play in Blau, that he is all business. However, Harris also commented that he was a well-liked professor at SF State because he was “patient and kind.” On the other hand, Harris stated that it was very hard for the students to get accustomed to him: “He didn’t mean to be intimidating, but he was.” Blau has a dichotomous nature - strong yet approachable, patient and kind but intimidating and, as Harris commented, “tough as nails” but “really a pussycat.”

Blau was known for his temper in his years at TAW and LCR. Harris as well as Blau mentioned the personal fights that he and Manley would engage in over seemingly small matters. For Blau, it was the arguing that was most important, even over winning the argument. This passion for arguing translated into one of the most important elements of Blau’s budding directorial style – his dialectical discussions about the work with the actors at TAW. However, not all of the actors were up to this type of theoretical discussion of the material. Sullivan recalled the frustration some of the actors (though,

33 Josephine Harris, personal interview, 20 June 2010.
34 Daniel Sullivan, personal interview, 2 April 2007.
35 Josephine Harris, personal interview, 20 June 2010.
not himself personally) felt concerning Blau’s approach to the material and his expectations for the way they approached the material as well:

Herb was a good extemporary speaker but he would address the company through written theses. We would usually all gather and Herb would then read opening remarks that would define the reasons for doing the plays that were being done. In approaching a text, very often, Herb would be interested in talking about the ironies of the text and I always felt that the appreciation of that is the appreciation that an audience has of a text. But for an actor that’s not where you go. You’re not playing the ironic content of the piece, you’re playing the action of the piece.³⁶

This frustration of having his ideas fall on deaf ears, or worse, ones that did not agree with his point of view is part of the impossibility of theatre that Blau has written about so often. When not actively engaged in argumentation Blau was, according to Harris, a very nice man. His dichotomous personality would cause him to gain strong friends but lose others, put critics on the defensive, and cause him to question his ability to relate to actors.

Though seemingly disparate in their personalities, Irving and Blau shared many similarities. Both were intelligent, committed individuals who believed fully in TAW. They had strong aspirations about the type of company they wanted TAW to be and both had the energy and drive to accomplish their goals. Both men were teachers as well as theatre directors and because of this had a broad knowledge of literature and a wide pool of friends from which to get ideas. Plus, they genuinely liked each other and worked well together.

Irving assumed the job of Managing Director while Blau was Consulting Director. Even though creation of an ensemble company was their goal for the artistic side of TAW, on the business side, Irving and Blau ran the company as a tight partnership. They were the decision makers for the company from play selection to design to where to seat the audience. The actors were expected to trust in their decisions and concentrate on their work as an acting ensemble. Irving, having come from a professional theatre background, took the lead in play selection, directing and was the driving force behind getting the company on its feet business-wise. He got to know area businessmen, newspaper reviewers, and councilmen. Blau, although he admitted that he did not know much about the theatre (“it was all news to me”) had seen enough at Stanford to convince him that theatre, in ways he was beginning to discover, was lacking in intellectual query. 37 His goal was to approach theatre in a more thought-provoking way through open dialectical discussion of the material and group critiques of the work. Blau’s beginning musings about the state of American theatre coupled with Irving’s practical theatre experience and business savvy gave the fledgling company a surprisingly solid base from which to start.

Blau’s first duty with the company was as dramaturg because, as he recalls, the actors “sort of liked the things I said” and because, at least for a time, he was content to sit back, observe rehearsals and absorb everything he could. 38 He wrote the program notes for each production and it was through these that he began to develop his personal views toward the dramatic material. Evident in these early notes is Blau’s desire, in true dramaturg fashion, to teach the play to the audience; to give them

37 Herbert Blau, preface, Take Up, xix.
something to think about when they viewed the production. He discussed the themes and ideas of the material rather than the actual production they were about to see and hoped to guide the audience into thinking about the words while visually absorbing the production. The notes illustrate how his mind approached the material, what themes and ideas he chose to relate to, and what connections he made between the play and the society he was living in. Writing the program notes was invaluable practice for Blau in deciphering scripts and a stepping stone toward his becoming a director.

Blau and Irving led the critiques of the work after the shows where cast members would gather and discuss, albeit reluctantly at first, the work they had just done. This principle of getting to know the material and each other through discussion is another idea borrowed from the Group theatre, gratefully acknowledged by Blau in his keynote address at a conference honoring Harold Clurman in 1993 at City University of New York. Although, unlike the Group, Blau felt that some of TAW’s actors were not as open to discussion as he would have liked them to be. He said many of them felt that “the old liberal idea of ‘communication’ was a dodge” and that the only reason they talked over coffee was to mask their feelings of not being truly committed to their art. In the beginning the talking, which was supposed to inspire ensemble building, was merely talk. This harkens back to Blau’s time at Stanford as a Master’s student when he realized that actors did not really discuss the play, only the surface elements of the production. With his own company, he keenly felt the resistance to discussing ideas

40 Blau, Impossible 137.
and critiquing each other. When he asserted his ideas through his talks, the actors felt more like they were attending a lecture and many complained to Irving.

Some of the actors did not like this professor-student relationship and some simply did not understand what Blau was saying. As Sullivan recalled: “I think generally, people felt lost when they weren’t provided with a context that they could understand.”

Adult actors are not students in an undergraduate program at a local college. Many actors like to bring their own ideas to the discussion and, if what Blau and Irving truly wanted was an ensemble company, then it is understandable that the actors had trouble with Blau’s extensive talks. It is rather likely that, given the dissonance among some of the more experienced actors in the group, Blau’s talks were frowned upon for being lectures by someone who had, basically, just started in theatre.

It is curious that, throughout The Impossible Theater, there is a sense of insecurity that comes through whenever Blau discusses his relations with the actors; that he sensed that the actors did not like him. It was apparent to Blau that if he was to accomplish his goal of open communication and trust with each other he, along with his actors, had to rediscover the committed passion that he felt had been missing since the days of the Group Theatre. This point is explored more fully later in this study in the discussion of the plays Blau directed.

Blau struggled with questions of style and purpose for TAW while attending to the duties and responsibilities involved in starting a new theatre: “I spent the early part of my career working (with my partner Jules Irving) to form a company, to get plays on, to be able to pay the actors, to raise money, and to run a repertoire, at the same time thinking about (I’ll bracket the word) the ‘nature’ of theatre, what it should be or might

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Blau and Irving wanted TAW to be a professional theatre company based in San Francisco yet there was no methodology involved at first. Though they did think about the kind of style they should have, they waited to see what would develop from the work rather than impose a style on the company and then have to abide by it. Blau explained their unremarkable beginnings in his later thoughts:

We asked no existential question; we were recouping no cultural losses, toppling no icons, breaking no classifications, rewriting no history, assuaging no ontological guilt [...] We were not committed to the Absurd [...] there was no spite, no sickness, no Messianic rage, no Quest for Identity, no demonic style. There was no style at all.”

Unlike the Group Theatre and its desire from the start to change the intent and content of American theatre through their original works, Blau and company started with simple goals - to start a theatre company and do good work in San Francisco. They were an experimental group devoted to work, study, and exploration of the texts and though study was always first, eventual public production of the work was in the plans, as well.

This seems a rather pedantic start to a company that would later become known for its highly sophisticated play selection and penchant for discovering new or different works and introducing them to American audiences. Nor does it seem at all the beginning of Herbert Blau, a director who would later create controversies through his ideas not only within his own group, but in the public media and even the U. S. State Department. This self-professed “naiveté” was due to the fact that neither Irving nor

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43 Blau, Impossible 116.
Blau were particularly political beyond their living rooms at this time and did not see their new company as their political mouthpiece.44 As Blau said they did not stay up all night “holding revolutionary conversations on the place of the theater in American culture” and that when they started the Workshop, their hearts were in a “relatively conventional place.”45

Though style and mission were not quite articulated at first, the partners were secure in their ideas for the practical operation of the group. As Irving stated in an interview for The San Francisco Chronicle, he and Blau committed themselves to a “policy of slow growth” and were cautious of not “overreaching” the talents of the group’s members.46 The “slow growth” policy was not intended as a marketing ploy at first but rather as an honest attempt to serve the works as best they could through rehearsal, discussion and discovery.47 Both Blau and Irving believed in not venturing too quickly into the realm of a publicly producing theatre. Irving thought the actors were not ready and Blau was reticent to present himself as a director because of his limited practical experience. Both partners were content to keep a low profile for the group and slowly build the anticipation among their ever-growing invited audience. They rehearsed a show until they felt it was ready for an audience, a luxury that Blau lamented the quick loss of when TAW later grew in stature and expectations. It was hoped that through dialectical discussion of the material as an ensemble, the actors

44 Blau, Impossible 114.
45 Blau, Impossible 114-115.
46 Nichols, “Behind-the-Scene” 15.
47 Fowler 60-62. Irving and Blau freely admitted that, once they discovered that their invitation only policy created a buzz around town as to who they were and what they were doing, they used this angle in their first subscription letter sent to their mailing list.
would feel more secure in what they were presenting and why. This policy would not only give them the confidence to face the critique of an audience but help justify charging admission to their shows when the time came.

Luther Nichols, noted theatre critic for The San Francisco Chronicle at this time and enthusiastic early advocate of TAW, praised this work ethic in his first article about the new group entitled, “A Behind-the-Scene Look at the Plans for Actor’s Workshop.” He contrasted TAW with other theatre groups in the Bay area such as the San Francisco Repertory Co, the San Francisco Theater Association, Theater Arts Colony, and Theater-at-the-beach that had tried for professional standards but, as Nichols stated, “put box office ahead of quality” and ultimately, disbanded. Nichols was also of the mindset that good theatre was not solely a product of Broadway and felt strongly that San Francisco had the potential to be a great theatre town, but that no one had, as yet, demonstrated the talent to make it so.

The partners told Nichols that their company had both “the time and the talent” to develop into a professional company of quality and that they had turned down offers to be on local television and to play in bigger houses. From this early start, Blau and Irving presented their company as something different - a theatre that put study of the material first and production second. Impressed by the group’s artistic integrity, Nichols was hopeful that the new company would develop into the resident repertory company San Francisco sorely needed and had patiently awaited with, as he colorfully states in his article, “the necessary indulgence of a commuter waiting for a broken-down bus.”

48 Nichols, “Behind-the-Scene” 15.

49 Nichols, “Behind-the-Scene” 15.
so, with beginning principles barely formed, a troupe of young but eager actors, no
mission statement or purpose yet articulated, and what Blau snidely refers to as the “rat
shit” in the corners of the loft, the Actor’s Workshop of San Francisco was ready to
present its first play to a small, invited audience. 50

**The First Season**

As stated above, one of the ideas that Blau and Irving were sure of when they
started is what they told Luther Nichols in their initial interview - that they wanted to do
justice to good plays. They wanted to hone their skills on material they felt was
important and that they were attracted to, not necessarily the material that was popular
on Broadway or on regional tour. The first season (1952-1953) consisted of Phillip
Barry’s *Hotel Universe*, directed by Irving; John Van Druten’s *I am a Camera* directed by
Irving; Henrik Ibsen’s *Hedda Gabbler* directed by Irving; Federico Garcia Lorca’s *Blood
Wedding*, directed by Irving; John M. Synge’s *Playboy of the Western World*, directed
by Blau; Tennessee William’s *Summer and Smoke*, directed by Blau; and, Moliere’s *The
Miser*, directed by Irving. These first play choices demonstrate an already developing
eclectic taste in dramatic material with a wide mix of playwrights, eras, genres and
styles. These first plays illustrate TAW’s commitment to present material that explores
the psychological aspects of human nature and address such difficult issues as loss of
self, the struggle for identity, deceit, passion, and unrequited desire.

In time, TAW’s play selection (a mix of European Avant-garde, American realism,
new interpretations of the classics and new plays written specifically for the Workshop)

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50 Blau, *Impossible* 116. Blau refers to this often in many of his later writings on the start of the
Workshop, but this is the best description: “There was a little Sartrean nausea when we discovered rat
shit in the garbage beneath the stairs, but we swept it all away, garbage, shit, and all, in the common
interest.”
would become the company’s most important contribution to San Francisco’s theatre society and garner the company international recognition. As noted theatre critic Gordon Rogoff observed, the plays chosen by Blau and Irving “revealed a taste so far advanced as to suggest that all other resident companies were hanging back with the brutes.”

Blau states in a 1988 article that his hope with regards to play selection for TAW was to “articulate a repertoire as if it were a mission, and to relate the plays to each other in a dialectical way.” The dialectical discussions that Blau had with his company about each individual play eventually transferred to dialectical discussions between the themes of the plays themselves. This is another key element in Blau’s directorial style – finding the dialogue between the plays so as to create an almost seamless line of thought throughout the season. This plan gradually formed out of his continuing work with TAW, his teaching of world literature, and his avaricious appetite for reading. However, the very first few plays chosen by Jules Irving were selected for reasons as simple as they had good parts for all of the actors, they could be costumed using the personal wardrobes of the actors, and they could be staged without any other scenic resources but a flat or two (borrowed from SF State) and the unused brick fireplace in the tiny loft that they rented. These were the factors behind the choice of Phillip Barry’s Hotel Universe as the premiere presentation of the Actor’s Workshop of San Francisco.

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53 Blau, Impossible 139.
Hotel Universe played on Broadway from April 14, 1930 until June, 1930. It is a semi-realistic, semi-mystical play about a group of American expatriates that visit a friend who is caring for her dying father at a rented villa in the south of France. The characters in this play are Barry's nod to the Lost Generation, a term coined by Gertrude Stein and popularized by writers such as Ernest Hemingway and F. Scott Fitzgerald. They are an eclectic mix of witty, urbane, disillusioned individuals who are each carrying incidents from their past that have haunted them throughout their lives and are preventing them from finding true happiness. The villa, which was once a small hotel named L'Hôtel de Univers, is rumored to have an otherworldly atmosphere that causes its guests to fall into fantasies and reenact those moments from their pasts that they wish to forget. In turn, each character is helped through a particular fantasy from their past by one or more of the group and each comes to some kind of closure and re-discovery of a reason to live.

Hotel Universe is a strong ensemble piece in that each character in it is equally as important as the next; one of the reasons Irving chose the play for the Workshop. The dialogue is smart and sarcastic and the story explores religious intolerance, suicide, love, and child abuse. The fantasy reenactments include sleepwalking, reliving a childhood game, physical fights, and speaking out against a dead parent; fantasies that are creative to stage and allow for exploration of the human psyche.

Although Blau later described the choice as “almost an accident,” he did find a correlation between the lost souls searching for meaning in the play and the feeling of “spiritual drift” he felt among the members of TAW. Blau, Impossible 139. He validated the choice by saying
that the play spoke to the group’s own uncertainty about who they were and what they were trying to say.

TAW’s presentation of Hotel Universe played to an invited audience of fifty people on February 28, 1952. The cast was as follows:

- Ann Field……………………………………………………………………….Priscilla Pointer
- Pat Farley………………………………………………………………………..John Clark
- Stephen Field……………………………………………………………………..Hal J. Todd
- Lily Malone……………………………………………………………………..Beatrice Manley
- Norman Rose ………………………………………………………………………..Paul Cox
- Hope Ames ………………………………………………………………………..Claire Schwartz
- Felix……………………………………………………………………………….Dan Whiteside
- Alice Kendall……………………………………………………………………..Mary Lawler
- Tom Ames…………………………………………………………………………Richard Glyer\(^{55}\)

The group rehearsed the play for six weeks merely as an exercise at first with no intention of performing it in front of an audience.\(^{56}\) However, after a few weeks of rehearsal, the partners came to realize that internal critique, though helpful and nurturing, was not as powerful as performing in front of an audience and they decided to invite people to come see their work.

The audience for this first presentation was made up of personal friends of the cast who had some knowledge or association with the theatre. Although critics were not formally invited, Luther Nichols was permitted to view the exercise. However, Irving

\(^{55}\) Fowler 41.

\(^{56}\) Fowler 42. Fowler states there were seven weeks of rehearsal but simple math reveals that between the workshop’s first meeting on January 16 and the presentation of Hotel Universe on February 28, there were 43 days equaling six weeks and one day, which is a fairly normal rehearsal period.
insisted Nichols not write about nor critique the presentation in keeping with TAW’s policy of letting the group grow as an ensemble without the watchful eye of the press judging every hesitant step. It was several months later, in an article dated September 7, 1952, that Nichols wrote about what he saw that night:

Some months ago this reviewer attended a private performance by an unusual actor’s group in San Francisco that left him all atingle. Many of the most discerning theater people in the Bay Area were there—it was by invitation only—and everyone we talked with agreed. Here was a new young group that showed thought, technique, a fine ensemble spirit, considerable talent, and, in short, just about everything one could ask of a budding repertory company. Nichols, all “atingle” at the possibilities the group presented, went on to say that the acting done by the troupe was better than the acting presented at the expensive, professional houses in San Francisco.57

After the presentation, Irving and Blau were offered donations (which they refused) and were asked to do the play again. The partners gratefully acknowledged the enthusiastic response but were content to move on to other material. They had accomplished what they wanted to do – they introduced their group to the public and were encouraged to keep going.

The next two plays - I am a Camera and Hedda Gabler - were Irving’s choices because he directed them and they could easily be done with the talents and resources of the company. Once again, there was no strong philosophical reason for choosing

57 Nichols, “Behind-the-Scene” 15.
either play.\textsuperscript{58} Blau had not, as of yet, exerted much influence in the play selection because he was not directing and he was content to let Irving take the lead. However, Blau admits to having more of a hand in choosing the next play, Lorca’s \textit{Blood Wedding}.\textsuperscript{59} It was not surprising to him that, even though most of the actors in the company had studied theatre in college, they had barely even heard of Lorca much less read any of his plays. This lack of association with global dramatic literature, Blau later recalled, was “symptomatic of the American theater of the early fifties.”\textsuperscript{60} \textit{Blood Wedding} was a success. The Workshop’s mailing list grew and so too, did Blau’s knowledge of producing theatre.

**Blau’s Directorial Debut**

After a few solid, well-received productions at TAW directed by Irving, Blau felt he was ready to direct a full-scale production for an audience. He had been directing scenes from John M. Synge’s \textit{Tinker’s Wedding} in the exercise workshops held for the actors. He considers this time his “audition” as a director for the company.\textsuperscript{61} When it came time for Irving to take a break from directing (he had directed four shows in a row) and attend to some important incorporation business for the Workshop, Blau took over as director and chose Synge’s \textit{Playboy of the Western World} for his first play.\textsuperscript{62}

\textsuperscript{58} Fowler 63. Fowler notes that, by choosing \textit{Hedda Gabler}, the company entered into the social-realism genre that would serve them well throughout TAW’s existence. However, this was still not a conscious choice on Irving’s part to do more socially aware material.

\textsuperscript{59} Fowler 75.

\textsuperscript{60} Blau, \textit{Impossible} 152.

\textsuperscript{61} Herbert Blau, personal interview, 7 July 2008.

\textsuperscript{62} Although Irving took a break from directing, he accepted his first starring role for the workshop in Blau’s production—that of Christy Mahon.
One reason he chose *Playboy* for his directorial debut is he was writing his dissertation at this time on Irish poetry and dramatic literature and wanted to put what he was writing about on the stage. Blau, however widely he has become known as a theorist, has always wanted to see how his thoughts worked on stage; to combine theory with practice. And, though he believes that a lot of his ideas get lost in the transition from his mind to the live stage, the idea of purely combining his theoretical thoughts with live practice continues to entice him.

Fowler makes the point that Blau’s choice of *Playboy* was because he was trying to break away from the “narrow realism” of the first three plays. While it is true that *I am a Camera* and *Hedda Gabler* fit this description because they explore relationships through intense dialogue and little physical action, *Hotel Universe*, with its pervading sense of mystical revelation, does not. Lorca’s *Blood Wedding*, which was more Blau’s choice than Irving’s, also shows a shift for the company into more symbolism and imagery. But perhaps the strongest reason for Blau’s first solo choice is that all of these previous plays delve into the psychological aspects of human nature with not much physicality or whimsy involved and, they were all dramas.

Blau, having sat in the background thus observing for the better part of a year, was getting eager to jump in and start directing. Harris described him at that time as a young man of high energy and intensity. The material they had worked on so far, though psychologically challenging, was not very physically challenging and Blau simply got bored. As he sat watching the performance of *Hedda Gabler* in the loft above the

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63 Fowler 76.

64 Josephine Harris, personal interview, 20 June 2010.
Judo Academy, he remembered thinking: “as ‘Banzai!’ shouts came up from the Judo Academy below, and a body hit the deck, ruining the silences, I was reminded of the wilder life secreted in the parlor, the trolls grinning in the corners.”\textsuperscript{65} Another element of Blau’s directorial style, exploring the physical possibilities of the material through the actors onstage, took root during his work on \textit{Playboy}.

Blau’s fascination with probing the intellectual and infusing thought into the theatre did not mean his choices of plays were only of the highly psychological type, on the contrary. What he insisted on was a probing of the text, whatever play they chose, and to keep true to a tenet that Clurman insisted on as well, that of deep inquiry into the themes, language, and actions of the text itself: “Herb, in particular, demanded a complete understanding of the material. He would say, ‘Listen to the playwright. Never mind what you feel. The words are the reason for your living.’”\textsuperscript{66} Synge’s words are another reason he chose \textit{Playboy}. As Blau states in the program note for this production, the “miraculous power of a poet’s talk” fascinated him and he was anxious to set it on stage.\textsuperscript{67}

Blau’s program note emphasizes the power of Synge’s poetry to not only illuminate the play’s main action of patricide, but to inspire rioting among the audiences that saw the production, both at its premiere at the Abbey Theatre in 1907 and on tour in America in 1911: “Bricks flew and the fiery imagination of the Irish boomeranged at

\textsuperscript{65} Blau, \textit{Impossible} 149.

\textsuperscript{66} Josephine Harris, personal interview, 20 June 2010.

\textsuperscript{67} Blau, program note for \textit{Playboy of the Western World}, n.d. Blau is currently working on a book of the program notes for the productions at TAW and the artwork for each. Currently, there is no publication date.
Synge in the first performance of Playboy.”68 Blau never stated whether or not he hoped his production would also cause a riot but, it is clear in his subsequent writings that he believes the power of words and the thoughts behind them are dependent upon each other, each having vital importance in the creation of theatre: “Since what I am saying of words is very close to my conception of theatre, let me say it again, if not simply, in rather simple words: in what I have to say the way I say it is the thought of what I’m saying.”69 Thought is what is behind the interpretation of the words. As for physical gestures added on to thought and words, he states: “a single gesture is not, despite the popular wisdom and some acting theory, worth a thousand words, for that still depends upon the words, and your sense of language as gesture. Whatever the gesture is worth, it is quite a different thing.”70 Thought, words, and gestures are three different languages interdependent upon each other in communicating the intentions of the script. These ideas came to full fruition later in Blau’s theoretical writing but the seeds of these theories on words and thought can be found in the program note for his very first directing venture. It can be surmised through further examination of the program note that Blau believed in the power of words to form a bridge between the audience and the players that would involve everyone in the realization of the piece: “The language of the play, one of the supreme comedies of modern times, is a decisive illustration of Synge’s idea that ‘All art is a collaboration,’ an intercourse of the imagination between a people and their poet.”71 His choice of Playboy, therefore, was a

68 Blau, program note for Playboy of the Western World, n.d.
69 Blau, Blooded Thought xix
70 Blau, Blooded Thought xix.
71 Blau, program note for Playboy of the Western World, n.d.
combination of his eagerness to explore “the trolls grinning in the corners;” his desire to
direct a comedic piece; the words; and, his wish to try out what he had been writing on
in his dissertation on the live stage.

The cast for TAW’s first production of *Playboy of the Western World*, which
opened on February 26, 1953, was as follows:

- Margaret Flaherty………………………………………….. Priscilla Pointer
- Shawn Keogh………………………………………….. Stan Weese
- Michael James Flaherty………………………………………Bert Brauer
- Jimmy Farrell…………………………………………….. Thomas Rosqui
- Philly Cullen…………………………………………….. Robert Ross
- Christopher Mahon………………………………………..Jules Irving
- Widow Quin………………………………………………Norma Jean Wanvig
- Susan Brady………………………………………………Colette Slightam
- Sara Tansey………………………………………………Lee Saunders
- Honor Blake………………………………………………Patricia Hammack
- Old Mahon………………………………………………..Irving Weissman
- Peasants……………………………………………………Libby Parnag

- Bryan Turner
- Edmond Lewis

The show ran for eight performances and had a total attendance of 569 people.72

Luther Nichols, in his critique of the performance dated March 4, 1953, calls the
production “a miniature masterpiece” and states that “The Actor’s Workshop of San

72 Ronald Bazzarini, “Organization and Management of the Actor’s Workshop of the San Francisco
Drama Guild Incorporated” 35-6.
Francisco has taken another long stride toward becoming a professional community theater.” Nichols praised the strong acting displayed by the cast, in particular Irving and Priscilla Pointer (who was pregnant with her third child at the time), whom he described as being “as fiery as she is beautiful.”

Nichols goes on to say: “So well have the play’s rich lyric and dramatic powers, ironic qualities and fine opportunities for comic action been caught that some rash admirers have been harking back to the performance of ‘Playboy’ that Ireland’s Abbey Players gave here in 1938.” It has been previously stated that Blau was writing his dissertation on Irish poetry and drama at this time and that he had an intellectual command of the material. However, these comments by Nichols clearly indicate that Blau not only had a grasp of the text but, as a director, he caught and played out the physical action and comedy that makes the piece so endearing. That is a director’s talent, not just a scholar’s intellectual understanding of the material. Nichols credits Blau’s direction again by saying: “Director Herbert Blau and his production staff have obviously been at great pains to attain these values. Evidence is seen in the uniformity of the players, dialects, and in the superb timing and ingenuity of the action.” Again, these compliments speak not only to the acting abilities of the ensemble but also to Blau’s ability to direct the action and get the uniformity that is essential to a piece of this kind. It is apparent from these comments by Nichols that, even though Blau had never directed a full-scale production before, his work was competent enough to be worthy of praise. Because of Blau’s understanding of the piece - textually, thematically, and

73 Luther Nichols, “‘Playboy of Western World’ At the Actor’s Workshop,” The San Francisco Chronicle 4 Mar. 1953: 18.

74 Nichols, “‘Playboy’ 18.
intellectually - he was able to communicate the physicality of the piece clearly to his cast
and so, to this critic. Granted, as this is the only review available for this show,
Nichols’s praise for Blau’s production should be read objectively. But, Nichols was a
respected, widely-read theatre critic for the San Francisco area and therefore his
comments are important. Irving commented that “Herb worked well. He was good at
catching dialect sounds and rhythms and his movement patterns were good.” Irving’s
comment about Blau’s ability to catch the rhythm of the language and the piece is
something that Blau would develop further and use to great advantage when he
directed Waiting for Godot in 1957. It is evident from his first experience as a director
that Blau was finding ways to connect his intellectual understanding to his physical
direction of the play.

CONCLUSION

Herbert Blau went from a chemical engineering student, to playwright, to
producer/director of an up and coming theatre company in a relatively short span of
time. This beginning period in Blau’s theatrical career was shaped by people as diverse
as Ivor Winters, a poet/New Critic; Beatrice Manley, an accomplished actress; and,
Jules Irving, a shrewd businessman/actor who was also Blau’s friend. Blau discovered
many key ideas concerning theatre during this early period: 1) full inquiry into the text
and the relationship between thought, words, and gestures; 2) dialectical discussions
about the plays that analyzed the themes, words, thoughts and actions and that
eventually lead to dialectical discussions between the plays chosen; 3) group critiques
after each performance that analyzed the work; and, 4) the relation between his

75 Qtd. in Fowler, 77.

76 This idea is explored further in chapter three.
thoughts about a play and the physical staging of it with the actors. These people and ideas began to create Blau’s directorial style – what kind of director he was starting to be based on what he was beginning to understand about the theatre and his place in it.

In the plans from the start of the Workshop was the desire to change the nature of San Francisco theatre by introducing a company that placed study, experimentation, and hard work ahead of box office success. The next chapter explores more fully the theatrical scene of San Francisco and where TAW fit into it at that time. It also discusses Blau’s further development as a director - the ideas, techniques, and issues he encountered while directing several more plays - and, his first major milestone as a director, the American premiere of Bertolt Brecht’s Mother Courage and her Children.
Chapter Two: Mother Courage and the Entrance of the Political

On January 13, 1956, Mother Courage and Her Children by Bertolt Brecht (translation by Eric Bentley) made its American stage debut at the Marine’s Memorial Theatre in San Francisco. It was directed by Herbert Blau and presented by the following members of The Actor’s Workshop of San Francisco:

William Kenney……………………………………….Recruiting Officer
Tom Klunis……………………………………….Recruiting Sergeant
Mother Courage……………………………………….Beatrice Manley
Dumb Catherine……………………………………….Jinx Hone
Ellif………………………………………………….Stan Young
Swiss Cheese……………………………………….Malcolm Smith
Cook………………………………………………….Eugene Roche
Commander……………………………………….John Sullivan
Chaplain………………………………………………..Robert Symonds
Ordinance Officer……………………………………William Dallman
Yvette………………………………………………….Winifred Mann
Old Colonel………………………………………………..Harry Raybold
Man with the Bandage…………………………….Jack Swanson
Sergeant…………………………………………………Wallace Jonason
Clerk………………………………………………….William Kenney
Young Soldier……………………………………….Richard Glenn
Old Soldier………………………………………………..John Sullivan
Woman...............................................................Dorothy Gordon
Peasant............................................................Stanley Gordon
Soldier who Sings..............................................Harry Raybold
Young Man.......................................................Jack Swanson
Singer...............................................................Ginger McFadden
Old Peasant......................................................William Kenney
Peasant Woman................................................Trigger Addis
Young Peasant..................................................Wallace Jonason
Soldiers.........................................................Bill Hogan, Jack Swanson,
                                      Stanley Gordon, Wallace
                                      Jonason, Richard Glenn,
                                      William Dallman, John Sullivan
Understudies...............................Priscilla Pointer, Jules Irving¹

Blau and Irving spent more time, effort, and money advertising the premiere than any of their previous productions. The area press gave great weight to the fact that a local professional regional theatre was mounting a full production of a Brecht play. Paine Knickerbocker, who took over for R.H. Hagen at The San Francisco Chronicle, wrote a pre-premiere article entitled, “Actor’s Workshop Gets an American Premiere.” In it, he gives a brief history of the writing and European success of Mother Courage. He quotes Theatre Arts magazine’s description of the play as “the biggest theatrical event of the whole post-war period” and praises the foresight of the Workshop in

¹ Program, 13 January 1956.
obtaining the rights before anyone else. He adds that, while “anti-war in its approach,” TAW’s production “should be worth witnessing.”

The San Francisco theatre scene at the time of the premiere included a variety of theatrical offerings. The large commercial houses offered touring shows of Broadway hits while the smaller, non-commercial houses offered a more eclectic mix of popular and lesser known theatre fare. The theatre-going public in San Francisco was basically divided into two camps: those that supported the smaller companies of local actors and those that did not. Local theatre artists as well as critics had hopes of making San Francisco a viable theatre town that could rival New York City and not be thought of as just another stop on the tour.

By 1956, TAW had grown from a small study group meeting above a Judo Academy to a resident company with professional status comprising over seventy members and operating out of two theatres - the Marine’s Memorial Theater, a large commercial venue and the Elgin Street Theater, a smaller, experimental house. Herbert Blau’s skills as a director continued to be honed on such plays as Tennessee Williams’s Camino Real, Anton Chekhov’s The Cherry Orchard, and a world premiere production of an unpublished play, “Captive at Large” by David Mark.

Nationally, the Cold War created within the American psyche a fear of the unknown and an uncertainty as to the definition of peace. Secretary of State John Foster Dulles’s exclusive interview for Life magazine, officially published on January 16, 1956, outlined three instances in the previous eighteen months where the United States had been brought to the brink of war. Dulles’s comments concerning “Brinkmanship”

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were leaked to the press and landed in the world’s newspapers on January 11, 1956, two days before the opening of TAW’s American premiere of *Mother Courage*.

The international controversy sparked by Dulles’s timely remarks opened Blau’s eyes to the power of the stage and what his work could accomplish. TAW’s production of *Mother Courage* caused a controversy within the San Francisco theatre community which, though small in retrospect, nevertheless impacted Blau. He did not consciously direct *Mother Courage* in response to Dulles’s comments on war and Brinkmanship but later states in *The Impossible Theatre* that *Mother Courage* was a play that brought them all “face to face with the countenance of the Cold War.”

This chapter explores the theatre scene in San Francisco at the time of Blau’s production, the concept of Brinkmanship and its impact on society, and Blau’s further growth as a director and theatre professional during this important time period.

**San Francisco Theatre in 1956**

San Francisco has enjoyed a rich and varied history of theatre but it seems the attempts of theatre artists up until the mid-20th century to create a solid theatre culture for the city had been inconsistent and, for the most part, ineffectual. Edmond M. Gagey’s thorough exploration of San Francisco theatre from the California Gold Rush of 1848 through the mid-20th century is an excellent source for a more complete history of San Franciscan theatre. Gagey’s comments in the concluding chapter on modern theatre in San Francisco are the most germane to this discussion as they tell the state of things theatrical up to 1950, two years before the creation of the Actor’s Workshop. Gagey states:

> Yet for all its many strengths and virtues, the San Francisco theatre has

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suffered from one serious defect - the derivative character of its offerings. San Francisco, unable to produce a significant and original drama of its own, tacitly admitting the superiority of Broadway by importing plays and players, has always played second fiddle to the East.  

Gagey states what Blau and Irving felt when they created TAW two years later. The San Francisco theatre scene was lost in the shadow of Broadway and needed a different type of company to not only introduce new plays and playwrights but also to create a steady theatre culture in San Francisco that was supported and enhanced by the community. It was the opinion of Irving, Blau, and Gagey that, given San Francisco’s prominence as one of the country’s largest cities, its beautiful location and many resources, the city should become an important theatre center. It just needed artists who were willing to stay and work to make it so.

Gagey’s call for the decentralization of the nation’s theatre and the creation of new theatre centers around the country, specifically San Francisco, was echoed by George Hitchcock, a playwright and actor of some standing in San Francisco. In his 1956 article for The San Francisco Chronicle entitled, “There’s Still Hope for Playwrights,” Hitchcock acknowledges the then recent growth of San Francisco’s theatre-going public and attributes it to the numerous non-commercial theatres that were operating at that time. Yet, he also states that most of the playwriting talent was being drawn away from the local theatre scene by Hollywood and Broadway. Hitchcock pleads local playwrights to not be lured by the commercial stage but to stay in San

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Francisco and establish a strong writing community. He states that the playwright “must keep his eye on his own typewriter and soul and off the cash register.”

Though most local theatre artists were enthusiastic about the artistic atmosphere in San Francisco and the willingness of local amateur companies to try out new material, they decried the lack of support from the city and its theatre patrons. Blau states his take on this problem as it applied to TAW in *The Impossible Theater*:

> When people say, however, how lucky we were to be in San Francisco, with its receptive audiences and cultural *savoir-faire*; that what we did could not be done in any other city, I can never resist saying that if The Workshop survived there, it was in spite of the general neglect, and even civic suspicion…One hears of a colorful history of old stock companies in San Francisco, but after the war one professional theater venture after another failed, for reason mentioned, but also for lack of support.

A bigger problem that plagued San Franciscan theatre was Broadway and the lure of money and more nationally recognized success that it offered artists. Producers such as Blau and Irving realized that theatre in San Francisco would only become significant if the artists could be convinced that they did not have to leave to be a part of good, nationally recognized theatre; that San Francisco offered opportunities that New York did not, such as the freedom to experiment. As evident in his subsequent memoirs about the Workshop years, Blau was often frustrated by the frequent changeover in TAW’s company because of what he terms as the “recurrent stupidity” of actors who felt


they had to “go through the experience of New York.” His frustration lay in the fact that, just when theatre artists began to develop and strengthen their talents, they would leave for the bigger money and fame that Broadway or even Hollywood offered. It was difficult for Blau and Irving to build a resident company of any consistency when the actors kept leaving. He was convinced that San Francisco, and specifically The Workshop, was where the new American theatre would surface:

Here was the place to work, we said, here were the people to work with. The clear-cut issue: did you want to work toward the consolidation of what you said you believed in, or did you want to go off and make a living at your ‘art’; that is, on the radio and TV, if you were lucky; or in stock or Broadway crap, if you were luckier.

It was because of this emigration of artists from San Francisco to New York or Hollywood that kept the city from developing a strong theatre with staying power.

As has been noted, theatre critic Luther Nichols of The San Francisco Chronicle was known for his honest assessments of theatre in San Francisco, most particularly the touring companies of Broadway shows brought in to the big, commercial houses. He observed that most of the actors in the touring shows suffered from “longrunitis,” meaning they had found the laugh lines or poignant moments that got the most response from the audiences and played those and not their parts. He said that the acting had lost its freshness, had become rote and uninteresting and led to “spoiling the evening for many Pacific Coast theatergoers.” He reiterates Gagey’s view of the lack of character in the shows offered in San Francisco in his review of the 1954-55

7 Blau, Impossible 61.
8 Blau, Impossible 61.
professional theatrical season in San Francisco written for The Burns Mantle Yearbook: The Best Plays of 1954-1955:

It’s always hard to keep a resume of the West Coast season from reading like Dead Sea history to those on the East Coast. We can’t escape the fact that our year is often dressed in hand-me-downs from earlier Broadway seasons. Some of the articles retain their stylish look.

But many appear a trifle worn and shapeless.

Despite this lack of energy, Nichols acknowledges the financial success of the season and notes that the theatre-going public chose commercial “frivolity over significance by a landslide.”

Problem plagued though San Franciscan theatre apparently was to critics like Nichols and Gagey, the city was nonetheless full of theatrical activity, both commercial and non-commercial. For instance, an example of the commercial “frivolity” Nichols mentions in his review was a comedy by Jerome Chodorov and Joseph Fields entitled Anniversary Waltz which played at the Alcazar, an 1145-seat theatre located at 260 O’Farrell Street. The advertisement for the play touts its “ninth record-breaking week” by January 8, 1956. This production, dubbed by Nichols as an “unlikely looking bit of crust that proved to be buttered on all sides,” starred Marjorie Lord, a well-known

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television actress of the time.\textsuperscript{12} Set in an apartment in New York City, the play originally opened at the Broadhurst Theatre in New York City on April 7, 1954. The play, advertised as “The funniest comedy in years! Ask anyone who has seen it! ,” ran for a record-breaking consecutive run of twenty-four weeks.\textsuperscript{13}

The Curran Theatre, which opened in 1922, is located at 445 Geary Street and is a 1667-seat house that is advertised as “more like a Broadway theatre than any other in the country.”\textsuperscript{14} In January of 1956, the Curran was running the musical \textit{Can-Can} with music by Cole Porter and book by Abe Burrows. Among the headliners for this production were Rita Dimitri and John Tyers, both New York actors. \textit{Can-Can} originally ran on Broadway at the Shubert Theatre from May 7, 1953 until June 25, 1955.

The Geary Theatre, known as “the oldest legitimate theater in San Francisco”\textsuperscript{15} was hosting the well-known French pantomimist Marcel Marceau who was praised by Nichols as having restored “a classic sense of the theatre as the quintessential place to see ‘the soul in action.’”\textsuperscript{16} Marceau delivered sixteen performances from January 8 through January 22, 1956.

Playing at the forty-nine seat Lilliput Theatre was Hugh Evans’s unique presentation of \textit{Dick Whittington and his Wonderful Cat}. The novelty of this production is best described in the \textit{The San Francisco Chronicle}: “An extravaganza in two acts. This is a new form of entertainment - a theater-in-miniature presented with over 300

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\textsuperscript{12} Lord was also appearing at that time as Danny Thomas’ wife in the popular television series, “Make Room for Daddy.”

\textsuperscript{13} Advertisement, \textit{The San Francisco Chronicle} 8 Jan. 1956, This World: 13.


\end{flushleft}
two-dimensional cutouts that are manipulated from the wings to music and dialogue on a taped recording.”17 The stage was built into an old fireplace. Apparently Evans, along with his partner, Frank Bray, brought their miniature theatre idea over from England and enjoyed some success as they segued in later years to puppetry shows.

These shows were entertaining and, as Nichols said, financially successful. It is curious then that he felt the offerings at these commercial houses drove many people away. This is an illustration of the division of the San Franciscan audiences stated above. Many patrons supported the commercial theatres and the Broadway touring shows while others did not. As Nichols states in the Yearbook:

This insistence on the frivolous, to say nothing of the high cost of tickets, cut the professional theatre off from great numbers of people who found satisfaction among the warmer, more intimate and more dedicated of the state’s ‘little theatres.’ There they sought relief for that nagging conscience that demands ‘the better things’ of the drama.18

Nichols’s praise for Marcel Marceau’s restoration of the human soul to the stage proves that he felt a dearth of meaningful theatrical productions from the commercial houses in San Francisco. Though he reviewed both commercial and non-commercial productions, it is clear he favored the material being presented at the smaller, non-commercial theatres and believed that the bigger, commercial houses should follow suit.

Following is a list of the little theatre companies that were producing shows during the week prior to TAW’s premiere of Mother Courage - specifically, January 8-15, 1956. The list shows an impressive mix of classical, contemporary, European, and new works

17 “San Francisco Datebook.” The San Francisco Chronicle. 8 Jan. 1956, This World: 15.

and is offered to provide contextual information on the type of material other theatres similar to TAW were presenting at the time Mother Courage opened.

The Interplayers was founded in 1946 in much the same way as the Workshop, with a small group of artists who wanted to work on plays. The four founding members (who met in a camp for World War II conscientious objectors) were Kermit Sheets, Martin Ponch, Joyce Lancaster and her husband, Adrian Wilson. According to Stanley Eichelbaum, a staff member of The San Francisco Examiner, the group maintained a creed of “provocative themes and aesthetic content” with works by Luigi Pirandello, Federico García Lorca, and Jean Giraudoux, to name a few.¹⁹ The group split in 1952 due to management differences. One faction remained The Interplayers and the other became The Playhouse Repertory Company, managed by Kermit Sheets. During the week of TAW’s premiere of Mother Courage, the Interplayers were enjoying a successful run of Jean Giraudoux’s The Madwoman of Chaillot on Friday and Saturday nights while the Playhouse was presenting Arthur Schnitzler’s La Ronde on Friday, Saturday, and Sunday. Martin Ponch, another founder of the original Interplayers, had formed the Actors’ Ensemble and was presenting a concert reading of Sean O’ Casey’s Juno and the Paycock on Sunday night.

The Theater Arts Colony, an intimate space with about 200 hundred seats, housed the producing team of Les Abbot and Les Abrams. They were presenting Shakespeare’s Twelfth Night to critical acclaim. The San Francisco Chronicle’s

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reviewer, R.H. Hagen, was impressed by the company’s “professional enactment” of the characters but also by their “consistent control of accent and rhythm.”

Two University of California, Berkeley graduates - Rachmael ben Avram and his wife Suzanna Hart - opened The Company of the Golden Hind in 1951. According to The Golden Hind’s website, the mission of ben Avram and Hart was to perform “great works of theater in an imaginative, theatrical manner, anti-naturalist in style, inspired by the writing on theater by Thornton Wilder, Gordon Craig and others.” Dedicated to popular material, The Company of the Golden Hind specialized in elaborate, stylized stagings of a wide variety of theatre from operas and Shakespeare to Arthur Miller, O’Neill and popular musicals. The company’s website has many beautiful pictures displaying costume designer Suzanna Hart’s talents. This company is worth more than a passing mention as it, along with TAW, received one of the first regional theatre grants from the Ford Foundation in 1959. They had a successful ten years of production from 1951-1961 and were an important part of the regional theatre movement of the 1950s. They had two shows running in January of 1956 - Mozart’s *Cosi fan Tutte* on Thursdays and Saturdays and Shakespeare’s *Richard II* on Fridays and Saturdays.

Irma Kay, a former dancer from Philadelphia, opened the Opera Ring in 1955 with the production that was still running in January of 1956 - Kurt Weill’s *The Three Penny Opera*. What made this theatre different and, in later years, successful was Kay’s imaginative stagings of large-scale musicals in a small, theatre-in-the-round space. *Three Penny* played on Fridays and Saturdays.

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Other plays in production during the week of January 8 - January 15, 1956 were Euripides’s Medea at City College of San Francisco; Luigi Pirandello’s Each in His Own Way at San Jose State College; and, the west coast’s first production of Jean Giraudoux’s Ondine played by the London Circle Players residing in Oakland.

How did Brecht’s Mother Courage fit into this scene? According to noted theatre critic Walter Kerr, “social-realist” theatre, like Mother Courage, had to be “inched into the American theatre” because it was not a popular form. However, though not pre-dominantly social-realist, the list of little theatre offerings during January of 1956 clearly shows not only variety in the selections but a decided bent toward European playwrights and composers and a more in-depth, probing dramatic literature than the commercial houses were presenting. Therefore it can be surmised that, based solely on type of material, TAW’s presentation of Brecht’s Mother Courage fit in with this season and was not the surprise to the theatre-going public one might assume, even though Brecht had not been popularly produced in America at this time. However, as presented later in this chapter, it was not the script of Mother Courage but the style of the play that proved to be too different and difficult for some theatre goers to accept.

Though the plays presented by the non-commercial houses were unique and varied, logic does not necessarily follow that the productions of them were done well or were enjoyed by the public. In his 1953 article, Luther Nichols states what he felt to be an underlying problem with many of the little theatre companies that sprung up rapidly after World War II and then folded. “The prime error,” he asserts, was that many of the

theatre companies were “putting on the make-up of professionalism before being ready to act the part.”

In agreement with this sentiment is Josephine Harris. When asked if she attended productions at other theatre companies as well as the productions at the Actor’s Workshop, she responded emphatically, “No! I couldn’t stand it. There was lousy art in every direction.” Harris is most likely biased in her opinions, yet her comments, biased or not, bear great weight as they are the reflections of someone who experienced what Nichols was decrying in his reviews at the time. She went on to say that San Franciscan theatre at that time was a “wasteland of left-over Broadway;” saying that the theatre companies, for the most part, “spit for the pit.” She explained, chuckling, that this colorful Shakespearean reference meant that they only did the “easy stuff,” the “common garden variety of production akin to Broadway theatre.” She did make a point of saying that Jules Irving was also of this mindset, to a degree, but that his style and intelligence placed him on a higher level than most theatre producers of that time. While Irving was drawn to more popular fare, Harris said that Blau was drawn to the “way-out theatre.” She felt that it was this difference in taste between the two partners that made them so well-suited to each other. She reveled in what she called the “innovative, bold, and unusual” theatre that Blau, Irving and the actors at TAW presented. Harris, referring to Blau and Irving’s intellectual approach to theatre, said that they “made people rise while understanding the medium.” She repeated this thought several times. According to Harris, Blau and Irving elevated the level of

understanding and intelligence in actors and audiences by their own thorough understanding of the material and their high production standards.24

Mother Courage fit in with the season of plays offered by the little theatres of San Francisco because it was different then the Broadway commercial fare being offered by the bigger houses. However, it was the actual production of it by Blau and company that set it apart. Blau, Irving and the members of TAW learned a good deal about theatre and their work in it between their inauspicious premiere on Divisadero Street in 1952 and their premiere of a major work by Bertolt Brecht in 1956. Along the way they garnered favorable reviews, gained a steady audience, and, in the case of Herbert Blau, a reputation as a director of some importance.

TAW and Herbert Blau from 1953-56

San Francisco theatre advocates called for the decentralization of American theatre, saying that San Francisco could be as good a theatre town as New York if the local talent would stay and local audiences would support them. Luther Nichols’s reviews are full of his efforts to get the community to rally behind local theatre. “Go see our theatre!” he seems to be shouting through his words. Nichols was excited by the prospects that TAW brought to San Franciscan theatre and did not hesitate to tell his readership about them. His 1954 review of TAW’s production of Death of a Salesman states this hope plainly:

This column intends to do some trumpeting from the rooftops today.

For a resident theater group in San Francisco has outshone all the shining predictions ever made for it. And in doing so, it has proved something that followers of local theater have maintained all along:

24 Josephine Harris, personal interview, 26 Aug. 2010.
that we can produce, right here in the Bay Area, shows as well-acted and well-directed, if not quite so plushly mounted, as those on Broadway at their best.25

Why did Nichols praise TAW and have such high hopes for it? Partly because of the failure of other theatre companies who approached the work from a profit-based mindset and not an artistic one. Also, the artistic integrity that Nichols saw in Blau and Irving clearly impressed him and gave him something more solid to write about. Here was a new company that displayed energy, merit, and talent and had openly stated their main intention was “to do justice to good plays.”26 They refused to present any play until they felt it was ready for the viewing public. Money, television appearances and other publicity-seeking traps were refused. The new company wanted to grow slowly, gel as an ensemble, and be ready for professional status when and if it should come. Nichols found these qualities to be most encouraging: “Faith is what the group has so far inspired. So much so that this oft-bruised appraiser is ready to shinny out on a limb once more to say that if any group at the moment has a good prospect of becoming San Francisco’s long-awaited professional repertory theater, this is it.”27 These are prophetic words as TAW established professional status a short eighteen months later.

There were many important events that happened during the neophyte years of the Workshop. Only a few key events are highlighted here as they serve to paint a line of development of TAW from study group to solid regional theatre company. Blau’s


directorial style became more prominent as he continued to learn the process of production and deepen his theoretical understanding of the material.

After completing his direction of *Summer and Smoke* in April of 1953, Blau and Beatrice Manley left the company for reasons which can only be surmised. However, there are clues. Blau recollects in *The Impossible Theater* that he felt animosity from some of the older, more established actors of the company. He had a penchant for lecturing to the cast that was not appreciated by some of the company members. Irving observed that Blau drove his actors particularly hard during *Smoke* rehearsals and there were grumblings of nepotism because Blau cast his wife in the title role. The most plausible explanation for the departure is that Blau was finishing his dissertation at this time and most likely preferred his solitary writing over the negativity he was feeling from the company. Blau and Manley could not stay away from the company for long however and were back by the fall of 1953. Though their leaving the company reads as merely a case of bruised egos, it does point out the struggles Blau encountered in trying to fit in among actors who not only considered him a theatre novice but who felt they had the experience in the theatre to back up their feelings. This is a point of contention that plagued Blau for many years as a director and contributed to his theatrical insecurity where actors were concerned.

Meanwhile, Irving, deciding that the group had outgrown the small loft on Divisadero Street, found a new home in an old auto storage warehouse at 136 Valencia

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28 Priscilla Pointer recalls in a personal letter to the author (21 July 2010) that Jules Irving took over the management of the company for fifteen months while Blau and Manley toured Europe on a study grant. Though she did not recall the dates, I believe she is referring to the first Ford Grant Blau received in 1959 to tour European companies. His article, "Meanwhile, Follow the Bright Angels," records his discoveries from this trip.

29 Fowler 85.
Street in August of 1953. The facility was much bigger and came with separate offices, a performing space that could be setup for any audience configuration, and a solid three-year lease, thus assuring the company a regular space that was theirs alone. Though the space was technically on Valencia Street, the audience entrance was located on Elgin Street so the Workshop called their new space the Elgin Street Theater. Moving to this larger venue increased audience capacity and allowed them to explore plays which required larger casts and more elaborate stagings than they were able to stage at the small loft.

Another key event in this time period was Luther Nichols’s resignation from his post at The San Francisco Chronicle in December of 1954. His position was taken over for a brief time by R. H. Hagen who continued to favorably review the productions at TAW including the world premiere of “Captive at Large” by David Mark. This production fulfilled another of the plans for the Workshop that Blau and Irving set forth in the very beginning - that of producing new works by local playwrights. Paine Knickerbocker, who had been writing for the sports section, took over for Hagen as theatre critic in October of 1955 and reviewed two of TAW’s productions before his important review of Mother Courage would spark the controversy associated with the premiere.

TAW experienced their first substantial hit in December of 1954 with their production of Arthur Miller’s The Crucible directed by Robert Ross. The choice of Ross as director is an odd one. At the time, Blau had a production in performance and Irving, who had been directing Shaw’s Major Barbara as the show to follow Blau’s, was notified that all rights to Shaw’s plays had been pulled. Apparently, My Fair Lady was preparing

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\(^{30}\) Fowler 96. Fowler states that, at the time of the move, TAW had grown to over 70 volunteer artists.\(^{31}\) Fowler 100.
to open on Broadway and the representatives for Shaw’s estate were keeping a lock on his canon of plays in hopes of turning another into Broadway gold. Ross had stage managed a few shows at TAW and also directed scenes from *The Crucible* for a workshop project. The strength of the ensemble’s acting, led by Irving as John Proctor, made the show a hit. It opened on December 3, 1954 at the Elgin Street Theatre to a favorable review in *The San Francisco Chronicle*. The show was held over through March of 1955.

At this point Irving and Blau made a decision that would effectively change TAW forever. Irving, spurred on by the popularity of their production of *The Crucible*, flew to New York City to approach Actor’s Equity Association with a bold idea - professional status for the Workshop through an Equity contract but on terms that he dictated. On April 15, 1955, TAW was awarded the first ever off-Broadway Equity contract to a group outside of New York City that was specifically created for their needs and abilities. There were many other standard off-Broadway contracts awarded to groups before this but the special provisions in TAW’s contract were the first of their kind and that is why the Workshop can claim this milestone as their own. This meant they had the status of being a professional company without having the usual contract sanctions to follow. As Fowler explains:

> The Workshop reversed the traditional pattern of building professional theaters for provincial audiences. Instead of deciding to create a professional theater and turning to Equity to see how such a theater would have to be organized, Irving, Blau, and their associates first built the kind of theater they wanted, and only after the Workshop had been established on their terms did they
confront the essentially conservative union officials with their handiwork.32 Instead of having to sign a standard Equity contract as Fowler notes the Alley Theatre had done the previous year, Irving, with the help and advice of Arthur Miller and the executives of ANTA, presented Equity with a bolder idea - allowing the Workshop to determine what it could handle financially while giving them professional status and the freedom to remain experimental in their work. There were a number of other advantages to this special contract which would later be dubbed the "Bay Area Theatre Contract": 1) a lower quota of union members who worked only on the weekends; 2) actors were paid per performance rather than weekly; and, most importantly, 3) no understudies, rehearsal pay or management hospitalization costs.33 These are huge fiscal concessions by Equity and speak to the reputation that TAW had already gained as an important regional theatre company. As Fowler points out, Equity’s willingness to relax its strict standards for TAW was a smart move. TAW had established a strong foothold in San Francisco, a town that, aside from the big commercial houses, had no other theatres either willing or capable of obtaining professional status. By conceding certain points and conferring professional status on TAW, Equity was now represented in San Francisco’s budding regional theatre industry by a company willing to do what they could to be a part of the union. Though the contract did not drastically change the operation of the company at first (Blau and Irving still had volunteer actors as well as a number of volunteer designers, office workers, and set and costume crews), it did afford

32 Fowler 167.
33 Fowler 168.
them a certain prestige and raised them to a professional level above the other operating companies.  

**Blau’s Practical Education as a Director**

Blau directed seven plays between his directorial premiere with *Playboy of the Western World* in February of 1953 and his production of *Mother Courage* in January of 1956. The first, Tennessee Williams’s *Summer and Smoke*, starred Beatrice Manley as Alma Winemuller. Nichols praises Manley’s performance in his review of the play and the way she mastered “every coy, overly genteel detail of Alma’s behavior.” He equates her performance with that of Geraldine Page who had just had great success with the same role in José Quintero’s off-Broadway production at Circle in the Square. Nichols states that Blau’s direction was “well-conceived” and that all of the elements of the play’s plot were “subtly underlined and its atmosphere captured with the necessary delicacy.” Once again he puts forth great hope that TAW would continue to grow in stature: “There are other good things about this production - things that should make everyone happy who holds faith in the Actor’s Workshop as a possible answer to the question: When will San Francisco have a professional repertory company?”

Despite this good review, there were problems encountered by Blau and company while working on this play. As noted earlier, this was the play that caused Blau and Manley to leave TAW for a time for reasons that can only be surmised. As Irving said, Blau pushed the actors hard in rehearsals, upsetting some of them with his overzealousness. Josephine Harris said that Blau was never “coarse or rude” in his

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34 Fowler 169.

35 All quotes in this paragraph from Nichols, “Miss Manley Excels in Williams’ Play,” *The San Francisco Chronicle* 5 May 1953: 20.
dealings with the actors but that he “pulled them up as high as they could go.” This illustrative statement by Harris gives credence to the thought that Blau pushed his actors beyond what they were used to giving, a directorial quality that Blau would keep throughout his directing career at TAW and later, at LCR and the KRAKKEN group. Apparently, there were different levels of intensity and commitment at work among the actors and Blau at that time.

An upside to Blau’s intense work with the actors can be found in Nichols’s complimentary review. He states: “What impresses most about the group is the honesty and perception of its treatments. It seems able to muster consistently the analytical intelligence and the sound ensemble acting to drill into the heart of a play, where lesser groups are content to stop at the surface.” The “drilling” that Blau did with the company (another key component to Blau’s directorial style) was intense and in-depth and came across in the final product. And, though not thoroughly accepted by the actors, it shows that Blau was learning rapidly how to get what he needed out of them for the betterment of the text.

Blau’s next production, after he returned to TAW, was Christopher Fry’s Venus Observed. It was the second production at The Elgin Street Theatre and was also reviewed by Luther Nichols. Nichols was impressed with the “brilliant verbal display” and the style with which Blau directed the play. It seems that Blau, first with Playboy and now with Venus, displayed early on in his directorial career an aptitude for directing

36 Josephine Harris, personal interview, 26 Aug. 2010.

37 Luther Nichols, “Another Little Theater Steps into the Spotlight,” 14.
plays of verbal wit with clarity and agility. It also shows a predilection toward choosing plays that allowed him to explore language, words, and poetry.  

After *Venus*, Blau directed a revival of *Playboy of the Western World* in May of 1954. It was TAW’s first attempt at performing in repertory style. The revival was not well-attended. There are two possible reasons for this: 1) the company had just completed a successful run of Arthur Miller’s *Death of a Salesman*; and, 2) as Blau observes in *Impossible Theater*: “America has no repertory theater traditions. People do not come back to see plays they have seen.” Blau and Irving, having built up a rather nice regular audience, wanted to keep them coming back and, though repertory was one of their goals for TAW, decided to shelve the idea for a time and stick to producing different plays.

Blau’s next production was Anton Chekhov’s *The Cherry Orchard* which opened in June of 1954. Nichols states in his review entitled, “The Workshop Stages Tender Chekhov Play” that Blau and company captured the essence of Chekhov with “fine sensitivity, flow of movement and intimacy” in their playing. Nichols writes a bit more in this critique than he had done previously on Blau’s directing and states that Blau “kept a proper Chekhovian arm’s length from sentimentality in the overall view.” Nichols again points out the strong ensemble acting by the group and singles out Manley’s performance of Madame Ranevsky as being “flawed only by too much theatrical gesturing.” It seems, looking at these comments by Nichols, that Blau was becoming

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adept at directing a cohesive, ensemble performance with particular sensitivity to the mood that the playwright intended.40

Blau directed a double bill of Oedipus Rex and The Farce of Pierre Patelin presented in arena staging at The Elgin Street Theatre in October of 1954. Nichols comments on Blau’s “sound and streamlined direction of both plays” but questions the choice of arena staging for both pieces. He liked the arena staging for the farcical antics of Patelin and thought the close proximity of the actors and actions to the audience suited the commedia del arte style of the piece. He did not like the same staging for Oedipus. As he explains: “Like Greek statuary, Greek tragedy suffers when seen too close up. Minor peelings and cracks appear. You are made too aware that this is play acting and not an echoing down through the ages of a profoundly disturbing human myth. Too, the large gestures of the acting style it demands are meant for larger distances.”41

To know what styles work in which particular audience-to-stage configurations and to adjust the blocking and performance style accordingly is a basic job of the director. Because of the tight space they had started with at the loft on Divisadero Street, Blau was accustomed to arena staging in some form or other and believed that “with some losses” an arena stage can “accommodate almost any kind of drama.”42 Though his production of Summer and Smoke the year before and the staging of Patelin benefitted from the intimacy of the smaller arena stage, his staging of a Greek tragedy


42 Blau, Impossible 153.
did not. He needed to use his objective eye and adjust the blocking and the acting
styles to suit the more intimate arrangement. There are times when style must be
sacrificed to the logistics of the physical space and it takes the director to notice this and
adjust the acting accordingly.

Blau did not open another play until June of 1955 due to the overwhelming
response to TAW’s production of *The Crucible* which held The Elgin Street Theatre for
several months before moving to The Marine’s Memorial Theatre in April of 1955. Blau,
who was beginning to make his voice more felt when it came to play selection, chose
Tennessee Williams’s *Camino Real*. Blau did not generally gravitate toward material
by American playwrights. While directing Williams’s *Summer and Smoke* he said that
he “found it hard to take a lot of it seriously;” that it was a drama of “drift and vague
apprehension” written during an era that had “very little to say” in an American theatre
that “felt it had very little right to say it.” In short, he was not creatively or intellectually
inspired by Williams.

But *Camino Real* is not a typically structured play. As R.H. Hagen describes it in
his critique of Blau’s production, the play is “a huge allegory, a dramatic fantasy on the
predicament of the high life as well as the low life of our time as Williams sees it, a kind
of satirical atomic-age version of the ‘Canterbury Tales’ as it might have been conceived
by Franz Kafka with generous assistance from Jean Cocteau, William Saroyan and T.
S. Eliot.” It is evident in Hagen’s vivid assessment that what attracted Blau to this play

44 Blau, Impossible 153.
was the opportunity to explore the human condition through physical actions, poetic rather than realistic words, and various scenes that did not flow together in an understandable pattern.

Blau described Camino Real as a “deliberately mad and effervescent mixture of T. S. Eliot’s Waste Land and the Coney Island fun house, a sort of purgatorial carnival, where perverts and prostitutes, pimps and panhandlers, charlatans and phony gypsies move with the characters from the past.” Blau’s program note gives a clear description of how he viewed the play and what he desired his production to look like:

CAMINO REAL is a dream then, and a satire on dreams: the dream of escape, the dream of love, the dream of the ‘sweet-used-to-be,’ our soap opera dreams and the pipe dreams on which we all subsist. Free and imaginative, Williams’ play is a lyrical celebration of freedom and the imagination, art and the artist, the naïve and the alienated in a comfortable America which has pledged allegiance to the bill board, the comic strip, and the TV screen.

Blau’s note demonstrates his flair for words and also reveals the fun he had while directing this play. Words like “free and imaginative” and “lyrical celebration of freedom” indicate that Blau relaxed into this work and let his imagination and that of the company flow within his structured rehearsals. Blau stated that, at this still rather early stage in his development as a director, he kept wondering whether or not he was “theatrical


He wanted to let the ideas come through in his direction of the play. He also wanted to prove to the company and to himself that he could relax his control over the material and allow others to come up with ideas as well.

Jules Irving played the main character of Kilroy in what critic Hagen calls “easily the most memorable performance of all.” “Kilroy,” according to Blau, is “the bumptious and ubiquitous American boy-man, the perennial wanderer with a heart of gold.” Kilroy is a character that personified the American image in literature, movies, and art. But after World War II, as Blau observes, the image had changed. He states the Kilroy that came home from the war had lost his innocence. He had become a symbol of, not “America the beautiful,” but of “America the damned - not impoverished, but smothered in its own bounty.” The Kilroy of this America was embodied in the more self-possessed character of Stanley Kowalski in Williams’s earlier play, *Streetcar Named Desire*. By 1953, Blau says that Williams wanted to return to “the values of the Old South and the Old World” and was searching for “something, somewhere to mean the word honor again.”

Hagen praises Blau’s direction of this large and often unwieldy play in his critique entitled, “Actors' Workshop Stages ‘Camino Real’ - It’s Explosive:”

Most of all, however, there is the whole production itself. With its superb direction by Herbert Blau, its scenery and costumes by George Armstrong and Jan Parr, its music off and on stage by Wendell Otey, Edward Haug, Emil

50 Blau, “Kilroy and the Dragons,” program note, 10 June 1955.
Stumer and Rolf Cahn; its fantastic chases, eerie humor and sometimes long-winded oratory, it may sometimes reminds (sic) you of a tragedy staged by Ringling Bros., Barnum and Bailey…But whether you try to understand it or not, I think you will find it the most explosively interesting and often the most poetically touching production that has ever been staged locally.\textsuperscript{52}

Hagen points out several things that were becoming trademark elements of Blau’s directorial style: the cohesiveness of the entire production including the acting, sets, costumes; the use of music and musical elements that would continue to inform his direction of the text; his predilection for poetic rather than staunchly realistic dialogue; and, the physicality he brought to the actors through his blocking of the plays.

Though the productions Blau directed up to this point each helped develop his style in different ways, there seems to be a clear sense that Blau relaxed a bit and had fun directing this play, a sense that is not felt when reviewing his first plays. He learned to work with the actors not work at them and discovered within himself the possibilities of theater beyond the literal interpretation of the text. This was an important production for Blau and a small turning point in his directorial career.

The last play Blau directed before he began his work on \textit{Mother Courage} was a new, unpublished play entitled, “Captive at Large” by David Mark; a play that was described as being very much like \textit{Camino Real}.\textsuperscript{53} Up until this point, Blau lamented the fact that the company - though gaining in reputation and strength - had not yet articulated its own voice. They had not discovered, through all of their textual analysis


and production, what they wanted to say through their theatre. In short, they lacked a style that they could call their own. In meetings with the company, Blau lectured extensively on this subject and the importance of the matter began to be felt among the other members of the company. It was gratifying for Blau to do intellectual work on texts and explore meanings on stage in well-reviewed productions but, the sense that TAW had not yet solidified a style or an overall vision bothered him. He felt that they were not taking big enough risks. As he states in The Impossible Theater:

I reviewed the fact that we were not attached to any social movement; we were a dissociated organism. We were not, like the Group, surrounded by any ideological ferment…Most of us were brought up with a conception of theater which is actually anti-literary, anti-artistic, hostile to ideas. We spoke only on stage, and then eclectically, and was that enough?54

He realized that he, along with the other members of the company, was still in a period of self-discovery and that his interests as well as the company’s were too varied to settle on any one certain style. The question of style was never answered fully enough to satisfy Blau with regards to TAW. Blau said that Robert Symonds, one of the strongest actors with TAW, told him once that “style just happens” and, for the time being, he was willing to wait it out.55

Though he did not push the style issue, Blau did look for new plays that might begin to pull their varied thoughts together. From the start of their work together, Blau and Irving solicited submissions of new plays from playwrights. Blau said that in over three years of reading endless scripts, he had not found one that could have been not  

54 Blau, Impossible 172.

only “an authentic voice” but also a “representative one - a voice that spoke directly, as Clifford Odets did for the Group, to the collective anxieties and aspirations of the company.” With David Mark’s “Captive at Large,” Blau believed he had found, if not a true voice for TAW, at least a play with many of the elements that attracted him:

It has the form of an improvised morality drama, with techniques indebted to Pirandello, Brecht, and the commedia…Like the plays of Ibsen, it is a play with a Secret; like some of our recent imports, it is a cryptogram and a charade, a comedy of insidiously serious intent. Moreover, it is a play with a message; its message is its secret; and its secret is the terminus of a series of themes arising from a world in which ‘issues are born confused.’ They were precisely our themes.

Blau felt that this play spoke to the still confused and vague thoughts of purpose he was having about TAW and his own developing sense as a director. In the words quoted above, there is a sense of joy of having a “secret” and needing to unlock its mysteries. Perhaps he felt that if he unlocked the secrets contained in the play, he would also solve the mysteries surrounding the purpose of TAW.

But “Captive at Large” also had other elements that attracted Blau. The play, as Hagen described it, was a “play about a play, within a play, and surrounding a play” that is an effort to “satirize playwrights, actors, and the very business of play production itself in the interest of saying what the playwright himself believes the world is all about.”

This is exactly how Blau felt about himself, theatre, and what he was searching to say

56 Blau, Impossible 173.
57 Blau, Impossible 173.
about the world as he saw it. David Mark and Herbert Blau seemed to be searching for
the same secret - an answer to their purpose in life through theatre.

Blau also felt, however, that the play was too literal in its attempt at confusion.
That in trying to, as Blau said, “get at the Human Condition, which seems hopeless,” the
play also called for “positive social action.” In the end, it left the company confused as
to its real purpose. Blau commented that the actors did not wholeheartedly endorse the
play because the characters were too literally drawn out and gave nothing for them to
explore and create on their own.59

Though Blau found the play problematic in some respects Hagen, as with Camino
Real, praised the production as being “one of the most hilarious efforts in the history of
the local theater.” He enjoyed the actors and the way each portrayed a number of
various characters throughout the play. This comment supports the direction of Blau
and his growing ability to create ensemble work out of seeming theatrical chaos. Hagen
continues in his review: “What really matters, however, is that ‘Captive at Large’ is a
large piece of what used to be called ‘the living theater,’ and because it is, almost
everybody concerned in the exciting production is just as good and just as important as
anyone.”60

Despite Hagen’s clear support of the production, TAW’s first world premiere did
not attract large audiences. Blau attributed this to what he termed as “the era of the
safe bet.”61 This is what Nichols, Armstrong, Irving, Gagey, Hagen and others quoted
thus far in this study were so baffled and frustrated by - the lack of support by San

59 Blau, Impossible 172.
60 Hagen, “Actor’s Workshop Scores Again in ‘Captive at Large,’” 18.
61 Blau, Impossible 174.
Franciscan audiences for new works in theatre that had not been first tested on Broadway. This trend would continue for many years and would always frustrate Blau and Irving who, nonetheless, never stopped seeking out new and untried material to present to their audiences. Though they were to present many more new plays - Blau’s own among them in the years to come - Blau said that he and Irving always “wrote them off in advance as losses at the box office.”

Hagen concludes his critique of “Captive at Large” by saying, “San Francisco’s new renaissance of live theater is well on its way, whether you like it or not.” Similar to Nichols and Gagey before him, Hagen is admonishing the populace of San Francisco and telling them to go out and support local theatre. As has been duly noted in this chapter, San Franciscan scholars and critics were looking for a company that would have the kind of professional quality and high production standards that could rival Broadway and place San Francisco on the level of New York in terms of quality local theatre. Did Nichols and Hagen overly praise TAW’s work because of this? Just because these critics wanted TAW to be good does not necessarily mean they were as good as these glowing reviews reveal. Their critiques, the only ones written about these early TAW shows, should therefore be read with this fact in mind and taken for what they were - hopeful calls for professional theatre in San Francisco.

**Brinkmanship**

Blau recalled that several days before the opening of *Mother Courage* on January 13, 1956, “the Cold War, which had gone its impossible way through crisis muted by

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63 Hagen, “Actor’s Workshop Scores Again in ‘Captive at Large,’” 18.
crisis, was back in the realm of Brinkmanship.™

Then Secretary of State John Foster Dulles’s description of Brinkmanship is recorded in an article for Life magazine entitled, “How Dulles Averted War.” The article was released to the press on January 11, 1956. Dulles’s comments contained in the article sent a fresh shock wave through Americans who were already wary and worn from the seesaw events of the Cold War.

In his speech to the Council on Foreign Relations on January 12, 1954, Dulles said that “the way to deter aggression is for the free community to be willing and able to respond vigorously at places and with means of its own choosing.” He believed that if forced to the edge or “brink” of war, the American government would not be afraid to show its muscle. It is rather like the childhood game of “Chicken” - when pushed to the line, push back until someone either backs down or crosses over the line.

“Brinkmanship” was the term applied to this concept.

According to Dulles, the United States had been pushed to the brink of war three times in the eighteen months from June of 1953 to early 1955. Dulles remarked that in each of the three instances military force by the United States was approved by Eisenhower, including the tactical use of nuclear weapons. Dulles said the U.S. government was showing force, not indecisiveness, in a “policy of boldness.”

Critical response to Dulles’s Brinkmanship article was swift. The story broke in The San Francisco Chronicle on Thursday, January 12. The article - relayed from the Washington Herald Tribune Service entitled, “U.S. on Brink of War 3 Times In Last 3

64 Blau, Impossible 88.

65 A digitized copy of the 8th draft of this speech can be found at: <https://webspace.princeton.edu/users/mudd/Digitization/MC016/MC016_Box_87_322.pdf>. This quote was taken from the final version delivered before the council and quoted in the Life magazine article, pp. 77-78.

Years, Dulles Says” - calls Dulles’s interview with Life “extraordinary” and outlines the three brink-of-war occurrences. Two days later - on Saturday, January 14 - The San Francisco Chronicle carried another Associated Press article from Washington, this time on the front page entitled, “Dulles Defends ‘Brink of War’ Foreign Policy.” In this article, Dulles defends his remarks and the foreign policy he believed had “checked the Chinese Reds in Formosa, Indo-China, and Korea.”67 On Wednesday, January 18, the The San Francisco Chronicle ran yet another article out of Washington entitled, “Policy Controversy: Dulles Hedges a Bit On ‘Brink of War.’” This article states that Dulles had “backed away” from the Life magazine article but “stood firm” on his policy of preventing war by not underestimating the opponents.68 The point to make here is, that after what had been presumed as peace at the end of the Korean War, this nation’s people were reminded once again that peace was not something they could count on and that war and the use of nuclear weapons, whether tactical or not, was a constant threat.

Blau’s intention in presenting Mother Courage was not to specifically link the play’s themes with these current events. However, the uproar in the newspapers surrounding Dulles’s comments amplified the themes of the play that Blau and company were presenting on stage, that war is a relentless, economically-driven hazard of human society that looks the same in any place and any time period. The coincidence of directing a play that deals with these themes of war at the same time an international outrage against war was happening afforded Blau the chance to relate what he was doing on stage to the hot-button political issues of the day. His intention in directing the


play was not to address these issues. Rather, the issues allowed Blau to give added importance to the play that was running at his theatre at the time.

The idea that Blau used the Dulles controversy to bring recognition to the play is substantiated in The Impossible Theater where Blau recalls a letter he wrote to the editors of The San Francisco Chronicle and to Paine Knickerbocker, the critic who dismissed the play as “pretty old hat.” He states that, even more than the bad review that Knickerbocker gave the production, he was upset and surprised that the play was not recognized by the press as the “thoroughgoing criticism of our reigning foreign policy, Mr. Dulles’ Brinkmanship.” Suddenly, Blau’s production of Mother Courage took on more importance to him than just being the American premiere of the play. The timeliness of the Brinkmanship controversy awakened Blau and company to the importance of what they were doing on stage. According to Blau, the production and the resultant controversy made them aware that what they publicly presented was a “moral commitment.” He said that it created within the company a “feeling for partisanship.” In short, the production of Mother Courage created the spirit of ensemble that Blau and Irving were striving for since TAW began.

The Production of Mother Courage

In one of his earliest articles entitled, “A Character Study of the Drama,” Blau hints at his developing sense of the drama as a social force and its place in American society: “Nevertheless, the drama is not merely an object to be responded to, it is a


70 Blau, Impossible 204.

71 Blau, Impossible 205.
formative influence; if well-made, articulate, and persuasive, it in turn has the power to
determine judgment and to induce a particular kind of response.”72 Blau believes that
well-articulated drama, as presented through a theatrical production, has the power to
influence the audience and become the kind of social art he was beginning to envision.
He continues:

The drama both exploits and encourages social solidarity [. . .] the
same positive quality of the drama is, of course, recognized by
totalitarian states and utilized to stimulate order; and it is one of the
great ironies of our age that the theater, so impoverished in our own
democracy, is apparently—in now ever regimented a way—thriving in
the Soviet Union.73

Blau did not accept the idea that America had no need for theatre to unify, teach, or
guide its populace, that it was the job of the government alone. Blau believed that
American theatre, with its emphasis on entertainment, was indicative of the “cultural
heterogeneity” that had taken over American society.74 These early thoughts show
Blau’s attitude toward American theatre and hint at what he would later write about in
depth in The Impossible Theater - that the American theatre and its drama was not
delving deeply enough into the psychological and sociological questions that plagued
society and therefore was not as powerful as it could be.


A case in point is Blau’s comparison of Arthur Miller’s *The Crucible* and Brecht’s *Mother Courage* as social dramas. As stated above, TAW had a tremendous success with their production of *The Crucible* the year prior to the premiere of *Mother Courage*. Blau believed the success of their production (and numerous revivals of the play) had to do with the fact that McCarthyism was at a fevered pitch in 1954 and that Miller had written a play that Blau said had the “vehemence of good social protest.”

Though he acknowledged several good points about the play, Blau thought that Miller was not objective when writing *The Crucible*. He believed Miller “put a judgmental finger on the full loathsomeness of…anti-social action” and, instead of deepening the mystery of where such irrational actions come from and why they occur, wrote from a clearly one-sided stance on the subject.

Miller had posited conclusions about the situation and the characters so that the audience could revel in their own judgmental satisfaction based on those conclusions set before them so clearly. However, as Blau said, if the audience already knows what they feel about the situation before they arrive, then it is easy to sit back, watch, and self-righteously condemn the characters that should be condemned and condone the action they believe in. From a director’s standpoint therefore, the question is: where is the power in that? If an audience already knows how they feel about certain situations and the play corroborates those feelings, then theatre has done nothing but create societal status quo instead of putting forth the questions that create inquiry and motivate change.

*Mother Courage* changed the rules for everyone - audience, actors, and Blau. As Blau said: “if *The Crucible* gratifies what you already think, *Mother Courage* lets you

75 Blau, *Impossible* 188.

feel what you think only long enough to make you judge what you feel." There was a certain predictability in a majority of the plays being presented at the time TAW did Mother Courage just as there was when Bertolt Brecht wrote the play. Audiences knew, for the most part, what to expect when they walked into the theatre: the lights would go down and the play would begin; the characters would be portrayed in a reasonable facsimile of real life which the audience would, through their silent acceptance, view; the play would end. But what Blau knew was that what San Franciscans had come to expect in a play they could not expect in a Brecht play. Issues and themes that were readily available in a play like The Crucible were tougher to discern in Mother Courage, thereby causing actors and audience alike to delve deeper into the material. Blau said that there was no way, as a company, they could have predicted how the audience would react to Mother Courage because it required a different type of commitment and a different relationship to the material. He stated that “the ground rules had to be written as we went along.”

Blau talks a great deal about the structure of Mother Courage and the dramatic rhythm of the play in The Impossible Theater. He states: “Unorthodox, severe, and fragmentary as it might be, the dramatic rhythm of Mother Courage is unavoidable because, though Brecht may not see as much of life as we would prefer, what he prefers to see he sees shrewdly and what he says he documents.” Though a play like The Crucible for example, takes the audience through a series of ups and downs, it follows logically and leads to a conclusion in which everyone, actors and audience alike,

77 Blau, Impossible 192.
78 Blau, Impossible 192.
79 Blau, Impossible 192.
can feel a bit justified that their emotions have been well played. *Mother Courage* is an ongoing dialectic rather than a conclusive story. The play puts the audience, not in their emotional comfort zones where loose ends are neatly tied up, but in the outer limits of these zones; it puts them in the peripheral grey areas of nebulous thought and frustrated emotion. For this reason, Blau was interested to see how *Mother Courage* would be received by the audience.

Blau believes that Mother Courage is not a heroic figure like John Proctor. In the end, she does not die nobly or drag her cart off a changed woman because of the outrages of war, though she loses all three of her children to its cruel destruction. She merely continues on, following the war with her cart, looking to regain some of her money. This is why, in Blau’s opinion, the play is a better social drama than *The Crucible* because it does not judge the situation and the characters with a pre-determined emotionality. It presents them in their particular situation, leaving the mind of the audience free to think and their emotions free to apply where they may.

Blau’s program note for his production of *Mother Courage* summarizes only some of the insights he gained during the rehearsal period and attempts to prepare the audience for the new style of theatre they were about to view. Here, in part, is what he wrote in 1956 concerning his discoveries about Epic Theater:

> Best known for his 'THREEPENNY OPERA,' on which he collaborated with Kurt Weill, Brecht developed in the 1920’s, along with the German director Erwin Piscator, a theater alien to the accepted traditions of western drama. It was to be a sociological theater, scientistic and tactical, opposed to the spirit of illusion and magic [. . .] a
didactic and critical theater, where all the conventions of the stage would function on behalf of man’s alert intelligence [. . .]. ‘Mother courage,’ written just before the second world war (sic), was not produced until Brecht—an exile from the Nazis—returned to Germany, and then not until it had been done in Zurich. The Actor’s Workshop production is the first in America. A drama in Brecht’s epic tradition, chronicling the German Thirty Years War, it is not a historical play in the ordinary sense; it is behavior ‘historified’ or ‘alienated,’ the recognizable and commonplace made strange and famous. The characters of ‘Mother Courage’ are modern in word and deed, and we are reminded of history in order the better to see by irony, balladry, planned incongruities, and caustically realistic drama the world which history ignores.  

The program note defines the Epic style in theoretical terms and warns the audience that what they were about to view would be different from the Western style of drama to which they were accustomed. But, as evidenced in this brief note about Epic theatre, Blau did not properly prepare the audience as to the new theatre style they were about to see. A more layman’s explanation of the alienation style would have better prepared the audience. For example, instead of saying, “a didactic and critical theater, where all the conventions of the stage would function on behalf of man’s alert intelligence,” he should have explained that there would be placards announcing the scenes, music that would interrupt the flow of action, and a straight forward, running commentary from the actors about the characters. The purpose of these conventions and the particular way

of playing the action in Brecht’s Alienation Theatre is to jolt the minds of the audience out of the accepted way of doing theatre and into a new vision of theatre; to “alienate” them from a complete subjective view and force them into a more aware objectivity. Although the conventions of Epic theatre are widely known and accepted today, they were not so in 1956.

Years later, Blau summed up his first experience with *Mother Courage* and its relevance as a social drama:

*Mother Courage* attacks not only war, but all forms of subservience to the ethics of ‘business as usual’; it attacks, in sum, the kind of economy we still have, structured on the premise that war is, if not our necessity and destiny, what we must prepare for to avoid it…It doesn’t tell us what we already know; it tells us what some of us don’t want to hear. And for some who share its sentiments, it is disturbing because it impugns us all—because there is no final locus for self-exoneration. At the end of 1955, it was not only iconoclastic as to form, testing our beliefs, it was also an anti-trust suit of our commonest emotions, oscillating finally between a Social Drama and an anti-social vision.81

Blau referenced Dulles’s Brinkmanship in the line “what we must prepare for to avoid it” and attacked America’s party line of war nurturing the economy. In Blau’s opinion, *Mother Courage* forced Americans to look at their country and realize that America’s economy was based on the necessity of war and the ‘business as usual’ tack that Dulles promoted. For those who agreed that war was a necessity for whatever reason, the play pointed out the futility of war - that it does not change, it just keeps going. For

81 Blau, Impossible 193.
those who did not agree with war or the American economic necessity of war, it still did not satisfy because it did not release them from their responsibility, thus recognized, to go out and change the ways things were done. As his thoughts progressed toward an idea of theatre as a social force, Blau constructed his approach to Mother Courage and the theme he would choose to bring out in his direction.

**Theme of Time**

One important issue Blau learned about directing while working on this production was the concept of time: time within the structure of each scene in Mother Courage; time as it relates to the acting; and, time as it is perceived by the audience while watching the play. He states: “‘Mother Courage’ was the first of our plays to force us to reconsider the question of Time in the theater, the way it is passed, and the way it gives identity to Action.”  

After the huge success of The Crucible, it was difficult for the actors, audiences, and critics to accept the seemingly slower pace and lengthening of action in Mother Courage. Blau relates in The Impossible Theater: “While a play like The Crucible may blur meaning in momentum, a production of Mother Courage may underline it, too much. The task is to realize a scene, the whole crisscrossing motion of motives, so that it might be the better alienated.” The issue of time that Blau refers to is related to the behavior of the characters and the playing of the action by the actors. What it came down to for Blau and his direction of the play was an economy of business - one gesture used to punctuate one moment so that each gesture has an import of its own but within the larger context of the entire scene. The speed of those moments and how they

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82 Blau, Impossible 197.

83 Blau, Impossible 198.
should be played comes out of what is seen as a whole, therefore slowing down an action merely because it is more “Epic” to do so, is not right either. It depends on what is seen in the whole scene. This is the problem of pacing in a Brecht play.

Paine Knickerbocker of the The San Francisco Chronicle comments in his first review of the play that there was “little suspense” in the play and that the production as a whole was “somber” and “somewhat tedious.” Blau believes that, when they have nothing else to say, pace is the one thing critics in the theatre usually pick to comment on; a slower pace usually means a dull production. Blau’s concern was that Knickerbocker did not understand the necessary pace of Mother Courage from the slow buildup to the wild drum beating scene toward the end of the play. Knickerbocker was instantly drawn to what Blau terms the “effective” and “startling” rhythm of that more obviously emotional scene and did not understand the reason for the dramatic climb to that moment.

Another reviewer, William C. Glackin of the Sacramento Bee, did understand the pacing of the play and, though he also comments on the lack of suspense, found the play effective:

There is no surface conflict in his play. There is therefore very little suspense, in the usual sense. Yet as the drama draws toward its close, you realize that it is a kind of law unto itself. It is essentially episodic, yet the episodes gather a momentum which creates its own suspense. Interest builds, scene by scene, as the meaning and feeling of the play become clearer and stronger, until Brecht creates a final, climactic

84 Paine Knickerbocker, “‘Mother Courage’-A Workshop First,” 21.
85 Knickerbocker, “‘Mother Courage’-A Workshop First” 21.
moment of shattering power.\textsuperscript{86} Glackin was also drawn to the emotional drum beating of Dumb Catherine toward the end of the play but understood the slow buildup of action leading to that scene, something that Knickerbocker did not understand.

Blau made a keen observation about pace and the playing of each moment in \textit{Mother Courage}. He states: “the aesthetics of pace has never been sufficiently explored, [. . .] it has something to do with the mileage of moments—the degree of \textit{illumination} in each instant, [. . .] but in our anxiety to get on with it, we are likely to skip over a good portion of reality that materialized for a slower pulse.”\textsuperscript{87} Understanding the pacing of a Brecht play is one thing. Directing that kind of pacing and finding the significance of the action without turning the play into a twelve-hour epic is another. Blau wondered how much time a director should take when playing the action. He was already dealing with what he termed as the “slow-building omnibus structure” of the play, meaning that Brecht wrote into the structure of the play the slow build and the significance of the moment.\textsuperscript{88} For American audiences who are used to a faster pace in general, how does a director of \textit{Mother Courage} take the time needed to present the moments of significance when those moments are already punctuated within the pacing of the play? Blau knew that Brecht wrote the tempo of the play the way he did because it fit for the society he was living in and coincided with what he learned from Irwin Piscator about \textit{Lehrstuck}, the learning plays written for the working masses. But as Blau was also aware, “tempos outdate themselves” as well as forms and an American


\textsuperscript{87} Blau, \textit{Impossible} 198.

\textsuperscript{88} Blau, \textit{Impossible} 198.
audience in 1956 San Francisco is far different from an East Berlin audience in 1950 or a French one in 1952. \(^{89}\) Blau relates that Brecht himself instructed his company to play with more vitality when they went to England because of the cultural differences between countries. Blau said that the pacing he found for his production of *Mother Courage* was somewhere between the didactic German and the livelier version presented at the Thèâtre National Populaire. \(^{90}\)

Blau further relates what he discovered while working on the pacing: “With Brecht’s plays over-deliberated performance may not only feel slow, but like a gloss to a Victorian novel, the redundancy of the didactic - so that while True Believers may be edified, the disinterested will not be so much enlightened as anxious to get on with what they already know.” \(^{91}\) To play a moment that is already didactic in nature with added dramatic significance in the playing could bore most of the audience who are not schooled in Epic theatre, and most likely would have the same effect on those who are acquainted with the technique. Blau realized that, even with thorough investigation of every moment and a basic understanding of Brechtian pacing, he and his company had trouble separating the alienation technique from mere slow pacing and found they had a tendency to push the action for more excitement. \(^{92}\)

Blau, keenly aware of the effect the slower pacing had on the audiences, puts a disclaimer on his work in his later recollections:

> Fast or slow, let me stress this: there is a difference between an

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\(^{89}\) *Impossible*, 198. Also used in Blau’s article for the *Tulane Drama Review* entitled, “The Popular, the Absurd, and the *Entente Cordiale*,” v. 5, #1, September, 1960, 122.

\(^{90}\) Blau, *Impossible* 199.

\(^{91}\) Blau, *Impossible* 198.

\(^{92}\) Blau, *Impossible* 199.
enlightening succession of ‘events’ and a lusterless sequence of ‘behavior.’ [. . .] That is why, despite the throwing of the onus on the audience (by the play and its defenders), I refuse to take the blame for boredom [. . .]. The anesthesia cannot be aestheticized away.\textsuperscript{93}

Blau is saying there is a natural boredom written into the play and no matter how hard a director tries to direct the action of the piece, it will always be there. The boredom cannot be outdone by the aesthetics or moments of importance of the play and the audience should not hold this against the director or the actors. This is a difficult point to make clear but one that is important to grasp in order to understand Blau’s developing awareness of rhythm in dramatic literature and how to direct it. He explains this point further: “As Baudelaire taught us, Ennui is the cardinal sin of modern life, and art cannot be too cavalier about impacting the situation by outdoing it.”\textsuperscript{94} In life, and especially in the atmosphere of Cold War America in 1956, there was a particular type of ennui - that of irksome wariness and tiresome politics - that made life uncertain and people insular. Blau suggested that art, in this case, \textit{Mother Courage}, should not exacerbate that ennui by being even more tiresome.

Yet, when they slowed down and worked out the minutia of the action implicit in the script, Blau and company discovered that every moment, if they played it, was full of life. Blau recalls: “What we soon realized about the play, particularly as it went on its feet, was that its activity is manifold and unceasing: where it seemed to stand still, there

\textsuperscript{93} Blau, \textit{Impossible} 199.

\textsuperscript{94} Blau, \textit{Impossible} 199.
were countless detailed bits of implicit business; where it appeared to be verbose, there
were various stratas of relevant irony, disguised and overt."95

As for his initial approach to the material, Blau said that he read everything he
could on Brecht and Epic theatre and that he and the company “struggled to the limit of
[their] naïve resources to deploy [themselves] in ‘Epic style.’”96 Blau did not use the
model book that Brecht created as a guideline for directing Mother Courage because it
was not available to them at that time. Also, aside from the model book and Brecht’s
treatise, “A Short Organum for the Theatre” written in 1948, there was not the wealth of
theoretical writings on Brecht and Alienation theatre that is currently available to
directors to learn the tenets of the theory. Despite this fact, Blau did state that he tried
to conduct himself and his company as closely to what he had read about Epic style as
possible.97 In retrospect, he believes not using the book helped developed his own
sense of what a director should be: “the more I work in the theater the one thing I am
most disinclined to hear is how a play should be done, even from Brecht, who wrote
prescriptions.”98 Blau was a director who wanted to attack the text afresh - with no
instructions from the playwright and no pre-conceived notions. He was the type of
director who thought his way through the material in an effort to find his own inherent
emotional response to it. He believed directors should go against the text and seek
answers that were not explicitly written into the text by the playwright. This is another

95 Blau, “Brecht’s ‘Mother Courage’: The Rite of War and the Rhythm of Epic.” Educational Theatre

96 Blau, Impossible 103.


98 Blau, Impossible 93.
reason why he preferred European dramatists over American dramatists, such as Arthur Miller, because he felt freer to think for himself when directing that material.

When answers need to be sought out rather than merely acted out, the true work of the director begins. A director wants to decipher meaning behind the words and create the actions that exemplify those meanings and then communicate the discoveries to the actors. This last goal presented a difficult challenge for Blau during the rehearsal period for Mother Courage but it was a challenge he thought he was ready for.

**Directing the Actors**

Blau states that “acting is the protoplasm of the theater. It is the essential element in the physical projection of the form which the playwright has perceived.”

This is especially true in a Brecht play where the form is as important as the content. According to Blau, actors are closest to the rhythm of the play, to its “bones” as he calls it. He believes the director, if he is in tune with Brecht’s idea of alienation is “the instrument of provocation...he [is] as much a gadfly as counselor.”

A director has to goad the actor into accepting and using the alienation elements and stoppage in action as part of the innate rhythm of a Brecht play. Most modern actors naturally want the action to flow seamlessly so they might run with the continuity of feeling and the sequence of action with subsequent reaction; they want to “get into it” so to speak. Instead, Brecht’s alienation theory makes them fall out of that rhythm and the acting thus feels uncomfortably choppy and disconnected. Blau recounts how the

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99 Blau, “Brecht’s ‘Mother Courage’: Rite of War.”

100 Blau, “Brecht’s ‘Mother Courage’: Rite of War.”
cast, at first, felt the play was “static” and, other than the drum beating scene, felt the rest of the play was “a lot of talk.”

A main tenet of alienation theatre is that actors cannot lose themselves in the role; they have to be very consciously themselves as actors on a stage playing a character. This goes against most American trained actors’ natural inclination. The director therefore must be the gadfly that Blau refers to, always reminding them that these are characters in a play and not the recreation of natural life on stage. Blau states that actors must sacrifice their “moments of drama” to present the points of the play; they must serve the drama and not themselves. In essence, Blau was asking them to lose themselves in the part but not in the way that most actors think. The actors had to lose their inclination to lose themselves in the roles and be consciously aware that they were serving the drama’s needs instead of the drama serving theirs. Blau says an actor must put aside his inclination to “fondle his feelings” because “to act in a Brecht drama requires in general a detached intelligence and that control of the body which is necessary if one wants to act by any system.” It sounds in this statement as if Blau is implying that the acting should be more intellectual than emotional; that the actor cannot get lost in the emotionality of the role but must maintain an objective stance and control.

The system used by many American actors at this time was the American version, developed and advocated by Lee Strasberg, of an acting method originally conceived by Constantin Stanislavski. Blau believed this system, commonly known as

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101 Blau, Impossible 193. Also written in Blau’s article “Brecht’s ‘Mother Courage’: Rite of War.”

102 Blau, “Brecht’s ‘Mother Courage’: Rite of War.”

103 Blau, “Brecht’s ‘Mother Courage’: Rite of War.”
“the Method,” was good for those actors who had not yet learned the mastery and control of all that they have known or felt. Actors, particularly young actors, needed to explore what was inside of them before they could have control enough to let it go and work from the outside in. Many modern actors want to immediately internalize everything. They need to find an internal reason for everything they do on stage which motivates action. Questions such as “what is my motivation?” and “why am I doing what I’m doing?” tend to keep actors inside their heads again, serving their needs as actors and not the needs of the play. Blau realized that this internal approach to acting stopped his actors from letting the external events of the play itself affect them. As he reasons:

Stanislavski stressed the organic factor between what an actor had to feel and what he had to do to feel it; but he assumed there was something objectively there to be felt. Brecht stressed the objective factor between what might be done and what it could mean…the image, the action, the totem, the happening carries the weight of meaning.

According to Blau, Brecht’s alienation technique asked the actor to play the meaning of the action and not look for the feeling of the action as the Method advocates; a concept that he states was “somewhat intimidating” to “the unprepared sensibility” of the actors.

However, the awareness of being an actor in a play should not be substituted for real people on stage, those who have no training and just are who they are. Using non-

105 Blau, Impossible 92.
106 Blau, “Brecht’s ‘Mother Courage’: Rite of War.”
actors, according to Blau, is the wrong approach. The characters in *Mother Courage* are real people, but to play them *with* real people does not serve the drama or Brecht’s intentions. To be unaware of the acting is not the point. The actor is aware of the acting and therefore must be a master of the technique and play the character as if looking at it from above the character rather than from inside it. As Blau states, “ultimately alienation is attitude, as well as a strategy. It is designed to put us at a distance from what comes easily or is too familiar; as an emotional corrective, it will not let us be comfortable by forgetting ourselves and where we are.”  

Actors need to be highly aware of who and where they are, serve the drama and not their own feelings, and go against what he colorfully describes as the “naturalistic provinciality of the best American theater, which has had its most recent apotheosis in the scratch-and-mumble school of acting on television.” Acting, as Blau saw it at the time, had become very self-indulgent with the actor playing inside his head rather than in the situation of the play.

Blau recalls in *The Impossible Theater* the time he observed the power of alienation acting. Ekkehard Schall, an actor with the Berliner Ensemble that Blau refers to as the “intensely Communist Marlon Brando,” performed in Brecht’s *The Rise and Fall of Arturo Ui*. Blau says that Schall was a “political actor” and that it was “eye-opening to see somebody get so much out of himself by force of external conviction.” Schall was driven by what he believed in; an engagement with the society in which he lived which manifested itself in his art.

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107 Blau, “Brecht’s *Mother Courage*: Rite of War.”
108 Blau, “Brecht’s *Mother Courage*: Rite of War.”
Schall’s conviction that Blau found so striking was something he felt was lacking in American acting and in his own company at the time they did *Mother Courage*. Yet, he felt what they lacked in political conviction they made up for in their enthusiastic playing of the new style of theatre. He recalls: “It’s hard to convey how happily naïve it all became after the initial doubts about the play - the alienation, the politics, the sense of mission; naïve in the best sense. There was a general feeling that with this play the theater might earn an effective social role in the community.”

The sense that they were presenting something absolutely new, socially-relevant, barely introduced to American theatre and unheard of in San Francisco, gave the company a sense of purpose, drive, awareness that they had not, up to this point, experienced. They had presented many successful productions and garnered good reviews for them which in turn procured them an Equity contract, professional status, and the admiration of many prominent artists, Arthur Miller being among them. However, they had never collectively felt with assured conviction that what they were doing was changing the landscape of San Franciscan theatre until one stormy night during rehearsal. Blau recollects the epiphanous moment:

Yet our optimism was tempered one rainy night at our Elgin Street warehouse, when morale was soaring in rehearsals and everybody was feeling that we might yet change the world. We were ardently exploring some point in the play when suddenly there was thunder and the rain began to beat heavily on the chicken-wire glass of the skylight; and all together as we were, we felt impossibly alone. The discussion stopped. The sense of isolation spread. And our ardor, momentarily dampened,

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was revived more realistically when I said the production had to contain
the knowledge that we were, after all, but a minority group in a minority
form in a country pledged to the protection of minorities, in a period in
which they needed such protection.\textsuperscript{111}

Blau’s words caused a shift in attitude within the company from naïve enthusiasm about
doing a new type of play to mature conviction that what they were doing had social
implications that went beyond the theatre and into the prevailing attitude of wariness
caused by the Cold War. The moment brought their work to a different level; one in
which social relevance melded with artistic exploration. Blau recalls that “no production
we had done until then was so full of discovery.”\textsuperscript{112}

Blau’s thoughts on the character of Mother Courage encapsulate what he
believed was most important about Brecht and Epic theatre. He states that Courage
embodies Brecht’s “desire for social change” and that she is, finally, “an image of
hopeless changelessness.”\textsuperscript{113} Not only does the character exemplify the theme of war
as “business as usual,” but she also embodies the style of Epic theatre acting. The
actress playing Courage cannot fall into the traps of emotionality, even when reacting to
the death of her children. Blau explains his vision for the character in his 1957 article:

How easy to break down, to become a ‘real’ mother in the expression of
her loss. But how unsafe, Brecht suggests, how unlike the woman
whose sole purpose has been to beat the war by playing its game, and
whose personal grief is not nearly so important to the purpose of the

\textsuperscript{111} Blau, \textit{Impossible} 203.

\textsuperscript{112} Blau, \textit{Impossible} 195.

\textsuperscript{113} Blau, \textit{Impossible} 200.
play as the public implications of her feeling, the judgment of society
that it demands, and for which the actress must sacrifice her ‘moment’
of drama to demonstrate the point…Mother Courage behaves with what
appears to be an intimidating severity.\textsuperscript{114}

To play Courage as a grieving mother negates the larger social issue that Brecht
intended for the audience to see. He did not want the audience to get caught up in the
emotion of the scenes but instead, to realize the reasons for the deaths of her children -
the relentless war. According to Frederic Ewen, Brecht was appalled when the reviews
for the 1941 Zurich production “stressed the emotional impact of the play” and praised
the strength of the mother.\textsuperscript{115} He states that Brecht, as is well known, re-wrote some of
the scenes and took out some of the more obvious emotional moments. Blau, in trying
to stay true to what he believed Brecht intended, directed the character of Courage in
this less emotional style.

Courage is not a hero. She is a business woman whose thoughts revolve around
the selling of her goods. As Blau states, she is a “camp-following career woman” who is
“as guilty as the warmongers” in perpetuating war’s business.\textsuperscript{116} She is not a character
that people will easily like because she displays no outward heroism or any obvious
redeeming quality. This point was brought out by Paine Knickerbocker in his first review
of the production. It is also this point that makes the character particularly difficult for an
actress to portray. The question is how to keep within the intentions of Epic theatre yet
create a character that will make a solid impression on the audience. In Blau’s opinion,

\textsuperscript{114} Blau, “Brecht’s ’Mother Courage’: Rite of War.”
\textsuperscript{115} Frederic Ewen, Bertolt Brecht: His Life, His Art, and His Times (New York: Citadel P, 1992) 360.
\textsuperscript{116} Blau, Impossible 201.
Courage’s final act of the play - that of pulling her wagon off to follow the war - is the epitome of Brecht’s acting technique. According to Blau, the actress playing Courage must let “the emotion of a desperate enterprise that has run down into the mechanical [. . .] come all the more from the actress’s most secret resources of feeling.”\textsuperscript{117} Again, the idea of the “secret,” having something that is withheld from the audience, intrigued Blau. As he says, there is a “fine line between compassion granted and compassion solicited.”\textsuperscript{118} When playing Courage, Blau believes the actress should not ask for the audience’s compassion by over-indulging in an outward display of emotion. An actress should play Courage like the “memento mori” that Blau says she is; the reminder of the inevitability of death.\textsuperscript{119} In this final moment, Courage is the embodiment of the idea of letting the situation - the relentlessness of war and having to turn a profit - have its effect on the audience in order to stimulate them to change. The actress playing Courage needs to let the situation ring true, not her emotional take on that situation.

According to Josephine Harris, Beatrice Manley gave a “dazzling performance” as Mother Courage. Mrs. Harris was struck by Manley’s deep understanding of the text and her “natural inclination in the role.” She relates that Blau “inflicted upon her [Manley] the highest standards” but that Manley’s intellectual understanding of the character helped her meet his standards.\textsuperscript{120} Bert Brauer recalls that Manley was “gritty, steely, and very pragmatic” in her portrayal of Mother Courage.\textsuperscript{121}

\textsuperscript{117} Blau, Impossible 201.
\textsuperscript{118} Blau, Impossible 201.
\textsuperscript{119} Blau, Impossible 201.
\textsuperscript{120} Josephine Harris, personal interview, 26 Aug. 2010.
\textsuperscript{121} Bertram Brauer, email to the author, 2 June 2010.
From a director’s standpoint, to have an actress of such apparent high caliber only enhances the work and makes it easier to direct the play. As mentioned above, Blau considered the final image of the play the most essential in conveying not only the themes of the play but the Epic style of acting. He states:

Now, this view of her can be given weight in production or, allowing for more than natural compassion, it can be contradicted. True, unseeing as you make her, an audience may still not believe the evidence of its senses. But if, in that final moment (for one example), you have the actress square her shoulders and look steadfastly into the future, hauling her wagon like a resolution to survive, ignoring the fact that she is still following the war blindly, then you play right into the sympathies that Brecht didn’t want…That final attitude is crucial, for as I see it, Courage pulling that wagon is by no means indomitable, but a desperate fool reduced to an unthinking beast of burden.¹²²

This passage demonstrates Blau’s take on the direction of the final moment in the play. He believes that if there is any hint of real courage in Mother Courage at this point it would negate the message of the play and, as has been noted, the actress would not be serving the play. In choosing a certain emotion like resoluteness or strength, the actress would be drawing attention to her interpretation and not the intent of the play. The actress must remain, not emotionless, but emotionally objective; she is always commenting on and not internalizing the character. Manley hit the right Blauian tone for this final moment. She was praised by some and criticized by others.

**Critical Reaction:** “The Education of Paine Knickerbocker”¹²³

¹²² Blau, Impossible 201-02.
Blau’s production of *Mother Courage* caused a controversy the likes of which had not yet been seen in San Franciscan theatre. The controversy, by today’s standards, was small and did not last very long. It consisted of a few argumentative comments and letters passed between Blau and company and theatre critic Paine Knickerbocker. Knickerbocker had taken over the post of theatre critic for *The San Francisco Chronicle* in October of 1955. He favorably critiqued two of the Workshop’s productions, *The Girl on the Via Flaminia* and *The Importance of Being Ernest* - both directed by Jules Irving - in October and December, respectively. Knickerbocker did not critique Blau’s production of TAW’s first world premiere, “Captive at Large.” *Mother Courage* was the first of Blau’s productions reviewed by Knickerbocker.

Blau had a difficult relationship with theatre critics and Knickerbocker in particular. Fowler refers to this fact often throughout his dissertation and Josephine Harris refers to Knickerbocker’s years reviewing the Workshop’s varied productions as the “education of Paine Knickerbocker” by Blau.124 It was her opinion that though Knickerbocker was a firm believer in San Francisco theatre, he was “hypercritical” of TAW. She recalls that TAW gave Knickerbocker a “multi-million dollar education as a reviewer” and that because of the adversarial force between Knickerbocker and Blau the company was “defensively good.”125 As noted, Blau was a highly intellectual man who strove to thoroughly understand each play and the methods needed to produce it. He was an intense director sometimes to the point of alienating his actors. It can be concluded that

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123 Josephine Harris, personal interview, 26 Aug. 2010.
124 Josephine Harris, personal interview, 26 Aug. 2010.
125 Josephine Harris, personal interview, 26 Aug. 2010.
he would not suffer well anyone whom he felt did not research the material as completely as he did, especially if that person was the newspaper critic who reviewed his productions.

Knickerbocker graduated from Dartmouth College and obtained his Master’s degree in English Literature from the University of California at Berkeley. In time, he would become known for his intelligence, fairness, good taste, and firm advocacy for San Franciscan theatre. He had been a reporter for the *Oakland Tribune* and then a sports writer at *The San Francisco Chronicle* prior to taking over as theatre critic. Though he did not have much experience as a theatre critic when he reviewed *Mother Courage*, he was an experienced reporter/writer with an English literature background and many supporters in the industry.

As stated above, Knickerbocker’s critiques of Blau’s production of *Mother Courage* caused a controversy between them. Blau refers to Knickerbocker’s comments as “know-nothing banality.” A dissection of Knickerbocker’s critiques of *Mother Courage*, analyzed below, reveal his elementary knowledge of Brecht and Epic theatre. The critiques incited Blau, who said that he was “sufficiently furious” to write a letter to the editor of the *Chronicle* but which Irving urged him not to send. He capitulated to Irving’s request, partly out of respect for his partner and partly to appease the nervous company members who believed that negative press would hamper the growth of the company. Blau’s comments present a bleak picture of Knickerbocker’s

126 According to Knickerbocker’s obituary published in *The San Francisco Chronicle* on October 16, 2005, he was instrumental in convincing the American Conservatory Theater to move to San Francisco right after TAW moved to New York.


abilities to review theatre productions. However, if the lens is pulled further back it reveals that there were justifiable reasons on both sides for the controversy.

The first article to announce TAW’s upcoming American premiere of Mother Courage appeared in the This World section of The San Francisco Chronicle on Sunday, January 8, 1956. The article is entitled, “A Slashing Indictment of War: The Skilled Actor’s Workshop Tries Its Hand at ‘Epic Theater.’” There is no name connected to the article and though Paine Knickerbocker’s name is in the byline of the article printed above it on the same page, it is no indication that he was the author of this Mother Courage article. However, the language used to describe the play and the mention of Epic theatre in the article is a good indicator that Knickerbocker was not the author, as is discussed below. The article describes the play as “bitter and didactic but still remarkable theater” and made the point that Mother Courage, through her relentless struggle to keep her children out of the war, was an indictment against all war. The article also states that the play was “as slashing in its impact” as Tiger at the Gates, written by Jean Giradoux and directed by Harold Clurman that was playing on Broadway at the same time.

Knickerbocker introduces the premiere in the aforementioned article, “Actor’s Workshop Gets An American Premiere,” on January 9, 1956, the day after the article discussed in the previous paragraph. In this article, Knickerbocker gives a brief accounting of the play’s performance history and notes that, up until the summer of 1955, Mother Courage had not generated much interest among American producers.

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129 Bill van Niekerken, email to author, 4 Nov. 2011. van Niekerken, the research librarian at The San Francisco Chronicle, said there was no way to know for certain who the author of this first article was.

He does not mention Epic theatre, alienation effect, nor does he use the strong adjectives of the first anonymous article, furthering the case against Knickerbocker as the author of that article. He focuses his article on how TAW obtained the rights to the play before anyone else and how Arthur Miller was going to be at the premiere. Knickerbocker was hopeful that the production would be an exciting event for San Franciscan theatre. His enthusiasm for the piece waned significantly after he viewed the production.

Knickerbocker’s first critique of Mother Courage entitled, “‘Mother Courage’ - A Workshop ‘First,’” reads like a general newspaper review of a play. He specifically addresses three aspects of the production: the play itself, the acting, and the direction. Knickerbocker introduces Brecht and explains the circumstances surrounding the writing of the play by saying that Brecht was exiled by the Nazis and that he wrote the play before World War II. He does not mention Epic theatre or alienation effect, two important aspects of Brecht’s work, in this article either. According to Knickerbocker there are many trouble spots with the play that he refers to as “weaknesses.” His main concern is that it “neither spoofs nor vilifies.”

Knickerbocker states that the play needed to take a stronger stand one way or the other and that it was not clear what the message was that Brecht intended.

Knickerbocker comments that the play had “little suspense” and that “much of its anti-war crusading seems both repetitious and pretty old hat.” He further states: “There have been many plays that are sharper weapons against war. Perhaps the fault here lies that Americans are sufficiently naïve to believe there are still causes worthy of

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defending, and that to some, war can still be the great adventure, but Brecht, exiled by
the Nazis, understandably presents it in another light.”  Knickerbocker’s comments
refer to the fact that Americans were able to romanticize the adventure of war because
no major conflict had been fought on mainland American soil since the Civil War. But
Brecht was from Germany and experienced firsthand Nazi fascism and the devastation
to cities wrought by massive weaponry. As Knickerbocker states, it was no wonder that
Brecht had a bleak view of war. Even though Knickerbocker understood Brecht’s
background, he still found the play dull. Blau believed that Knickerbocker was not
aware of Brecht’s subtle, yet relentless themes of “war is life” and, economically
speaking, war as “business as usual.”

Blau comments on the western audience tendency toward the overtly dramatic in
his 1957 article entitled, “Brecht’s ‘Mother Courage’: The Rite of War and the Rhythm of
Epic.” He states that most people are drawn to the latter part of the play because “most
of us are still prone to recognize as dramatic mainly that which is fast-paced and
violent.” Just like Blau’s actors, Knickerbocker was also most impressed with the
drum beating scene played by Dumb Catherine because it was a break from the slower-
paced scenes that came before. Knickerbocker thought that the loud drum beating
coupled with Dumb Catherine's feverish cries made a “startling and effecting picture.”

Knickerbocker states there were “two particularly bright lights in the somber
production of ‘Mother Courage,’” those of Eugene Roche as Cook and Robert Symonds

133 Blau, Impossible 193.
as Chaplain. He calls them “superb” and says they were the ones who “most successfully capture and in turn reflect the raffish spirit of war and its erosive moral degradation.” He thought these two portrayals embodied the American spirit of war mentioned above. However, the theme Blau was trying to portray was that, in war, nothing changes. All of these events happen in the play because the course of war, fueled by the ever-present economic necessity, is relentlessly grim, the way Knickerbocker describes Beatrice Manley’s portrayal of Mother Courage. Interestingly, when criticizing Manley’s performance, Knickerbocker hit upon the very point Blau was trying to make - that war is relentless and is seldom glorious.

Knickerbocker says that Manley played Mother Courage with an “unrelenting grimness.” Under the subtitle, “Not Endearing” he states:

Mother Courage is no Molly Pitcher or Mata Hari. She is a determined old girl who survives the Four Horsemen, but, unfortunately, she does so without endearing herself to anyone, so that while one might marvel at her toughness, one really doesn’t give a damn whether the old trout comes a cropper. She is a target neither for our scorn, nor our admiration....

Knickerbocker did not realize he was experiencing the alienation effect Blau desired—not to lose oneself in the emotion of the character but to think objectively about the character. The fact that Knickerbocker did not care what happened to Mother Courage could be seen as a testament to Blau’s direction and Manley’s performance; apparently, their work reflected the basic tenets of Brecht’s alienation effect. On the other hand,

Knickerbocker’s detachment from the character was so severe that he did not care to think what caused the character’s grim attitude. This is something that a director needs to be careful of when directing Brecht - to create a portrayal that is true to Brecht’s technique but one that is also interesting enough to create thought and discussion, not dismissal.

Knickerbocker’s critique points out another flaw in Blau’s direction of the acting. The acting by Symonds and Roche impressed Knickerbocker while Manley’s did not. This shows unevenness in the acting styles which Blau, as director, should have recognized. In order to stay true to the Epic style, Blau should have made certain that all performers were acting with the same level of alienation technique; that no performance stood out from the rest. This might be an example of the tendency to push for sake of pacing that Blau described; that he too felt the need for some type of more obvious emotion in the production.

As for the rest of Blau’s direction, Knickerbocker states:

I think there is weakness in the direction of the play. That there are no strong voices to render the songs does not matter, but the timidity of the production does. Mother Courage’s cart goes through the score and ten years never changing, with the same sausages and inscription, whereas it might have become a dramatic symbol of her fortunes; the stage is used with little imagination, and the costumes are drab where some contrast would have helped.\textsuperscript{138}

Again, Knickerbocker points out exactly what Blau was attempting to show through his direction - that Mother Courage, as exemplified in her cart, never changes and that

\textsuperscript{138} Knickerbocker, “'Mother Courage’— A Workshop ‘First,’” 21.
there is no “dramatic symbol of her fortunes” implied in the text or wanted in the production.\textsuperscript{139} The dissection of Knickerbocker’s first critique of the production reveals his tendency toward the dramatic and his lack of knowledge of the Epic style of Brecht. This does not mean, however, that Blau’s production was the best interpretation of this play and that Knickerbocker was merely blind to the technique. The analysis is simply meant to show Knickerbocker’s lack of understanding of Epic theatre and Blau’s vision as a director.

Understandably there was an uproar against Knickerbocker’s critiques from those who liked the production. Typically, it is part of human nature to defend what is fervently believed in from those who differ from it. The letters in response to Knickerbocker’s first critique from friends of TAW solicited by the company are not merely defensive but have a deeper motivation to them. The letter writers pointed out Knickerbocker’s lack of knowledge which, in turn, induced him to see the production a second time and prompted a second critique which appeared in the “This World” section of \textit{The San Francisco Chronicle} on January 29, 1956.\textsuperscript{140}

In “Mother’s Admirers Force a Last-Ditch Defense,” Knickerbocker parries the many jabs from the protest letters with the skill of a good newspaper writer but with only slightly more knowledge of Brecht and Epic theatre than was contained in his first critique. The opening lines of Knickerbocker’s second critique reveal the emotional response from his readership:

\begin{quote}
Since the Actor’s Workshop production of Bertolt Brecht’s ‘Mother
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{139} Blau, \textit{Impossible} 193.

\textsuperscript{140} The cartoon drawings that appear along with this second critique show the Workshop’s artwork for their advertisements of \textit{MC}—a woman’s head with crosses in the eyes—confronting a caricature of Knickerbocker with scales of justice in his.
Courage’ was reviewed, I have been teased into paraphrasing Congreve, and wondering has ‘hell a fury like the epic theater scorned?’ For a dozen letters or so have been sent to The Chronicle (sic) protesting that review. Some are shrill in indignation, boiling with emotional outrage, and others are calmer, but no less sharp.  

Some of the letters he quotes from attempt to draw Knickerbocker’s attention to such things as the standing ovation on opening night and the herculean effort the Workshop accomplished in producing such a play as *Mother Courage*. Knickerbocker counters these comments by explaining that the ovation and comments were from a friendly opening night crowd. There is some truth in his comments. There is no way to accurately judge the true inspiration behind a standing ovation and, traditionally, an opening night crowd is usually filled with subscribers and friends of the theatre. Another letter praises Manley’s performance and another sarcastically compliments Knickerbocker on using the word “scatological” correctly. But the comments to note in detail here are those concerning Knickerbocker’s knowledge of Epic theatre since this is the main point of the argument being discussed here.

In this second critique, Knickerbocker quotes Eric Bentley extensively and demonstrates that he had done some research on Epic theatre and alienation effect. He states:

According to Eric Bentley, who translated this play, Brecht’s kind of theater was the ‘corrective’ that the baroque theater of Germany needed [. . .] ‘The word “epic,”’ Bentley continues, 'has sometimes been

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a nuisance, in that it places Brecht’s work in the category of the eccentric, the deliberately unorthodox, the willfully experimental. When Brecht’s method differs from conventional theater, it differs consistently along the lines of a mature, commonsense theory of the stage. […] But since Brecht was writing in opposition to a baroque German theater that does not exist here, I suggest that his plays should be presented either as severely accurate academic exercises, or productions for local audiences as unlettered as I.142

Basically, Knickerbocker is saying that since Brecht was writing in reaction against a specific type of German theatre, one that Americans do not have, then Brecht will not appeal to non-academic audiences unless it is made more commonly theatrical and interesting in the ways described in his first critique, i.e. different costumes and better use of scenery.

The most interesting letter he quotes from was written by Mary Marvin who, Knickerbocker snidely remarks, “wrote in chilly fashion to MRS. Knickerbocker.” Marvin stated very plainly: “To say of a Brecht play ‘there is little suspense’ is to admit an ignorance of Brecht’s theory and objectives.”143 These words turned out to be prophetic for Knickerbocker because years later, when Blau and Irving announced they were leaving San Francisco, he acknowledged his ignorance of Brecht and his theories when writing these first critiques. He states:

Our first conflict with the Workshop came with our review of the American premiere of 'Mother Courage.’ (We have learned much

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since then.) While our remarks were sincere, conscientious, earnest, it was the review of a Yahoo. Our conclusions were honest, but we were simply inadequately prepared to discuss that particular play.\footnote{Paine Knickerbocker, “The Loss of a Theater and Its Effect on a City’s Culture,” \textit{The San Francisco Chronicle} 7 Feb. 1965, Datebook: 3.}

Knickerbocker admirably acknowledged publicly his lack of knowledge when reviewing TAW’s production thus mending not only his relations with the company to a certain extent but also his reputation as a competent theatre critic.

The lesson Blau took from the controversy was that they all had to learn to deal with negative reviews and answer for themselves the question that they pose: “You accept good reviews of productions in which you don’t really believe, do you have a right to complain about a bad review of a production in which you do?”\footnote{Blau, \textit{Impossible} 203.} With regards to his nervous partner and fellow company members, Blau says that their fears inspired him to think of a “new, contentious kind of theater, which doesn't simply shut up when reviewers tell them that what they don't understand is bad.”\footnote{Herbert Blau, email to the author, 17 Sept. 2010.} This interesting dilemma still haunts and, unarguably, will always haunt those who work in the theatre or in any art form where subjectivity is the basis of critique. Or until, according to Blau, “we are free of the box office necessity of good reviews.”\footnote{Blau, \textit{Impossible} 203.}

The main problem to look at in this controversy is that \textit{Mother Courage} is not just a play, but a representation of a specific theory and, at that time, a whole new style of theatre that San Francisco theatre patrons had not been exposed to before. To critique such a play requires more effort and research on the part of the critic and this was,
among other important issues, what Blau and others found missing in Knickerbocker’s writing.

On the other hand, to reiterate what is stated above, Blau was not just presenting another play he was presenting a whole new theatre theory. He realized that *Mother Courage* required a different type of commitment and relationship to the material which took weeks of rehearsals, discussion, discoveries and plain hashing it out before the actors felt comfortable. But did he realize he also had to prepare the audience and the critics for these new rules? True, the program note Blau wrote explained the new type of theatre the audience was about to see. However, more was needed to educate them before viewing the American premiere of a play by a playwright that American audiences had very little exposure to either through production or critiques.

Though this brief exchange of arguments between a critic and his readership seems minor in relation to other theatre controversies, it nonetheless lit a spark in Blau. He believed Knickerbocker missed the obvious correlation between the play’s theme of war as usual and Dulles’s current foreign policy of Brinkmanship. But this was 1956, a time when McCarthyism was still strong and communism was feared. Knickerbocker, as theatre critic for a major national newspaper, was dealing from a precarious position. He had to think about what he wrote very carefully in order to be fair to the production but also to protect himself from possible repercussions or worse, loss of his job due to being labeled a communist. The evidence shows that Knickerbocker did not have an understanding of Epic theatre when he wrote these critiques and perhaps he was responding from a position of wariness and weariness of war as discussed earlier. Blau
needed to take these ideas into account when he thrust upon San Franciscan
audiences an anti-war play in Epic style.

**Concluding Thoughts**

The production of *Mother Courage* unofficially marked the end of Blau’s neophyte
period as a director. He was now an energetic, accomplished young director with a
desire to do good theatre. And though this can be said of many young directors at this
time, Blau had a take on theatre that was different.

Blau set himself out to be an American theatre revolutionary, something he
discovered while working on *Mother Courage*. There is a sense of pride in the way Blau
described the particular happenings of the controversy surrounding his production.
Theatre, specifically his production of *Mother Courage*, made people think beyond the
moment of the play. It was the kind of controversy he said was lacking in American
theatre in his program note for his production of *Playboy of the Western World* four
years earlier. As Blau stated in *The Impossible Theater*, “*Mother Courage* is a
revolutionary play precisely because it can’t be appropriated without misgivings by any
particular cause.”148 The play could not be claimed by either those who believed in war
or those who did not; neither one side nor the other. Blau took this philosophy and re-
invented it as part of his developing mission for TAW and his own directorial style—no
one side could claim them as a mouthpiece for their cause. Eventually, he and Irving
learned to vary the repertoire so as to not seem slanted toward any one particular type
of theatre. It helped them develop what was to become their greatest and most
acclaimed asset—an eclectic, intellectual repertoire.

Blau wanted to raise the level of intelligence and awareness of the material in American audiences and, especially, American actors. His approach seemed harsh at first to those who were used to doing things the same way. But Blau pushed the actors to go deeper than they were comfortable with and in so doing, alienated some while gaining strong allies in others. Through techniques learned from the Group Theatre, Blau helped the company develop a strong ensemble despite the near constant shifting of company members.

Blau was willing to and indeed actively sought different material to direct and produce. He was somewhat different from Irving in this respect. As Josephine Harris said, Blau wanted to do theatre that was “way out there” while Irving stuck to more popular material. She stated this was one of the reasons they worked so well together.

What mattered most to Blau and why he is an important man to study is that he wanted to accomplish these things in a city that was not New York. When many young directors took their talents to Broadway, Blau, along with Irving, insisted that San Francisco was the place to be. His desire to stay in San Francisco with Irving and create intelligent, different theatre helped solidify the decentralization movement. And yet, though Blau had learned much by this time, he was still plagued by what he did not know. The next chapter explores Blau’s further development as a director with an artistic vision and the pinnacle production of his practical theatre career—Waiting for Godot.
Chapter Three:  *Waiting for Godot*—“A Transforming Event”

Vision, sure of itself, learns to wait. For me, that’s style…For those of us who have only our madness, our art is the means and process of finding out what our style is. How can I know what I mean until I see what I say?  

**The Question of Style**

Blau states in *The Impossible Theater*: “You know a man by the experiments he chooses to make. That’s a part of style.” Each new “experiment” Blau made led him closer to a directorial style that was uniquely his own. As he has stated numerous times, he wanted to literally see what he thought through the physical work of the actors on the stage; to combine his practical direction of the piece with his theoretical perceptions. He was becoming keenly aware that his overall understanding of each play’s theme created a dialectical discussion between the productions. In short, he was learning that the work he did on one production informed the work he did on his next production. Yet his conviction that American theatre was woefully lacking in dramatic material that addressed the global issues of the times was a problem for him. His production of Brecht’s *Mother Courage* had taught him that what he chose to say through the material and his staging of it could impact an audience in a more politically aware fashion. As his convictions about American theatre became stronger, Blau looked to the European plays and playwrights for material that better suited his evolving

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1 Herbert Blau, personal interview, 17 July 2008.
3 Blau, *Impossible* 177-78.
directorional style. However, though Blau turned to Europe for dramatic material, his
direction of it was distinctly American.

By the late 1950s, the Cold War had become an unwanted fact in daily life. There
were many different viewpoints being publicly expressed in the media about how the
war affected daily life in terms of homeland and global security. Blau recalls in The
Impossible Theater how this “cracked perspective of the Cold War” was allowing him
and his company the freedom to explore all of their varied opinions and feelings through
their work on stage.\textsuperscript{4} The members of the Workshop enjoyed the eclecticism of the
repertoire they were presenting and liked to experiment with many different plays, not
taking a firm stand on any one style or theme. An upside to this apparent lack of a
definitive style for TAW was that the company could not be designated as a supporter
for any particular political or social point of view. In other words, as Blau stated, they
could “take a stand, and change our minds.”\textsuperscript{5} They would not rely on one voice to
speak for them but, through the many actors who shifted in and out of TAW bringing
their different voices and perspectives, would concentrate their efforts on finding a way
to make all of their styles work together as one.\textsuperscript{6} As the Workshop grew in stature,
Blau felt an inkling to pinpoint an artistic style for the company but was at a loss as to
what it would be or indeed, if one particular style was necessary. Though he was not
certain that this was the right course of action for the company, Blau was content to wait
and see what unfolded.

\textsuperscript{4} Blau, Impossible 179.
\textsuperscript{5} Blau, Impossible 179.
\textsuperscript{6} Blau, Impossible 176.
Blau’s search for a directorial style in the late 1950s paralleled America’s own search for a style with the global community entering the nuclear age and America taking a prominent lead role opposite Russia. Style, as defined for the discussion of the nation’s search, pertains more to the cultural image rather than specifically the artistic image, as it does for Blau. However, the same parameters can be applied because the country was looking for a cultural identity based on the core values that best represented the nation as a whole, the work of its people, and the material products it produced.

Though America’s military and economic strength, solidly introduced during WWII, proved that it had the ability to be a world leader, America’s cultural identity - its people, institutions, arts - was not so widely known. What little the rest of the world knew of America came mainly from such sources as Hollywood movies, Jazz, and manufactured products, what Henry R. Luce, founder of the Time-Life magazine empire, described as American internationalism “in very human ways.” 7 Yet as the Saturday Evening Post put it so clearly in 1947, because of these products, Americans were thought of as “a race of Hoot Gibsons, Al Capones and Frank Sinatras” mainly interested in lowbrow, popular entertainment. 8 In 1955, Statesman George F. Kennan encapsulated the concern for America’s cultural image in a speech he gave to the International Council of the Museum of Modern Art in New York. He stated: “What we have to do, of course, is to show the outside world both that we have a cultural life and


8 Saturday Evening Post, editorial, 15 Nov. 1947: 147.
that we care something about it.”\textsuperscript{9} Statesmen wanted to prove that Americans, as stated in the \textit{New York Times} magazine, were not “barbarians.”\textsuperscript{10} The country had symphonies, ballet companies and art museums on par artistically with their European counterparts and the world needed to know that Americans supported these higher forms of art as well as the more popular forms described by Luce.

The 1958 Brussels World’s Fair was an opportunity to change this canted worldview of America’s cultural identity. It was the first world exposition of the nuclear age and a chance for America to prove that it was a nation interested in culture and the advancement of humankind and not just military might and economic gain. The topics chosen for the displays at the fair ranged from agriculture, computer technology and voting procedures, to fashion, appliances and the modern family home. The nation’s leaders were attempting, like Blau, to realize their ideas through the displays; to physically see what they envisioned it meant to be American. For the country, the fair was the most important cultural event of the century.

It was also an important event for Blau and the members of TAW. They had been “invited” by the Department of State to represent American regional theatre at the fair, an honor of dubious origin.\textsuperscript{11} Blau and Irving selected Blau’s production of Samuel Beckett’s \textit{Waiting for Godot} to take to the fair. This was a great opportunity not only for

\begin{flushright}
9 George F. Kennan, \textit{International Exchange in the Arts}, The International Council of the Museum of Modern Art, New York City, 12 May 1955. As stated in the printed pamphlet, the International Council was “formed in 1953 by the Trustees of The Museum of Modern Art to help increase understanding and mutual respect among nations by fostering, in the field of modern art, cultural interchange between the United States and other countries.”


11 The word “invited” is in quotations because of the controversy surrounding the invitation which is discussed later in this chapter.
\end{flushright}
TAW but for Blau as it enabled him to introduce his work as an American director to an international audience.

Blau found his stride as a director while working on Waiting for Godot. He had a solid cast of actors who, after some initial hesitations about the material, worked enthusiastically with him and each other. Blau applied what he had learned from his previous work on Synge and Brecht about pacing, physicality, and the use of actions to highlight the meaning of the play, in his direction of Godot. He used American jazz music as an underlying metaphor and, as James Schevill points out in his analysis of the production, emphasized the reality of the tramps' life through broad, burlesque-type comedy. By emphasizing the action and making the situation more real than symbolic, Blau came away with a decidedly American version of Beckett’s absurdist play. The production, the west coast premiere of Godot, was generally well-received at the Marine’s Memorial Theatre and overwhelmingly praised at San Quentin prison where Blau and company performed the play for one night to an audience of prisoners and guards. When the opportunity arose to go the fair, Blau chose Godot.

Why? What did Blau want to say to the international theatre community about his work as an American director by selecting the European play, Waiting for Godot, to represent American regional theatre at the Brussels World’s Fair? How did Blau’s production of Godot support or hinder the State Department’s hopes for representation of American regional theatres at the fair? This chapter answers these questions by investigating the events leading up to the fair and the four unique presentations of Blau’s production of Waiting for Godot.

1956-57: TAW’s Season of Change

After the personally gratifying work and the lessons learned by Blau and company during the production of *Mother Courage*, it would follow that the next production he chose to do would be crucial to his continuing development as a director with a vision for his up and coming professional regional theatre. It would also follow that the next production chosen would build upon the publicity and controversy caused by *Mother Courage* and that Blau, after discovering the intriguing possibilities of doing work with more overt political overtones, would think carefully about what his next production should be. Although TAW’s American premiere of *Mother Courage* is a milestone in American theatre history, it nevertheless failed to attract large audiences and closed after only seventeen performances, leaving the company reeling in debt at the end of the 1955-56 theatrical season.\(^{13}\) Blau and Irving placed the blame for this on Paine Knickerbocker and what they believed was his less-than-informed critiques of the production.\(^{14}\) It cannot be determined definitively whether or not the critiques were the sole reason for the short run of the play but it can be surmised that, given the credibility of Knickerbocker and the newspaper itself, they certainly did not help. Another contributing factor to the play’s lack of appeal was the aforementioned reticence of San Francisco theatre audiences to support a play that had not been tried out on Broadway.

Partly because of their strapped financial situation, the next play chosen was not one that satisfied Blau’s directing needs so much as his producing needs. The financial solution was rather simple and used repeatedly over the next several years. As Blau

\(^{13}\) Fowler 205.

\(^{14}\) Fowler 205. Fowler states that both Blau and Irving hold Knickerbocker’s critiques as the reasons for the play’s lack of audience support.
recalled, “Anytime we wanted to make money, Jules begged me to revive The Crucible.” That is what they did at the end of the season as a purely business move, to get audiences back into TAW’s seats. Though the revival did help to recoup some of their losses, the company was basically broke and, to top it off, was evicted by the city from their smaller, cheaper Elgin Street Theatre to make way for a new freeway. They were left with the more expensive lease on the Marine’s Memorial Theatre, debt, and flagging audience support.

Dire as these circumstances appeared at the time, they did not halt the enthusiasm of the directors for the company or the purposes they were beginning to feel. The tough financial situation did move them to a bold, yet necessary and ultimately ideal solution - creating a subscription season of plays. Subscription seasons were not new in the San Francisco area and have since become a standard offering in many professional and non-professional theatres. A subscription season guarantees a certain amount of audience for each show as opposed to the uncertainty of individual play offerings, and also brings in money up front so the company knows what money they have and what they have to come up with. A subscription-based audience is generally considered to be a more loyal audience, thereby giving the company a solid following. For TAW at that time, going to a subscription season gave them a certain amount of financial security which allowed them to produce new plays as well as the popular revivals.

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16 Fowler 206.
17 Fowler 208. Fowler mentions that the Playhouse also had subscription seasons.
The challenge for Blau and Irving brought on by the subscription season was that now they had to conceive of a whole season. They could not simply go play to play based on what aroused their interest but had to think in terms of what satisfied not only their own artistic needs but those of the audience as well. It became clear to Blau that, as one play says one idea, an entire season of five plays says many entirely different ideas - collectively. One of the questions he had to answer for himself was how, through the productions, could he make these many different opinions, stances, and thoughts presented through a season of plays coalesce with his own director’s style which he was still working to find?

The first subscription season offered by TAW consisted of the following: a double-bill of August Strindberg’s The Stronger followed by Miss Julie adapted and directed by guest artist George Tabori and starring guest artist Viveca Lindfors; The Plough and the Stars by Sean O’Casey directed by Blau; Clifford Odets’s The Flowering Peach directed by David Sarvis; Waiting for Godot by Samuel Beckett directed by Blau; William Wycherley’s The Country Wife directed by Leon Forbes; a revival of Phillip Barry’s Hotel Universe directed by David Sarvis; and The Ticklish Acrobat by Robert Hivnor directed by Jules Irving.

This collection of plays does not appear to adhere to a main theme for the season because the work was still pieced together for more practical reasons than creating a dialectical discussion among the productions. While staying true to their initial commitment of presenting good plays and giving voice to new as well as established playwrights, Blau had to discover how to guide each of these productions so that the work done on one informed the work done on the next production. The subscription
season, beginning with the production of Miss Julie, started Blau thinking about theatre as a whole entity; specifically, what its nature and purpose were. Blau came to the theatre from an analytical rather than an artistic educational background therefore he approached it from a different, more tactical perspective. He wanted to dissect theatre and find out how it worked. This goal is pervasive throughout his work with TAW, his subsequent work with the KRAKKEN group at Oberlin College in the 1970s and his numerous writings about the theatre. The subscription season helped Blau discover another component in his developing style as a director - the conception of a season of plays and its impact on the audience.

At this time however, there were more pressing and practical questions that had to be answered. For instance, there still was no guarantee that audiences would return to TAW in sufficient numbers, even though they had announced they were changing to a subscription season. Irving realized that the first show chosen to start off the new season had to offer something unique that would draw a popular audience. As it so happened, Viveca Lindfors, an actress of some notoriety, was in San Francisco doing the national tour of Anastasia in the spring of 1956 when Irving invited her and her director/playwright husband, George Tabori, to see the current revival of The Crucible at TAW. The couple was so impressed with the ensemble work of the company that they presented Irving with the idea of working with the company at some point in the future. Irving later remembered the conversation and invited them to be guest artists for the first show of the new subscription season, August Strindberg’s The Stronger as a before
The second play of the new subscription season was Sean O’Casey’s *The Plough and the Stars*, Blau’s first new production after *Mother Courage*. Blau commented that directing *Plough* after *Mother Courage* was, in many respects, easier though no less challenging or intellectually gratifying. The play was full of material that Blau could connect to written by a playwright Blau recognized as a kindred spirit in that O’Casey, like Blau, always looked for the humor in the situation. As noted earlier, Blau was attracted to plays that: 1) were intelligent, clear-eyed views of the human condition; 2) had opportunities to explore physical action; 3) were dense and well written; and, 4) had an undertone of humor. Blau found O’Casey’s sense of joy in the face of dire situations to be refreshing for, as he said, “one can hardly think of an American dramatist who is capable of it.” This comment reiterates Blau’s dissatisfaction with American playwrights and the, as he stated, “drivelin wantonness” of American theatre.

Blau, in his reflection of directing *Plough and the Stars* written in *The Impossible Theater*, reveals the growing sense of connection between the plays he directed and gives clues into how he approached the next play he would direct. In other words, his comparison of O’Casey’s *Plough* with Brecht’s *Mother Courage* shows that what he learned while directing Brecht fed into his direction of O’Casey. His work on O’Casey,

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18 Fowler 210. Irving would later fall back on this tactic of having guest stars boost audience attendance later in the 1960s when he was the sole director of the Repertory Company at Lincoln Center.


in turn, reveals insights into his future direction of *Waiting for Godot*, his next play after *Plough*.

Blau stated that *The Plough and the Stars* shares a basic irony with *Mother Courage*: “The heroic event is undermined by the routine activities of common men; great things are shown up by small.” Mother Courage loses her three children to the war but keeps following it, not out of any righteous indignation or nationalistic pride but because it is her business. She does what she does because of her merchandise, the “small” that was stated above. In *Plough*, it is the raw, animal looting of the shops placed against the more heroic need of having the basic necessities of life that God gives to his people. It is the focus on material objects and how they affect human life in the midst of great turmoil that seems to be a theme that Blau connected with in *Mother Courage*, *The Plough and the Stars* and finally, as discussed below, in *Waiting for Godot*.

The work Blau and the company did on Brecht helped them understand the importance of each moment and how to play each moment with exacting but natural detail. In directing *Plough*, Blau worked on the playing of seemingly small activities such as passing the tea plates or making sure the carpentry of the character Fluther Good was convincingly done. To explain further, a scene is about having tea; the characters are there to drink tea. This simple act is the crux of the scene that supports the storylines and themes in and around this action. Blau discovered if the themes are overplayed or overshadow the simple actions the irony of the play is lost. But, if he juxtaposed these everyday activities against the harshness of the rebellion and the

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rebel fighting, then the irony is clear.\textsuperscript{23} The lives of the characters are truly revealed in the small, seemingly unimportant moments and activities. Instead of playing the overbearing oppression of the rebellion, Blau had his actors play the more tangible, life moments and all of their humor against the noisy events of the grim fighting. The humor, he learned, was inherent in the irony.

In terms of acting, Blau came to the conclusion that “to the American actor…O’Casey is more immediately appealing than Brecht. He requires gusto and comic ability, but no special technique of feeling, no intellectual wit, beyond knowing how to play and breathe naturally through the racing curiosities of the language.”\textsuperscript{24} Based on their first experience with Epic theatre, Blau found the style to be too foreign to his troupe, though, as he stated, they “studied the theories and struggled to the limit of our naïve resources to deploy ourselves in ‘Epic style.’”\textsuperscript{25} But with O’Casey, the raw emotions were always near the surface waiting to explode in some sort of fight or revelry giving his company and himself the freedom to, as he stated, “let go with a big heart.”\textsuperscript{26} Apparently, as a director, Blau felt more kinship with the flamboyant physicality of the Irish playwright.

After Blau’s production of \textit{Plough}, TAW presented Clifford Odets’s \textit{The Flowering Peach} directed by David Sarvis. The show was very well received by critics and audiences alike. So much so, that Irving and Blau decided to extend the run to take advantage of the financial windfall. This is not an especially remarkable point to note.

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\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{23} Blau, \textit{Impossible} 209.
\item \textsuperscript{24} Blau, \textit{Impossible} 209-10.
\item \textsuperscript{25} Blau, \textit{Impossible} 103.
\item \textsuperscript{26} Blau, \textit{Impossible} 210.
\end{itemize}
However, because of the extended run and because Blau and Irving felt they had to get in another production to keep up with the 1956-57 subscription season, they decided to present the fourth production on Thursday nights for four consecutive weeks. That way, audiences could still enjoy *The Flowering Peach* and the company could explore new material. This strategy gave Blau and Irving the financial freedom to select a more experimental play for the fourth production even though past TAW history had proven that experimental plays were not box office successes for them. The play chosen was Samuel Beckett’s *Waiting for Godot*. TAW’s production would be the West Coast premiere of the play. This is a rather inauspicious beginning to a play that would ultimately become known as a “transforming event” for the company, taking them from San Francisco to New York, and to the international stage at the Brussels World’s Fair.\(^27\)

**Directing Godot: “Herb is crazier than ever.”**\(^28\)

Fowler gives a comprehensive account of Blau’s directorial work on *Godot* and it is not the intent of this study to merely rehash Fowler’s account.\(^29\) Blau, in *The Impossible Theater* gives a thorough, more theoretical accounting of his work on Beckett’s play.\(^30\) Both accounts are used here as foundations upon which to lay insights into Blau’s emerging directorial style - his interpretation of the material, the staging of it, his work with actors, and the impact his work had on the audiences.

\(^{27}\) Herbert Blau, personal interview, 17 July 2008.


\(^{29}\) See specifically pages 224-237.

\(^{30}\) See pages 228-240. It is true that this section relies on Fowler’s and Blau’s accounts of this time period. As most of the original company, including Jules Irving, are no longer alive, these two sources are now the most important and only sources for this information.
When Blau first introduced the play to the company, he recalls the reactions ranged from confusion to anger and that many members complained to Irving that he was “crazier than ever” and refused to be in the play.\textsuperscript{31} He states this was also the reason Irving cautiously agreed to only four Thursday night performances initially. Alan Mandell, the company’s business manager at the time, said that the company was “terribly confused” at the first reading and Joseph Miksak (who went on to play Pozzo) blurted out “this is a play?”\textsuperscript{32} To further complicate matters, Robert Haswell, who was originally cast as Didi, quarreled with Blau so much during one meeting that Blau kicked him out of the cast and replaced him with Eugene Roche. Blau confessed that Haswell was “a pain in the ass in other respects” and realized that this particular actor was not suited for this particular play.\textsuperscript{33} The company had successfully worked through their anxieties about the challenges brought on by \textit{Mother Courage} because the play had a storyline to follow and characters that made sense to them. \textit{Godot} completely baffled most of them. Blau himself was wary of his choice initially. He recalls that he was “apprehensive, and approached the play through first readings (at my house, not at the theater) with meticulous attention to its conceptual differences from anything we’d done before.”\textsuperscript{34}

In order to make the play more amenable to the cast, Blau had to come up with a clear idea that gave them something concrete to be played. Blau saw \textit{Godot} as

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{31} Herbert Blau, interview with Jacob Adams, \textit{The Impossible Itself}, DVD, 2010; Herbert Blau, e-mail to the author, 17 Mar. 2011.
\item \textsuperscript{32} Alan Mandell and Joseph Miksak, interviews with Jacob Adams, \textit{The Impossible Itself}, DVD, 2010.
\item \textsuperscript{33} Herbert Blau, e-mail to the author, 17 Mar. 2011.
\item \textsuperscript{34} Herbert Blau, e-mail to the author, 17 Mar. 2011.
\end{itemize}
“brazenly theatrical.” As he states in his program note for the show, the points of reference for the action of the play range from “the circus, the pantomime, the music hall, Marcel Proust, burlesque, vaudeville, the daily newspaper, Kafka, the comic strip, and St. Thomas Aquinas.” The use of flamboyant physical references such as the circus, burlesque and vaudeville mixed with the philosophy of Proust and Kafka make it clear that Blau’s directorial vision for Godot was straightforward comedy with moments of unbridled frustration and anguish.

Blau’s description of the opening moment of the play further captures his directorial vision: “In the theater of the dead as Beckett construes it, the irredeemable, of course, is the name of the game, as it was when the tramps first came on to the stage, where everything’s dead but the tree, with an inconsolable sense—just before the activist sixties—of ‘Nothing to be done.’” However, in rehearsals, Blau kept the focus on all of the things that the tramps were doing while waiting and discovered, in the playing of the play, plenty to be done. He recalled that he started the rehearsal process with a series of improvisations that focused less on objectives or sense memory and more on “performing particulars, from tying a shoelace to scratching the head or chewing a carrot…culminating in what it began with: doing nothing, that is, with a disciplinary consciousness, in the acting, that the nothing had to be *done*.” He discovered the style with which he wanted to create the piece by creating, as he said,

35 Blau, Impossible 232.
38 Herbert Blau, e-mail to the author, 17 Mar. 2011.
“the reality of illusion and the illusion of reality.”

Two tramps waiting in a wasteland for some illusory person to arrive is real and being played out before the audience. Blau’s direction sought to make the false reality of this wasteland a reality by focusing on such mundane things as boots and carrots. To reiterate what is stated earlier in this chapter, he sought to juxtapose the small, ordinary things of life against the larger, harsher realities of humankind.

Blau’s emphasis on the “what” that was to be done and less on the usual character-driven motivational “why,” invariably created object moments; moments when the object is given the attention not only of the actor trying to work with it but of the audience watching the actor absorbed in the object. It is interesting that he saw the objects as characters and on the same level of importance as the human characters. Indeed, he viewed the characters as objects also; objects that inhabit the landscape and give it meaning by their presence. The following quote from *The Impossible Theater* explains this concept: “The empty landscape waits to be recognized. The boots wait to be worn…which of the New Wave…can invest man-as-object with so much humanity? Why, tree, boot, bowler, and black radish seem more human than the people in other plays.”

People have become objects themselves and therefore are no longer more important than the objects they used to rule over. Blau focused on the objective behind the moment but, taking Blau’s theory a step further, it is the object that takes on more importance than the objective – the human’s reason for using it - in the moment.

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40 Fowler 226-227. This is my take on what Blau described to Fowler as “objective moments;” that once they had improvised the scenes, the next step was to find the objective behind the moment. I have modified this idea to the object behind the objective.

object moment seems to say that all that mankind has come to believe about the superiority of the human mind is now reduced to this moment of flattening between human and object. A good example of this is when Lucky is commanded to think by his master, Pozzo. But Lucky cannot think until an object - Vladimir’s bowler hat - is placed on his head. The hat enables Lucky’s mind to function and he delivers one of the most famous and confusing monologues in dramatic literature. When the object is removed from his head, Lucky’s mind stops and his speech ends. The object controls the human and therefore becomes as important, if not more so in Lucky’s case, than the human himself no matter what the objective behind the moment.

As for the objects themselves and how to work with them as an actor, Blau told his company to “just perform what he [Beckett] tells you to perform, and you will feel…exactly what you need to feel, and in the bones.”42 If the actor uses the object as Beckett says it is to be used, then the actor will feel and do all that is needed, nothing more and nothing less. The characters - Didi and Gogo - feel and do all they need to in their world of the play. They do not look for meaning in their actions with the objects; the meaning is in the doing of the actions with the objects in the play. Blau clarified this thought by saying: “Eat Gogo’s carrot and try to carry on a conversation and you will know quite materially that a carrot is a carrot.”43 In plainer words: do the action; the meaning of it is in the doing.

There is one particular memory that Blau relates with relish and which illustrates plainly Blau’s concentration on the playing of the actions as a way to get at the pure gut emotions of the characters. On opening night, in Act I, Symonds suddenly beat his fist

42 Blau, Impossible 231.
43 Blau, Impossible 231.
against the concrete proscenium arch and shouted, “I’m hungry!” For Blau, it was a moment of brilliance. He excitedly recalled the action was as if Symonds “wanted to bring the whole fucking theatre down.” This one action demonstrated Gogo’s frustration intermingled with Symonds’s own as the two became one and the anguish of their lives intertwined. This was the kind of commitment to character and action that Blau expected from all of his actors in any play. Symonds said that his “rather shocking” move came at a time right before the thrust stage was popular and that actors were trying to break through the limitations of the proscenium arch. Symonds wanted his and Gogo’s frustration to get as close to the audience as possible but the arch prevented him from doing so.

By not diving too deeply into the psychological meaning behind every moment and letting the actors improvise rather than memorize movements and blocking, Blau let the play be discovered as well as directed. Discovery is an intrinsic quality of directing but the director has to be able to let go of the control and learn to trust the abilities of the actors for discovery to happen. By letting go, Blau discovered what the actors could do to bring the play to life. The actors, consequently, felt far more secure in what they were doing as they found the action themselves. Blau, in this case, was less of a director and more of a guide through the bits of action in Beckett’s absurdist landscape. This is another example of how Blau’s work on Brecht’s Mother Courage undoubtedly prepared him for this type of improvisational exploration on Godot. By not being locked into any habitual method of working the company was discovering how to work in the moment and let discoveries happen.


Concerning the identity of the tramps Blau stated: “Beckett is out to recover wonder, the mysterious harmony of man-in-nature, man-as-nature...he does this in the form which puts character - in all its flux and transformation - in separate bodies before you...the two tramps convince us they live one-life, Between [sic] them...they compose an identity.” 46 Who are the tramps Vladimir (Didi) and Estragon (Gogo)? According to Blau, the characters are “nothing but the concrete fact of their waiting. Sans history, sans memory, with nothing but a few carrots, radishes, and verbal scraps and tatters and greasespots from the rag and boneship of the western tradition.” 47 They arrive on stage having come from nowhere. There is no exposition as to who these two are or where they have been or even where they are at present. They are the embodiment of the Sanford Meisner acting mantra of “being in the moment.” Since nothing is explained of their before and nothing offered of their afterward, the moment is all they have. Blau told the actors playing these characters from “nowhere,” that “identity has to be rehearsed into being;” they would have to find who these people were along the way. 48

It is widely accepted by most scholars that Waiting for Godot is a play about waiting. But, how the waiting is portrayed is open to as many interpretations as there are directors willing to give it a try. For Blau, the waiting in Godot is filled with activity. Blau stated: “Our actors discovered the physical investment demanded of them in this apparently intellectual play, as they discovered a new conception of character-in-action.” 49 The key for Blau was the actors’ awareness of the tasks to be accomplished

46 Blau, Impossible 231.


48 Blau, Impossible 232.

49 Blau, Impossible 231.
and the objective behind the object. It is an outside-in style of acting where the doing of the action motivates the inner life of the actor. For the TAW actors who were used to finding the feeling first and then dealing with the actions, Godot was another leap of faith into the unknown with Blau there to guide them.

**Godot at the Marines Memorial Theatre**

As stated above, the production of Godot had to be squeezed into TAW’s first subscription season because of the popular and financial success of The Flowering Peach. Godot opened at the Marine’s Memorial Theatre on Thursday, February 28, 1957 and was slated to run for four consecutive Thursday night performances. The cast was as follows: Vladimir (Didi)-Eugene Roche; Estragon (Gogo)-Robert Symonds; Pozzo-Joseph Miksak; Lucky-Jules Irving; Messenger-Anthony Miksak.

The actors were justifiably nervous on opening night as they were about to perform a play that was not only breaking new ground in theatre internationally but, with their west coast premiere, locally as well. Eugene Roche recalled that on opening night he “really had no idea what [he] was saying.” However, he knew where he was going on the stage and in that type of theatrical environment, as he smartly stated, “you trust that if you know where you’re going, you’ll know what to say once you get there.” For Roche the performance “just gelled” and allayed his brief fears about performing Godot. Alan Mandell declared that opening night was “just magic” and that the reactions of the audience were some of the most interesting and exciting that he had ever encountered.

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50 Eugene Roche, interview with Jacob Adams, The Impossible Itself, DVD, 2010.

The overall audience response to the play was positive despite the letters of complaints, patrons who walked out of the show, and a few dropped subscriptions. In an effort to explain an all but un-explainable play to their brand new subscribers, Irving and Blau held post-show discussions, just as Mike Meyerberg, the producer of the 1956 Broadway production, had done for much the same reasons. Blau recalls that the discussions were “pretty lively” and explains the purpose of them thusly: “During discussions, which I mostly moderated (with supreme judiciousness) we were considerate, discrete, posing question for question, as to why they felt this or that, and asking what they thought of some action or other onstage.”

Despite the attempts by Blau to explain the play, there were many patrons who still could not grasp the idea of it. They needed to know what it meant. Blau relates one particular story in The Impossible Theater that rather succinctly sums up the main question that most early viewers of Godot had:

In a discussion after our production of Godot, a chemist insisted it couldn’t be a good play because there was no meaning, no message. 'I want to know the message,' he said, pounding the table. Well, all you can say to that is, if there is a message it’s not glad tidings. And when you’re really aroused you may insist in return that an empirical scientist ought to know better than that—that a carrot is a carrot is a carrot, overstating the point.

Paine Knickerbocker however, praises the play, Blau’s direction, and the cast in his review, “A Weird, Wonderful Wait for ‘Godot.’” It is clear in his writing that he

52 Herbert Blau, e-mail to the author, 17 Mar. 2011.

53 Blau, Impossible 228.
enjoyed what he terms as the “paradoxical charm” of the play itself, stating that it was “touching, impudent, somber, quick, murky and simple in quick succession.” Knickerbocker enjoyed Blau's direction stating that the play must be done “with a flair” if it is to be successful and that the direction had a “wonderful élan.” Knickerbocker was the first critic to praise the quality of the acting and the ensemble of the cast: “From the youthful eagerness of young Anthony Miksak, as the messenger, through the heavily accented authority of his father, as Pozzo, the cast is superb. Irving is a skyrocket of sputtering brilliance in his brief moment, and Symonds and Roche make a superlative team.”

The production ran for a total of twenty-eight performances; far more than the original four that Irving had cautiously planned. The houses were more than sixty percent full which, in a 650-seat house like the Marine’s, was surprisingly good attendance especially, as Blau said, “for a play like that, then.” Perhaps Blau was surprised that a play as amorphous as Godot was met with such enthusiasm while a play more didactic and literal in approach, such as Mother Courage was not. However, Godot, with its mix of humor, open-ended philosophy on the human condition and endearing characters was far safer than Mother Courage. Audiences could openly agree with Godot’s themes and question its philosophies without seeming overtly anti-society, or worse, anti-American in a time when fear and suspicion still held sway over the nation’s population.


**Godot at San Quentin**

On November 19, 1957, Blau and the company of *Godot* performed the play for the prisoners at San Quentin. There had not been a play presented at San Quentin since Sarah Bernhardt performed there in 1913. Originally, Blau and Irving suggested Blau’s original play, “A Gift of Fury.” But one of the stipulations of allowing the company to perform at the prison was that no women were to be involved in the show and so they chose *Godot*. Blau stated that the prison psychiatrist warned Warden Dickson that *Godot* might be too intellectual, too traumatic for the inmates. The psychiatrist believed the prisoners may not understand it and it might harm them in some psychological way. It is true that *Godot* had already gained a reputation as a highly cerebral, odd play that had not, as of yet, been nationally adored by American audiences. Yet, this fear expressed by the prison psychiatrist seems like an act of profiling. It seems as if he was making a blanket assumption that all prisoners, because of the sheer fact that they have done something against society, are simple-minded, incarcerated individuals who only want to break the mundane ritual of their everyday prison lives by ogling women and laughing at prank bits of comedy. The prisoners proved everyone wrong.

According to Blau, there were 1200-1400 prisoners crowded into the North Dining Hall of the prison. The makeshift stage was two boxing rings put together. There was a jazz band playing mood music before the show. Blau gave a curtain speech in which he talked about the play like a piece of jazz with a main jazz theme running through it and riffs off of that theme. He told the crowd that, just when they would start to expect the

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56 I am referring to the American premiere of *Godot* at the Coconut Grove Playhouse in Florida in 1956 and the subsequent performances in New York City.
play to go in a certain direction it suddenly shifts into another direction.\footnote{Herbert Blau, interview with Jacob Adams, The Impossible Itself, DVD, 2010.} For this reason, Blau suggested they take from it what they could. The lights were not dimmed in the packed hall so that the armed guards could keep an eye on the crowd and the glow from the prisoner's cigarettes added an eerie feel to the surreal, carnival-like atmosphere.

Blau and the actors were nervous before the show. They had no idea what to expect in terms of audience reaction and reception of the play. Actors Eugene Roche, Joseph Miksak and Robert Symonds recall their apprehensions in presenting the play to the prisoners at San Quentin in Jacob Adams's documentary entitled, “The Impossible Itself.” The men speak in incredulous tones about the double-gated entry into the prison; the surreal atmosphere of rehearsing the play before the performance under the watchful eyes of prisoners and guards alike; and how the rope used to tie up Lucky had to be handed to Miksak by a guard right before his entrance and handed back to another guard immediately after his stage exit. Roche recalls the absolute silence at the start of the show. Symonds was sure the prisoners would whistle and boo the actors.

Yet as the editors of the San Quentin News observed, the prisoners, who were expecting to see girls and comedians, fussed for a moment, began to listen, and then became engrossed in the play until the very end. They enjoyed the performance so much that they gave the company a standing ovation complete with shouting and stomping feet. Later that year, when the prisoners discovered the troupe was trying to raise money to present Godot at the Brussels World's Fair, they passed a hat and
raised fifty-seven dollars, a sum equivalent to an upper-class inmate’s salary for an entire year.  

Martin Esslin wrote an incisive description of TAW’s performance at San Quentin in his book, *The Theater of the Absurd*. Esslin comments that “what had bewildered the sophisticated audiences of Paris, London, and New York was immediately grasped by an audience of convicts.” What is it about Beckett’s play that appeals to the incarcerated? Is it the waiting for something to happen? Or is it the common, everyman identity/non-identity of the two tramps? Or, perhaps it is the character of Lucky - chained and abused - yet able, when called upon, to eloquently spew forth what Blau terms as “eschatological gibberish at the loose ends of Western philosophy?”

Only eight months after the Paris premiere of *Waiting for Godot* in January of 1953, it was presented at Luttringhausen Prison in Wuppertal, Germany. According to Adams’s documentary, an inmate at the prison - whose name has been lost to history - obtained a copy of the play from someone who had seen the Paris production. The prisoner translated the play into German, obtained permission from the prison warden to perform it, and presented the play on November 29, 1953. Afterward, he wrote to Beckett about his production and explained that it was the play’s theme of waiting that so intrigued him and his fellow inmates, who do nothing but wait. The letter touched Beckett greatly and sparked a lifelong fascination in him concerning his plays performed in prisons.

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60 Blau, *Impossible* 231.

61 *The Impossible Itself*, dir. Jacob Adams, DVD, 2010
Adams rather brilliantly created a montage of scenes from San Quentin showing the electric chairs on condemned row, rows of open toilets, and barred cells with voiced-over lines from the play, suggesting that the prisoners, because of their lives of confinement and waiting, were actually living the lives of Didi and Gogo. This is why the prisoners received *Godot* more enthusiastically than the dinner theatre crowd in Florida and the Broadway crowd in New York City after a few cocktails. *Godot* was being acted out in real life by the audience of prisoners. Esslin brings out an important point from the review written for the San Quentin newspaper that *Godot* was well-received because it had no blatant moral or didactic purpose. It simply presented a situation of waiting that each individual derived their own meaning from just as Blau had suggested in his curtain speech.

TAW’s presentation of *Godot* inspired the prisoners to start their own drama group at the prison. The San Quentin Drama Workshop, still in operation today and internationally known, has a long history of performing Beckett’s plays as well as original works. Former inmate, Rick Cluchey, though not in on the original formation of the group, quickly took charge and has made the group what it is today. He and Beckett developed a close friendship, with Beckett providing financial support to Cluchey’s endeavors as well as mentoring.

Speaking about the play’s success at San Quentin and the innocence with which the prisoners approached it, Blau remarked: “fashion could hardly have been the reason for the play’s success…they knew nothing of the play’s notoriety” and that the

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62 The San Quentin Drama Workshop’s website has a few pictures of TAW’s production in 1957. Please see: http://www.thesqdw.org.
response by the prisoners to the production was “one of the purest we have ever had.”63

The performance holds a special place in Blau’s memory but did not prepare them for their next important presentation of the play - their premiere performance in New York City.

**Godot Goes to New York City**

Before heading off to Brussels and the international spotlight at the World’s Fair, Blau, Irving and company needed to raise a final $2,000. It was decided that they would do a limited, six-week engagement at an off-Broadway theatre in New York to raise the funds and to garner some positive publicity before their international debut. They acquired the help of a young producer, Warner LeRoy, who was an enthusiastic supporter of the group’s efforts.64 LeRoy published ads in most of the major New York papers, touting TAW’s “widely acclaimed production” of Godot as being “the only play selected by the State Department to represent the U.S. at the Fair.”65 TAW’s Godot ran from August 5-September 13, 1958 at LeRoy’s York Playhouse on 64th Street and 1st Ave.

The company arrived in New York with great excitement, despite the oppressive heat wave that was hitting the city at the time. They were a professional regional theatre company from San Francisco about to open one of their most acclaimed productions to date on off-Broadway before they left to represent American regional theatre at the first World’s Fair of the atomic age. It was also a chance for the company

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63 Blau, Impossible 235-236.

64 Warner LeRoy was famous in the 1960s and 70s for managing elaborate restaurants in New York such as Maxwell Plum’s, Tavern on the Green, and the Russian Tea Room.

65 “Waiting for Godot,” advertisement, The New York Times 20 July 1958. As with most advertisements, this ad is a bit sensationalized. The truth is that Yale University was also selected to represent university theatre with their production of Archibald MacLeish’s play, J.B.
to be reviewed by New York critics and to prove to New York City audiences that good, 
professional theatre was happening outside of New York. For Blau, it was a way to see 
if his regional artistry could hold up to the artistry and scrutiny of the national stage.

Expectations ran high for a successful run before the start of the show on August 
5, but were quickly dashed by intermission when, according to Blau, during the whole 
first act there was “hardly an audible reaction to any one of the reliable lines or pieces of 
business that had enjoyed more than a year and a half of success in our own theater.”66 
The company was crestfallen, angry and defiant at the same time and pushed harder 
for a response in the second act. The apparent non-reaction of their first New York 
audience to the same work that garnered rave reviews in San Francisco caused Blau to 
wonder: “Could San Francisco be that provincial?”67 Was it merely the production 
itself? Or was it a combination of the production and the fact that a regional theatre 
company and a European play were chosen to represent American theatre at the fair 
that was partly to blame for the lukewarm reception?

The reviews which appeared in several New York newspapers were mixed and 
seemed to praise the acting (“Extremely well-acted!”68) but question Blau’s highly 
physical interpretation of the action. The following three reviews are representative of 
the criticism of the production. It is curious that each reviewer makes special reference 
to this as a “San Francisco” production. The company was from San Francisco, but it

66 Blau, Impossible 236.

67 Blau, Impossible 236.

1958: 49.
seems these reviews highlight TAW’s regional theatre status as if to distinctly differentiate it from a New York production.

Richard Watts of the New York Post states that Blau’s direction seemed to emphasize the “grotesque aspects” of Beckett’s play and that what struck him the most about “the San Francisco production” was the “vigorous physical activity.” As for the action, Watts gives a good description of what it must have looked like by saying that “its handful of actors are almost constantly in dynamic motion and finding inventive things to do.” Watts, as echoed in the following two reviews, finds that Blau’s emphasis on the physicality of the piece cost the production in terms of the underlying meaning of the play itself. He laments the loss of the “warm human touch” that actor Bert Lahr contributed to the Broadway production and stated that “the play now seems less sadly philosophical.” What Watts is commenting on is not that Blau took out the philosophy of the play but that, by the overly active, less melancholy playing of it, Blau’s production lost the humanity that Watts found so appealing in Lahr’s performance. On a positive note, he did say that the brazen comic antics that Blau and cast created were “theatrically effective.” He sums up the production thus: “It may be studiously cryptic, purposely perverse, at times childishly vulgar, and occasionally a little tedious in its determination to be unconventional. But it does capture a sense of provocative brooding over man’s fate and hopes that isn’t easily forgotten.”

Gene Gleason, writing for the New York Herald Tribune, states in his critique entitled, “Waiting for Godot Given In a Revival at the York,” that “the San Francisco Actors’ Workshop did its brave best with the material and can be cheerfully commended on that score.” Gleason’s comments are more centered on Beckett’s play which he

69 Watts 49.
called a “static, tragicomedy” than on TAW’s performance. For example he states: “the dialogue had a kind of drunken, disconnected, tangential flavor; little spurts of emotion, vague lapses, snatches of lyricism and infinite repetition.” It is not quite clear if Gleason is commenting more on the writing of the dialogue or in its delivery. The “little spurts of emotion” and “vague lapses” could be attributed to the performance but not the “snatches of lyricism and infinite repetition” which are ingrained in the written words. Gleason does not seem to be enamored of the play itself and it can be conjectured that this fact affected his review of TAW’s performance.70

Speaking specifically about the performances, Gleason stated that Symonds and Roche were “well up to their assignments” and that Miksak played Pozzo as a tyrannical ringmaster of a circus with “great generosity of voice and gesture.” Of Irving as Lucky, Gleason stated that he “heaves and staggers and struggles with every ounce of his energy, but his single dytharambic soliloquay [sic] was largely lost in the physical display.”71

Gleason’s comments about the essence of Lucky’s speech being lost in the physicality of Irving’s interpretation echoes the sentiments of Brooks Atkinson of The New York Times, widely regarded as the most influential critic of this time. Atkinson had several good, though rather non-committal, things to say about the production in his critique entitled, “Coast Troupe Here on Way to Brussels.” For example, he stated: “On its own terms, this is an intelligent production of an unintelligible play.” A definition of “on its own terms” is in order to decipher what Atkinson thought of the troupe and Blau’s


71 Gleason 12.
direction. Atkinson stated that Symonds and Roche waited for Godot “in high spirits—laughing with gusto and moving around the stage in lively fashion.” He called the overall tone of the play “relatively decisive” and that each actor played each character with “no variations from the norms.” But, as he goes on to state, “a playgoer’s attitude toward a play is conditioned by the best production he has seen” and in Atkinson’s opinion, TAW’s production did not measure up to Herbert Berghof’s 1956 Broadway production starring Bert Lahr and E.G. Marshall. As Atkinson saw it, none of TAW’s actors compared with the 1956 Broadway cast and Blau’s highly physical interpretation of the play lacked Berghof’s more “pertinent” interpretation that came “frightening close to the truth of the human race waiting indolently for salvation that never comes.”

Atkinson stated that Godot was more of a “tragedy with comic overtones” and believed that the tragedy was lost in Blau’s lively, physical, and more positive take on the material.

Did Blau override the meaning of the play in his attempt to find the object moments as previously described? Was the production less about Beckett’s intentions and too much about Blau’s interpretation of the physical actions and comic bits of the piece? According to Atkinson, the answers are “yes.” He stated: “Mr. Beckett wrote a play in which what is said is largely beside the point. What is felt is the essence of his baleful story.” As previously stated, Blau found hope inherent in most of the plays he directed. Was the hope he found in Godot and the raucous playing of the object moments a hindrance to Blau’s understanding of the underlying tones in Beckett’s play?

73 Atkinson L22.
Beckett himself has said that the play has no deeper meaning; that he just decided to write a play and this is what came out. Beckett was notoriously silent about the meaning of the play and the identity of Godot and consequently drove actors, directors, and scholars into a frenzy trying to decipher the meaning for themselves. As stated above, there are as many different interpretations of Godot as there are directors who take on the challenge of directing it. However the point to make is that these three reviewers related the same missing ingredient - the humanness of the piece and the deeper, philosophical musings on the state of mankind.

Blau was bemused by the disparity in the reception of the production between the audiences in San Francisco and those in New York. Whereas the comic bits and reliable stage business he and the company had worked on succeeded in San Francisco they did not in New York, for the most part. As he has stated, he never much paid attention to reviews. He let Irving read them and he could tell by the look on Irving's face whether or not they were favorable.74 Blau reacted more off of the minimal audience reaction on opening night. Because he had to return to San Francisco quickly to begin rehearsing the next play, he did not stay around to notice that most of the subsequent shows went well and that the audience did eventually warm up to the troupe and their Godot. They finished the run at the York having earned the rest of the money needed to make the trip to Brussels.

As for criticism of the selection of the play itself, early in his critique Atkinson wrote a seemingly innocent statement that echoed a warning given earlier in July by Howard Taubman. Atkinson stated: “By invitation of the State Department, the San Francisco Actors’ Workshop is to represent the American regional theatre with this

production of a European play.”75 This statement reflects the mild but growing concern about the selection of Godot to represent American theatre which preceded the troupe’s arrival in New York. In a special to The New York Times dated July 20 and entitled, “Old Vic Performs at Brussels Fair,” Taubman praised Britain for following in the steps of other nations by sending its best theatre company to the fair to perform two of its best representations of Britain’s theatre - Shakespeare’s Hamlet and Henry VIII. Of America’s theatrical representation he stated that “only the United States has not been able to make a representative showing in the drama.”76 Although America’s presentations in the other arts - specifically music and dance - were well-received at the fair by mid-summer, the theatre had yet to make a showing. The Yale drama department was to bring Archibald MacLeish’s J.B. in September as part of the university youth representation. But as for professional theatre, Taubman said only that “a San Francisco company later on will do, of all things, ‘Waiting for Godot.’ And that takes care of our spoken theatre.” It is apparent that he did not think much of Godot as a representation of American theatre.

Neither did one patron, Dennis W. Vernon, who wrote a letter to the drama editor of The New York Times stating that the play was not American in “origin, setting or dialogue.” By dialogue (though performed in English) Vernon possibly was referring to the lack of American colloquialisms to designate it as an American play. As for the setting, the play cannot truly be said to be set anywhere. But, it is conceded that the play’s origin is not American. Vernon said that he was “ashamed” that this play was going to represent American theatre and called upon the State Department, the United

75 Atkinson L22.

States Information Agency, or “whoever was responsible” to find a play that better represents America or not send anything at all.77

The push during the 1950s was to create an American arts culture not dependent upon European culture; to find within the ballet companies, jazz ensembles, and theatres around the country, an American arts standard that was not modeled on the European standard. Russell Lynes, in his July 1958 article entitled, “Proof That We Are Not Barbarians,” stated the concern:

> It has long been fashionable in certain intellectual circles in America to look at our culture through European eyes and to measure what goes on here in terms of what used to go on there. Each generation, for a century and more, has had its share of expatriates who went to Europe to absorb the older culture and who came home in hopes of making European standards our standards.78

These comments make the case against presenting Godot as a representation of American regional theatre. However, according to Blau, one of the main artistic reasons he chose Godot was because he thought European audiences would be interested to see how an American company handled the play and its dissection of postwar civilization. Blau believed that instead of other, more obvious American symbols such as soda fountains and the musical, Carousel, Europeans would appreciate that Americans “could have some sense of the peculiar anxiety and dread underlying the


He wanted to prove that, as an American director, he could handle the material with understanding and compassion.

Putting this rationale aside, there was a controversy that sprung up concerning who exactly was responsible for choosing TAW and their production of Godot. After the mixed reviews and the outcries against the selection of Godot surfaced, Jean Dalrymple - director of the City Center in New York and the U.S. Performing Arts Coordinator for the fair - gave an interview that ran in the two largest newspapers in New York stating, in effect, that neither she nor the State Department were responsible for choosing either TAW or Godot. She told the press that TAW was one of five regional theatres chosen by a drama panel of the American National Theater and Academy (ANTA) to fulfill what she termed as an obligation to have one “‘grass roots’ or regional drama group” at the fair. She also made it clear that, because congressional funds for the performing arts section of the fair had been cut from $2,000,000 down to $500,000, the only way one of the regional companies chosen could go would be to pay their own way, which was true. TAW was the only company that could do so because of their fundraising efforts and the support of the city of San Francisco, and therefore they were the only regional company going. However, Irving disputed Dalrymple’s denial of her office’s involvement in the selection of the company saying that approval

79 Blau, Impossible 237.

80 Fowler 262-293. He gives a thorough account of the fundraising, controversies, and performances of Godot in the chapter entitled, “L’Affaire Godot.”

for both the company and the play came out of her office and not ANTA.\textsuperscript{82} The article clearly cut down the importance of the company, the run at the York theatre and made it sound as if they were not invited by the State Department but that the only reason TAW was going to the fair was because they could pay their own way.

As damaging as these statements were, it was the ending statement by Dalrymple that was the most hurtful. She stated that she was still hoping for a financial angel to put forth the money to get “an outstanding professional Broadway drama”\textsuperscript{83} at the fair; specifically, \textit{Pajama Game}.\textsuperscript{84} Broadway should have been represented at the fair given that it was the most widely known segment of American commercial theatre at that time. Howard Taubman reported that the absence of Broadway at the fair was noted by the Europeans: “Europeans have a fair idea of what our best plays are and they wonder why they have not been sent here. It may well be that European observers are aware that Broadway producers declined to interrupt profitable runs temporarily, even to serve the nation.”\textsuperscript{85} No angel came forth and instead of supporting TAW and \textit{Godot}, Blau stated that Dalrymple and her staff “possibly rattled by newspaper criticism of our selection…didn’t even show the courtesy of greeting us before we went abroad.”\textsuperscript{86}

\textsuperscript{82} Sam Zolotow, “Role is Offered to Jessie Landis,” \textit{The New York Times} 11 Aug. 1958: 18. For a more detailed account of the fair fundraising efforts of TAW and the initial contact of Irving by Dalrymple’s office, see Fowler pages 262-266.

\textsuperscript{83} Zolotow 18.


\textsuperscript{85} Howard Taubman, “Windows to the Souls of Nations,” \textit{The New York Times} 7 Sept. 1958, \textit{The New York Times Magazine}: 103. This article is a good source for comparisons between exhibits of America and other nations at the fair.

\textsuperscript{86} Blau, \textit{Impossible} 236.
The contradiction between Dalrymple’s story and TAW’s illustrates three things:
1) the pressure that Dalrymple must have been under to select the right entertainment and artists to project the proper American image at the fair; 2) the doubts she felt that a regional theatre production could do as well at the fair as a Broadway one; and 3) the glaring fact that no Broadway show had offered to go to the fair. There was no mention in her statements or in any of the advertisements that TAW was, in fact, a professional theatre company at this point. Fueled by her concern over the slight criticism of the play’s selection, the mixed reviews, and the fact that no professional Broadway drama was going to the fair, Dalrymple felt so compelled to back pedal her support for the troupe and the play that she went public with statements that were, in essence, false. Also, the official United States guidebook to the fair entitled, “This is America,” which had been in circulation since the fair opened in April promised that the groups performing in the American Auditorium were “representative of the widespread appeal the arts have in the United States” and that there would be “outstanding examples of the American regional theater.”

Perhaps justifiably, Dalrymple worried TAW’s Godot would not live up to this expectation. However, after some investigation into the statements and letters made by both Dalrymple and Irving, the New York Times and the Herald Tribune published recants of Dalrymple’s statements thereby confirming TAW’s story.

But it seems the State Department was not through with its attempts to thwart TAW’s trip to Brussels. There was another, more poignant controversy that occurred

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88 Fowler 278.
right before the company was to leave for Brussels. Perhaps it was a veiled attempt to once again pressure the company into not going to the fair as it seemed TAW was not truly fitting the American image the State Department desired.

When Irving had submitted the letter of acceptance for the invitation he was also asked to submit the names of the members who would be making the trip overseas. On that list was James Kershaw, the company’s stage manager who would be taking over Blau’s responsibilities as director, as Blau was not making the trip. Due to the state of the Cold War and the lingering effects of McCarthyism, a background check was made on each member of the company and Blau and Irving were informed two weeks before their departure that Kershaw was not allowed to go. According to Blau, who gave interviews to the New York and San Francisco newspapers, Kershaw was found by the State Department to be “unsatisfactory” and that it would be “inadvisable” for him to go to Brussels. The reasons for the ban were not made available to Blau and Irving, despite their numerous attempts to contact officials at the State Department. They wrote a scathing letter to Richard Sullivan, head of the State Department office at the fair, in which they explained that they would not stand for this type of coercion and expected blind compliance. They told Sullivan that had they been informed prior to signing the contract that any member of their company was not satisfactory, they would not have signed it and that it was too late for them to back out of their commitment. They stated that their rights as American citizens were being violated and that they did not hold to being told who they could and could not have in their company. They threatened that if the State Department did not comply with their requests, they would

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go public with the letter and embarrass the fair committee. The State Department ignored the letter and refused to allow Kershaw entrance into the State Department-owned American Pavilion, should he make the trip. According to Blau, the Kershaw ban, which he dubbed “an intolerable absurdity,” had nothing more to it than the fact that Kershaw was a leftist who attended the California Labor School and was at one point a Teamster. In later reflection, Blau called the whole affair “stupidly unjust.”

Alan Mandell believed that the entire company was under scrutiny from the Federal Investigation Bureau because of their repertoire that included plays by Brecht, Pinter, and “all of the exciting playwrights who happened to be left wing.” Eugene Roche believed that “anything people didn’t understand, they labeled ‘Pinko’ or ‘Red’” and said the Kershaw ban was a “sad moment” that was “embarrassing for America.”

Blau and Irving ultimately decided that it would be far more detrimental to the company and the city of San Francisco not to go to the fair. Blau explained their reasons for following through with their commitment to the remaining members of TAW in San Francisco. He told them that the State Department would have preferred it if TAW did not go to the fair and, by making the trip and performing Godot at the fair as intended, they were defiantly thumbing their noses at the dismissal, the ban and the ill-treatment suffered by the company. The company members wholeheartedly supported the directors’ decision. The cast and crew left for Brussels on Sunday, September 14.

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90 For the full reproduction of the letter see Fowler pages 283-85.
without Kershaw but, with a small bit of notoriety caused by the controversy that made them the talk of the fair when they first arrived.

**The American Identity at the Brussels World’s Fair**

The aim of the Brussels World’s Fair, according to Belgium’s King Baudouin, was to “create an atmosphere of understanding and peace.”\(^94\) Baron Moens de Fernig, Commissioner General of the fair, states in the souvenir program: “Now, as never before in history, there is need throughout our universe for a renaissance of human values. The gains of centuries must be preserved. Man must be freed of the fear of annihilation-free to enjoy his world and to use it wisely.”\(^95\) However, according to the editors of *Time* magazine, despite these high aspirations for the fair, in reality it was “a propaganda and prestige battleground in the cold war” with the principal players being the United States and Russia.\(^96\) The massive, highly impressive pavilions of both countries were directly across from each other on the fairgrounds and the exhibits displayed inside were meant to impress upon the international fairgoers the favorable attributes of each country.

This being the first world’s fair put on after the international devastation of World War II, it was very important for America to make a positive showing with exhibits and demonstrations that highlighted the American way of life. The State Department was keenly aware that it was the American military that caused the fear of annihilation the Baron referred to in his comments and were anxious to erase this image of America. A brief contextual history is offered below in order to understand the push for a positive

\(^{94}\) “All’s Fair,” *Time* 28 April 1958: 29.

\(^{95}\) The Brussels World’s Fair, pamphlet, 1958.

\(^{96}\) “All’s Fair,” *Time* 28 April 1958: 29.
American identity and why, consequently, the State Department was concerned about sending TAW’s production of *Godot*.

The period immediately following World War II was a rough, transitional time for America. America irreversibly entered the international spotlight when it exploded the first atomic bombs over Hiroshima and Nagasaki, Japan in August of 1945. The bombs’ effects on society went far beyond the initial destruction. The explosions threw America into a national identity crisis facilitated by the sudden plunge into the rough waters of world leadership and informed by the massive destruction of human life it had just completed. American leaders and journalists hotly debated whether isolationism or internationalism should be its postwar policy. American statesmen realized a new foreign policy was needed, one that made provisions for this ominous turn of events. Buoyed by Henry R. Luce’s call to “make isolationism as dead an issue as slavery,” they pushed a new policy - internationalism. In his 1941 editorial, “The American Century,” Luce calls upon Americans to “accept wholeheartedly our duty and our opportunity as the most powerful and vital nation in the world and in consequence to exert upon the world the full impact of our influence.” Isolationism was no longer an option and Americans found their country and themselves in a blaring international spotlight without a script. Nations struggling to rebuild after the devastation of World War II watched warily as the two emerging world powers - the United States and Russia - began the race for geopolitical power and atomic weapons superiority.

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97 Luce, “The American Century,” 22.

Concerned by all the negativity within the international community towards America, American statesmen wrestled with the problem of determining exactly what positive ideas could be posited that would change America’s image. Economically, America was a capitalist nation built on free-trade principles. Militarily, it was a world power with the knowledge and means to create and implement weapons of mass destruction. Culturally, it was not as easily defined. What was America - its ideologies, people, and culture - and how should it be presented to the nation and the rest of the world? To complicate matters, in late 1950, the Soviet Union ingeniously shifted the focus of their negative propaganda campaign against America and started a cultural campaign. They sent forth emissaries, such as artists and athletes, to visit other countries and report back on what they observed about the different cultures. Foreigners were invited into the Soviet Union to observe firsthand the ways of Soviet society and its highly developed artistic culture. The purpose was for these visitors to then carry what they observed back to their own countries. As Edward W. Barrett, a government official and highly acclaimed journalist, described it the offensive was to “prove conclusively that the West, particularly the war-minded U.S., was without culture, while the peace-loving Soviet Union was virtually becoming the Athens of the Twentieth Century.”

Although obviously biased in his opinion, Barrett nonetheless makes an important point that the Soviets had found another, more legitimate way to tarnish America’s image by exploiting Russia’s widely acknowledged proficiency in the arts—particularly music, ballet, and theatre. Barrett observed in 1953: “The Soviet recognized

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what we Americans have been slow to learn: that there are many nations where ‘culture’ isn’t a politically abhorrent term.”

By the mid-1950s, America’s cultural identity was prominently on the minds of some of the country’s most respected statesmen and journalists, as indicated by Barrett’s comments. Barrett, Luce, and Kennan were concerned about the back seat America’s cultural image was taking to its more prominent political and economic image. Kennan stated: “But there is certainly a large area, and probably the predominant one, in which the prevalence of these negative feelings is the result of our own carelessness and neglect, our own failure to take any adequate measures to see that the impression we create abroad actually does reflect the real values of our civilization.”

In 1955, while addressing the forty-sixth convention of The American Federation of Arts, Luce asked: “what do we do next?” What Luce was asking was, now that America had apparently achieved the goals that were set down after the Revolutionary War - to form a new nation, provide liberty for all, abundance, and create a strong economic and military system - it was time to move on to the finer goals of life that would define the nation and up the level of cultural advancement needed to round out the image. Luce made it clear that it was finally time to address an issue about America that had been ruminating since the nation was formed - its finer culture; specifically, the arts.

100 Barrett 181-2.


102 Henry R. Luce, address, Forty-sixth Convention of the American Federation of Arts, Des Moines, Iowa, 13 Oct. 1955: 5.
Kennan, a highly respected American diplomat, observed in his address to the International Council of the Museum of Modern Art entitled *International Exchange in the Arts* that Americans were “gradually becoming aware for the first time of the frightening extent to which negative conceptions about us prevail…but many of us still do not realize how largely these negative feelings are related to cultural rather than to political conditions.” Kennan’s main thesis summarizes the problem of the arts in America as he interpreted it in 1955. He called for a genuine respect and acknowledgment of the arts that is at least equal to the level of respect afforded them in the other nations of the world. He warned that isolationism tended toward complacency and believed that America would not be a great nation until it developed a genuine appreciation of art that places it above “horse racing and slot machines.” Kennan meant that America had to develop a respect for a distinctive, innovative cultural life that curbed the generalization of mass media specifically, Hollywood movies. Kennan’s thoughts on the mass commercialism that had become American culture are clear: “Above all, let us not make the common American mistake, so characteristic of the commercial media, of thinking that contributions of weak artistic talent or content are going to be acceptable if only they are packaged in pretentious and elaborate frameworks of technical execution.” Kennan was disturbed by the impact that Hollywood movies and the rising popularity of television had on the American cultural image. He expressed concern that mass media products were “aimed at passive amusement rather than at creative challenge.” But Kennan’s assessment of mass media entertainment is not wholly accurate. There is much truth in his statements concerning America’s obsession with seeking only amusement in the arts. Indeed, this
obsession has grown considerably since Kennan’s time. However, it is necessary to point out that films such as On the Waterfront, Marty, and Stalag 17 (movies that won Academy Awards around the time of Kennan’s speech and have since become seminal films) to name just three of many were breaking new grounds in terms of acting, narratives, and production values. Therefore, while it is true that Hollywood movies, television, and even Broadway were cranking out a good deal of product that was meant strictly for amusement, it was unfair of Kennan to make such a blanket statement concerning mass media and popular entertainment.  

One government agency that had been grappling with the problem of America’s cultural identity was the United States Information Agency (USIA). The USIA and its operational unit the United States Information Service (USIS) was, according to Foreign Service diplomat Wilson P. Dizard, Jr., “the biggest information and cultural effort ever mounted by one society to influence the attitudes and actions of men and women beyond its borders.” The main objective of the agency was to tell the truth about America - its faults as well as its good points - in order to give the people of the world the “full and fair picture” of American life that President Harry S. Truman had called for. The men and women throughout the various incarnations of the USIA before, during and after WWII realized that in order to create a lasting impression and one of a true world leader, America had to develop a cultural aesthetic coupled with an intellectual curiosity as well. The belief that a unified effort was needed to present

103 All quotes in this paragraph from Kennan, International Exchange in the Arts.


America in a more humanistic way informed the programs of the USIA. Charged with
telling the facts of American life, they used all the media outlets available to them at the
time - books, pamphlets, radio, film and later, television. The programs of the USIA
were designed to counteract the negative image most of the world had of America
which was an infant nation with no nascent culture or desire to develop one. The USIA,
though not solely responsible for this (the State Department and the Advertising Council
both played important parts in this matter), had to build a cultural identity for the country
from a history of respect for the arts that was not there. Joseph Horowitz observes:
“The arts of the United States have not undergone many centuries of rooted organic
growth…they are instead recent transplants, subject to sudden shock and jarring
contradiction.”106 American art was mainly transplanted from European countries and
consequently had been struggling to find its own voice.

What exactly does this mean for America and its representatives at the Brussels
World’s Fair? American leadership wanted their exhibits to: emphasize the ideas of
democracy; show that Americans were hardworking, real people who valued individual
freedom and peaceful relations with other countries; show the youthful spirit of the
nation (exemplified by the 250 college students that served as guides and interpreters in
the pavilion); and, prove that America was a country with cultural interests that went
beyond Hollywood movies. President Dwight D. Eisenhower said that the American
exhibits at the fair would “give a helpful insight into the character of our national
community, the fruits of its land and the spirit of its citizens.”107 The USIA, Advertising

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106 Joseph Horowitz, preface, Artists in Exile: How Refugees from Twentieth-Century War and Revolution

Council, and the State Department had to create an American identity but one that had substance. They turned to prominent New York architect Edward Stone to create the perfect pavilion for the exhibits.

The American Pavilion was to be a showplace for all that was good and interesting about America.\(^{108}\) It was a large, circular building made of steel, golden aluminum, huge translucent walls and a plastic roof which allowed for natural light inside and a feeling of wide open spaces. Outside, there was a huge circular pool with fountains surrounded by the flags of the forty-eight states and three territories. Inside was another circular pool, 150 feet in diameter that formed the center of the interior.\(^{109}\) Leading into the pool was a long runway which led to a platform where models of the very popular, opening day fashion show posed in everything from a simple cotton day dress to an elaborate full-length mink coat.\(^{110}\)

The aim of the exhibitions was not to stress capitalism but the American way of life; to allow visitors to roam through the massive pavilion at their ease and observe life as it was happening in America. President Eisenhower insisted that six voting machines be set up so that visitors could experience the democratic voting system.

“The Face of America” exhibit showed past American inventions like a 1903 Ford car and a huge slice of a giant redwood tree illustrating the ancient history of the land. The exhibit, “Islands for Living,” according to the official guidebook, showed a typical

\(^{108}\) An interesting side note: the guidebook and numerous articles on the American representation at the fair like to highlight the “Unfinished Work” exhibit. According to the guidebook, this exhibit “describes in words and pictures how Americans respond to the challenges of their society…the exhibit does not hide remaining unsolved problems.” The problems addressed such issues as urban slums, racial prejudice, and juvenile delinquency and were presented in the exhibit that was located behind the main pavilion.

\(^{109}\) This is America 8.

American home complete with furnishings and decorations that highlighted the concept of mobility by being “light, portable and easily stored” while appliances and “disposable containers exemplify the desire to save time and energy.” “Streetscape” was a recreation of a typical main street found in any smaller town in America. It had traffic signs, storefront windows, a mailbox, a newsstand displaying an array of articles and a drugstore that served up soda fountain treats. “The Children’s Creative Center” allowed children to explore their creativity in a safe, free-play room that had educative toys and art supplies.

American ingenuity was also displayed in the “City Planning and Industrial Development” exhibit which showed how America was improving its urban areas. The main feature of the “Automation” exhibit was the huge ‘RAMAC’ computer which allowed visitors to ask it questions in ten different languages. The American invention of colored television was demonstrated by way of a fully functional television studio set up in the “Color Television and Music Room.” The “Nuclear Energy” and the “International Geophysical Year” exhibits, as described in the guidebook, emphasized “the United States’ desires and commitments to share the benefits of scientific research with other nations.” In other words, to feature the peaceful uses for nuclear energy rather than the destructive uses demonstrated in WWII.

America's cultural side was represented by many different artists, orchestras, ensembles, and entertainers. Displayed in the “American Contemporary, Indian, and Folk Art” exhibit were sculptures, paintings, and crafts which demonstrated the rich history of American native art and folk art as well as the works of promising young contemporary artists. The “Circarama,” presented for the first time outside the U.S.,
surrounded visitors with a 360-degree filmed view of American landscapes, town
scenes, and cityscapes.\textsuperscript{111}

How effective were these exhibits in creating an American cultural identity? The
reviews were mixed. On the one hand, visitors enjoyed the beautiful openness, natural
light, and feel of the pavilion building. On the other, some felt that most of the exhibits
were unorganized, rambling, and not truly representative of American life. Many visitors
felt the Russian exhibits far excelled the American ones.\textsuperscript{112} The main criticism was that
it felt like a Manhattan advertising firm created a utopic vision of American life with bits
and pieces collaged together from high fashion gowns, to crates of tumbleweeds, to a
film strip show of various American images in random order.\textsuperscript{113} There was no apparent
direction or solid organization so prominently displayed by the Russians. Though the
aim was to present the American way of life and to prove that Americans were just
ordinary people, the result came off less than satisfactory. One American visitor to the
fair had this to say about the overall effect: “We have found that people everywhere are
eager to know about the \textit{basics} of American life…Unfortunately, few things in the
American building answer questions on this basis.” Instead, this visitor summed up her
opinions by saying that what was presented at the fair was a “Hollywood-designed life
complete with swimming pool, idle women…plus evidence at the Stock Market display

\textsuperscript{111} All information and quoted descriptions in the three previous paragraphs come from \textit{This is America}: 12-39.

\textsuperscript{112} Howard Taubman, “Brussels: American Mistakes and Lessons,” \textit{The New York Times}, 1 June 1958, 

\textsuperscript{113} Howard Taubman, “Brussels: American Mistakes and Lessons” 11, 14, 16.
that coupon-clipping can make it all possible.”114 In another letter, one visitor agreed that the exhibits were not generally organized or clear. However, she agreed with Taubman’s assessment that the individual exhibits were not as important as the overall aim, “which is consistent with our democratic tradition - that is, freedom to choose, freedom to err, freedom to do the very best we can in the diverse ways provided by our democratic processes.”115

Criticisms like these started soon after the fair opened on April 17, 1958. Instead of creating a solid, positive American image, it appears the State Department put together a quilted view of American life that failed to take the fairgoers by storm. Coupled with the added criticism that Russia presented a much stronger positive image, it is no wonder that the State Department was feeling less than confident that TAW’s production of Godot was a good choice to represent American regional theatre.

Godot at the Fair

According to Taubman, the fair was expected to be more than just a normal fair: “It will be the place where the cold war, fought with the weapons of art and drama, music and dance, architecture, books and films, will reach a climax...a grand campaign whose objective is the minds and hearts of men.”116 The bill of entertainment created by Jean Dalrymple and her committee included such noted artists and groups as Harry Belafonte, Marian Anderson, the Philadelphia Orchestra, the American Ballet Theatre, the orchestra from Julliard, and the Yale drama presentation of J.B. by Archibald

MacLeish. There were numerous jazz ensembles, an original opera presentation called
“Susannah,” and presentation of the film, South Pacific. Yet even with this impressive
display, critics made a point of comparing the American performing arts offerings to the
Russians and again found America a distant second behind Russia in what came to be
looked at as a performing arts competition.

Entered into this competitive struggle for artistic identity and superiority was
TAW’s production of Waiting for Godot. The concern, as has been noted above,
expressed by Dalrymple and others was that TAW took a European play to represent
American theatre at the fair. What they did not realize was that, even though the play
was written by an ex-patriot Irishman living in France, Blau’s production of Godot had a
distinctly American feel. The various critiques of Blau’s direction discussed above
pointed out the emphasis on the physical action. The general consensus among critics
was that TAW’s Godot was a non-stop, wildly comedic production. Whereas the critics
in San Francisco applauded Blau’s direction, the New York critics observed that the
philosophical meaning of the play was lost in all of the action. Foreign critics who
reviewed TAW’s performance at the fair agreed with the New York critics. They
believed that, though the play was well-acted, Blau’s emphasis on comedy was
overplayed and, ultimately, the performance lacked deeper meaning.\footnote{Fowler 289-91.}

Blau wanted to impress upon European audiences that Americans were capable
of handling a European play with insight and understanding. His focus on the object
moments and the meaning behind those moments; the emphasis on the more gritty
reality of the situation the two tramps find themselves in rather than taking a more
esoteric stance; the energy and rhythm; and, the quick flow of the dialogue all speak to

\footnote{Fowler 289-91.}
Blau’s particular American style when directing the play. And though the critics found the meaning of the play lost in the energetic interpretation by Blau and company, Blau recalls in *The Impossible Theater* that the “performances were wonderfully applauded” and that people commented most on the “Chaplinesque comedy” in the piece. It played to capacity crowds at the 1150-seat American Auditorium during its short, five-night run. The company returned to San Francisco without any further controversy or fanfare and gave four homecoming performances to very appreciative audiences at the Marine’s Memorial Theatre. In reality, the State Department got what they asked for - a representation of American regional theatre done in an American style.

**Conclusions**

In January of 1956, *Waiting for Godot* premiered in America at the Coconut Grove Playhouse in Miami, Florida. Directed by Alan Schneider and billed as the “laugh sensation of two continents,” the play starred Bert Lahr as Estragon and Tom Ewell as Vladimir. It is well-known that the production was a flop.

Next, Herbert Berghof tried his hand at directing the piece with Lahr again as Estragon and E.G. Marshall as Vladimir in the April 1956 Broadway premiere. As discussed above, New York critics - particularly Brooks Atkinson - praised Lahr’s ability to reach the audience with his warmly comic and soulful interpretation and applauded Berghof’s insightful and philosophical direction of the piece. According to David Bradby in his book *Beckett: Waiting for Godot*, Berghof recognized that Lahr needed complete freedom in his vaudevillian approach to the play and in his need to satisfy his fans by

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playing the role with his trademark gestures and vocal expressions. Bradby states that Berghof’s approach was “to play the comedy for all it was worth but also to stress the grotesque aspects of the play’s action.”120 Bradby believes the Broadway production, as well as the Miami production before it, did a disservice to the play by over-emphasizing the star quality of Lahr and his vaudevillian style and that both productions failed to get to the true power of the piece.

In 1988, Mike Nichols directed a production of Godot at Lincoln Center this time with an all-star cast that included Robin Williams as Estragon, Steve Martin as Vladimir, F. Murray Abraham as Pozzo and Bill Irwin as Lucky. Echoes of the critiques of Blau’s direction are contained in the critique of Nichols’s direction by Frank Rich of The New York Times. He states: “Mr. Nichols abhors the pauses where feeling might enter "Godot," so he fills most of them up with shtick.”121 The videotape of this production confirms this comment. The play is nonstop comic bits that, for the most part, are overplayed and definitely not funny. Instead of one star overplaying the comedy, as Bradby states in the earliest American productions of Godot, there were two very high-powered stars as the tramps vying for equal attention.

Four productions are not enough to confirm this as fact, yet the implications are there that these productions, with their over-emphasis on the comedy, is the American style for Waiting for Godot. When analyzing this question, one must consider the European and American views of life after World War II. Europe was physically devastated by the war while America, though certainly affected by the loss of human


life, did not experience the bombings and fighting of the war on home turf. Consequently, Americans had a less subjective, less political view of postwar society than Europeans who were embroiled in recovery plans and picking up the pieces of their bombed cities. Beckett fed into both the American and European postwar sensibilities of that time with a play that commented on postwar society without being overtly political or didactic. For Americans, the absurd, nebulous world Beckett created in Godot could be anywhere and the tramps could be anyone seeking to find meaning in that world. For Europeans, that same world could very easily represent their homeland and the tramps the citizens seeking to regain some normality in that world. Blau wanted to prove that an American company could understand the more philosophical European take on the play yet still retain the more open stance of the American style.

Blau’s production of Godot, despite the criticism and nervousness of the State Department, did in fact best represent American regional theatre. Blau took a European play and directed it with an emphasis on the comic moments mixed with an American interpretation of the angst of the postwar world. It was, as Blau had originally intended, an American’s take on a European play. It did not represent American commercial theatre but, even better, represented the experimental ideals and goals of regional theatres that wanted to break from Broadway’s norms and create new and interesting work. By choosing Godot, Blau made the voice of American regional theatre heard around the world.

Whether Blau’s interpretation of the piece was ultimately right or wrong is a purely subjective question. Based on the critiques and comments noted in this chapter, Blau’s

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122 This statement does not discount the devastation caused by the Japanese bombing of Pearl Harbor. Most of mainland America escaped the bombs of war.
direction of Godot should have allowed for more moments of deeper reflection. Godot is, whether intended by Beckett or not, a piece with reflective and pertinent thoughts about the state of mankind in postwar society. To override these moments with constant comic action negates the power of the play.

Bradby believes that Blau’s production focused on the comedic power of the entire ensemble and not just one star and that that is the reason his production was much better than Schneider’s or Berghof’s productions. Bradby states that Blau showed the theatre world that Godot “was a work of depth and power, with universal appeal, provided it was sympathetically performed and not treated as a clown show.”

However, given the account of Blau’s production in The San Francisco Chronicle, The San Quentin News, and the New York papers, Blau’s Godot was wildly comedic and boisterous. Even though it did not focus on one star who was a vaudevillian clown, Blau’s production was no less comedic and was, in fact, criticized for not bringing out the “depth and power” of the piece.

The comments by the New York critics that speak directly to Blau’s direction of the play foreshadow the comments to come when, in 1965, Blau and Irving surprisingly quit San Francisco and headed to New York City to take over the directorship of the Repertory Company at Lincoln Center. In the intervening years between 1958 and 1965, Blau continued to direct seminal productions at TAW and develop his directorial style. Most importantly during this time, he published his first book on theatre - The Impossible Theater: A Manifesto. His now famous (or infamous) call for a revolution in theatre was aimed at the heart of the very city he was headed toward - New York and its reputation of being the nation’s stage.

123 Bradby 104.
Chapter Four: Danton’s Death—“Risking the Baroque”

Her cherished hope was that Lincoln Center for the Performing Arts would have a permanent repertory theater of distinction and achievement.²

The purpose of this book is to talk up a revolution…I intend to be incendiary and subversive, maybe even un-American.³

Broadway and “‘The New Establishment’”⁴

On November 21, 1965, the Tulane Drama Review hosted a conference at the Carnegie International Center to discuss the current state of the American theatre and possible directions it might go in the future. In the introduction to a subsequent article on the conference written by Blau, Richard Schechner states that the sessions were “frustrating, exhausting, frequently long-winded” but that there were interesting and innovative ideas bandied about by theatre specialists such as Blau, Theodore Hoffman, Paul Gray, and Peggy Wood.⁵

What was discussed at length at the ten hour conference was the desire to change the given outlook of theatre as set forth by the Old Establishment, Broadway. In other words, they wanted to explore ways to relax the grip economically-driven

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¹ Herbert Blau, personal interview, 17 July 2008; Take Up the Bodies, 62. Blau likes to use this expression when describing the times at TAW he pushed the limits of the physical conception of a large scale production because of his own desire to try it all. In Take Up the Bodies, he referred to it as a “presumptuous fantasy, the desire to do it all at once, the hubris which probably did us in at Lincoln Center.” It is the hubris he refers to that is explored in this chapter.

² Inscription on the dedication plaque in the lobby of the Vivien Beaumont Theatre in NYC.

³ Blau, Impossible 3.


Broadway had on American theatre and open the door to the rest of the country. They wanted to create a New Establishment, a new way of looking at theatre that would include exploration of new and classic material in repertory style, and actors and directors who were willing and enthusiastic about creating professional theatre not in the same way as Broadway. What came under fire most at this conference and the topic germane to this chapter’s discussion of Blau was the lack of a skilled American resident company that could handle challenging classics as well as new works performed in a repertory format. Blau was invited because he was the new co-director of the Repertory Theatre at Lincoln Center (LCR) and had just completed his first highly criticized production there, his own translation of Georg Büchner’s Danton’s Death. He was not the first director to fall short of certain expectations for the fledgling theatre. Noted director Elia Kazan and successful Broadway producer Robert Whitehead had also proved disappointing in their scant two-year attempt to legitimize the repertory dream for New York. What were the expectations and goals for the New Establishment, namely LCR, and was a national repertory company possible in New York City?

According to the theatre scholars and practitioners at the conference, something was stifling the voice of the American theatre. The insinuation of the Cold War into society brought, among other things: the threat of nuclear war; fear of Russian expansionism; The House Un-American Activities Committee; McCarthyism;  

6 Blau, “‘The New Establishment’?,” 109-129. Other issues discussed concerned the financial difficulties of creating and maintaining a good resident company. Theodore Hoffman, the director of the theatre program at NYU at that time, stated: “But the truth is that when you get a theatre you don’t necessarily become an artist. A lot of the directors in the resident theatre movement ought to become producers.” John O’Neal of the Free Southern Theatre used the reaction against Blau’s program note for Danton’s Death (discussed further in this chapter) as an example of how the Establishment could put a lockdown on free speech. In tandem with that thought, Peggy Wood did what Schechner called her “now famous exit” because of the language Blau and Paul Gray used in their speeches. This conference may not have solved the problems of mainstream theatre but it did bring them to the forefront of what is still being debated today - the prominence of Broadway.
blacklisting; the habit of looking over the shoulder instead of looking forward; the Korean War; Brinkmanship; and, the most damaging, the suspicion that arose around intellectualism. John Gasner used the thermodynamic term “entropy” to describe the breakdown of energy and the lack of focus and drive that characterized American theatre in the 1950s.⁷ Although there were several plays that broke through the malaise of the 1950s, Gasner believed that “American theatre on the whole has not delivered the punch which has been its main distinction ever since 1920.”⁸ John Dugan, who directly addressed the main issue troubling most intellectuals writing in the heart of the McCarthy era, queried: “Would it not be more alert and reasonable to suspect that under the tranquil façade the drama has been seriously restrained…How many great moments of enlightenment have been lost to mankind because inquisition has taken the place of inquiry and fear walks abroad in the land of the free?”⁹

The 1950s was a decade of lost passion in the face of conformism; a homogenized American society so amply put on display (and criticized by Americans) at the Brussels World’s Fair in 1958. Yet, homogeneity never works in a country as historically diverse as America and in an art form as diverse as theatre. Sooner or later someone or something is going to break out and go in another direction. Blau noted that psychiatrists identified the key problem of the 1950s as “moral blandness.”¹⁰ George F. Kennan called for the arts to restore the American creative spirit by “breaking

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⁷ Interestingly, Blau later uses the same term in the chapter, “Growing Up with Entropy,” in The Impossible Theater.


¹⁰ Blau, Impossible 134.
through…the monotony and what I might almost call the narcotic effect of the modern commercial cultural product, and finding types of stimuli that are more kindly to the development of the creative spirit” (sic).11 As discussed in Chapter Three of this study, Kennan believed that the glut of cheap, popular entertainment caused by the advent of television and movies was blunting the natural artistic spirit of the country and called for new ways to nurture individual talent and create new avenues in American art.

Kennan was not the only advocate for restoring emphasis on the individual experience of art and reducing the push for art to conform to mass appeal. Gasner stated that “successful productions are not conclusive because success is often achieved on Broadway with more than a little help from sensational writing and stage production. Many a successful play has seemed artificially inflated with psychological and social pseudo-significance….“12 Many critics writing during this period, like Gasner, decried the fact that success of a particular show did not necessarily mean it was a good show; one with lasting dramatic appeal or importance for American theatre.

Walter Kerr articulated another aspect to consider about American theatre at this time: “It is not the purpose of the theatre to form the national character. The theatre does become a mirror of that character and in reflecting an aspect of it helps to crystallize it, perhaps. And I suppose this accidentally helps us to define that character. But that is not the same thing as creating the character. National character is created by beliefs.”13 It is true that theatre is a reflection of society, not the other way around.

12 Gasner, introduction, xviii.
And so, if the 1950s and early 1960s were characterized by ennui and a secretive suspicion of social or political rebellious thought against society, then it is safe to assume that the theatre reflected this character flaw. This is precisely what these scholars, statesmen, and theatre artists were lamenting - the glossing over of serious social issues and a lack of artistic vision for the American theatre. Even strong playwrights such as Lillian Hellman, according to Gasner, had trouble articulating what they were advocating in their works of the 1950s. There was no sense of a collective voice emanating from American dramatists as a whole and without a strong voice taking a stand either way, the character of the theatre was lost in the same mire as the national character. Blau summed up this problem when he stated that theatre, for the most part, had “a history of frustration and incapacitated vision, a laying waste of powers, hypocrisy, feebleness, careers in ruin, and the repeated betrayal of every promise of collectivity.”

As discussed in the previous chapter, America was keen on creating a new image for the country after WWII, one that emphasized its cultural attributes. Most of what the world knew about American theatre came from Broadway. Even though Jean Dalrymple and the arts committee for the BWF tried to get a Broadway show to the fair, they failed. Critics said it was because Broadway producers were not going to give up guaranteed money at the box office to play for free at the fair, even if it was to act as an emissary for American arts. Consequently, Broadway’s absence at the fair was quite conspicuous. According to Edward Reed and many other analysts of the state of theatre, Broadway had become a business enterprise run by “a pack of damned

individualists whose response to any hint that there might be a ‘common good’ is, what’s in it for me?” Broadway promoted any material that generated profits and denied the development of new, experimental works that went against the formulaic grain. Walter Kerr suggested that theatre was “outside the rhythm of American life” and that it was an “unpopular form” that Americans did not feel any kind of loyalty or affinity for. Reed bluntly stated that the theatre could not be saved while “economic lunacy prevails.” Broadway had to compete with the cheaper forms of entertainment, television and movies, by offering more popular fare, all the while trying to stay the rising costs of production and drop in attendance. And although the off-Broadway movement - represented by such solid theatre groups as Circle in the Square and the Phoenix Theatre - saved the serious drama from certain demise, there was minimal representation of it in the main houses on Broadway.

Into this atmosphere came a proposal for the Lincoln Center for the Performing Arts, a new arts complex in the heart of New York City. It would be a cultural hub for opera, ballet, music, education and theatre and was the first of its kind in the country. The land for the complex was eleven acres of reclaimed slums that were designated as the “Lincoln Square Urban Renewal Project” in April of 1955. By October, an informal committee met headed by John D. Rockefeller, III. A few days later, the Metropolitan Opera and the New York Philharmonic-Symphony Society both offered to build their new production houses on the site. In June of 1956, the Lincoln Center for the Performing Arts, Inc. was incorporated and Rockefeller was named as its first president.

16 Kerr, Stage & Screen 2.
17 Reed 50.
He served as president until 1961 and then became its Chairman of the Board until 1970.  

Plans for a theatre at Lincoln Center were in the works from the very beginning but it would be ten years before it was built. The theatre, it was hoped, would be something different than established Broadway; a theatre that would change the direction and vision of American theatre.

**The Vivian Beaumont Theatre: “The House That Jackasses Built”**

In 1958, Mrs. Vivian Beaumont Allen, heiress to the May department store magnate J.E. Allen, donated three million dollars to the theatre building fund for Lincoln Center. It was her hope that the theatre would grow into a national theatre for America along the lines of the Comédie Française. Sadly, she died in 1962, three years before the theatre building was completed and never got to see her dream realized.

The Vivian Beaumont Theatre opened in the fall of 1965. The theatre, designed by Finnish architect Eero Saarinen and scene/lighting designer Jo Meilziner, remains structurally the same today as when it first opened. The semi-circular, wrap-around auditorium seats 1140 people when in proscenium-style and 1083 people when in the thrust configuration. There is a five-row loge but the theatre boasts that no seat is more than sixty-two feet away from the stage, thus keeping the audience close to the action. The impossibly long, curving proscenium line causes many sightline problems for

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directors when in the proscenium configuration. Using the thrust stage fixes most of the sightline problems but creates sound issues due to the enormity of the stage area itself.

The stage, which was at the time it opened the largest of any theatre in New York, measures 138 feet across; seventy-five feet, six inches deep; and, eighty-nine feet, eight inches high for a total of 10,000 square feet. The massive stage takes up seventy-five percent of the auditorium space and has several trap doors located in the stage floor. At the time that Blau and company moved into the Beaumont, there was a turntable on the stage that measured forty-six feet in diameter. Though used for his production of Danton’s Death, Blau said that the turntable broke down soon afterward and was unusable. It has since been removed but traces of the wheel and the mechanism can still be found deep below the stage floor. At its opening, the theatre boasted the latest state-of-the-art theatre technology. It housed the first computerized light board that used punch cards. The cards held the cues for entire productions and could be saved for future use if the show were revived. It had vast wing space and large projection screens at the rear and on the sides of the stage.

Though meant to be a technical marvel and house what was forecast to become America’s national theatre, some New York critics were quick to jump on the massive structure and illuminate what they perceived as its many faults, veiling their deeper convictions that LCR was just another corporate plaything. Though aesthetically beautiful to look at from the outside, the Beaumont, according to Rogoff, was “the all-

20 All dimensions taken from “New Efforts to Encourage New Playwrights: Off-Broadway Problems Discussed by Guild Group; Grant to New Dramatists; Playwrights’ Conference,” Dramatists Guild Quarterly 2:3 (1965): 23-24. These are the dimensions Blau encountered and therefore are the best for this study.

purpose theatre that absolutely defines lack of purpose.” \(^\text{22}\) Kenneth Brown stated that the “vulgarity and waste is appalling” and that the Beaumont was “another monument to the opulence and derangement of the dollar and those who control it.” \(^\text{23}\) Blau, in his own assessment of the space years later, colorfully described the Beaumont as:

> The whole bastard stage with its botched contours and true dimensions: the long-receding distance to the back wall, the vast see-through wings, the vomitoria with passages below and (usable) airspace above, the vaulting loft so large that Irving (later) had to prevent them from dividing it into a movie house, and the side ramps with electronic close-in panels - a technological disaster to begin with, used now only as expensive tormentors for the perplexed frontage; that is, the cross-purpose proscenium and pimple thrust. \(^\text{24}\)

Blau and company accepted a new, uncompromising member into the company when they moved to New York - the Vivian Beaumont Theatre. \(^\text{25}\)

**Expectations for Lincoln Center Repertory Theatre**


\(^{24}\) Blau, *Take Up* 44.

\(^{25}\) I had the good fortune to be taken on a personal tour of the Beaumont by Linda Heard, the lighting designer, while on a research trip to New York City in January of 2008. The tour confirmed several of these critical observations—the stage is massive, the sightlines cruel, and, according to the visiting stage manager, there was only one vocal sweet spot, downstage center, where the actors could be heard without either shouting or significant amplification. I was permitted to try projecting my voice from various areas on the stage, including the sweet spot. The difference was truly amazing. From most of the stage, the sound of my voice got sucked into the massive auditorium with no reverberation. I could not hear my own voice even when I shouted. But, when I stepped straight down center onto the apron, the sound of my voice carried and I could fill the hall. My personal experience with the massive stage aided my understanding of what Blau’s company of actors went through when they performed on the stage.
The Repertory Theatre at Lincoln Center was established to create a resident repertory theatre which would change the direction of American theatre. The hopes for LCR were lofty: 1) to get back to the kind of experimentation that would lead to the creation of new American plays without the dependence upon box office numbers; 2) the establishment of a permanent acting company with the training and skill to perform both classics and new works admirably; and 3) to become America’s national theatre. LCR began, in essence, with most of the same goals as TAW but with vastly different resources. Ironically, what was supposed to be part of “the New Establishment” that would break away from the money-locked theatre Establishment of Broadway was started by an offer of municipal land from the city of New York and some of America’s most high-powered businessmen.

Hired to take on the challenges of creating the Repertory Theater at Lincoln Center were Elia Kazan, a renowned Broadway and film director, and Robert Whitehead, a successful Broadway producer. The Vivian Beaumont Theatre was still two years away from opening when Kazan and Whitehead, along with executive director, Harold Clurman and resident playwright, Arthur Miller, started production of the repertory company in a temporary theatre built for them at ANTA in Washington Square. Kazan and Whitehead gathered together a mix of Broadway stars and unknowns for their first company. The Broadway stars included Jason Robards, Jr., David Wayne, Hal Holbrook, Salome Jens, Barbara Loden, Ralph Meeker and Zohra Lampert. Among the members of the first company was an as yet undiscovered star named Faye Dunaway. Given the Broadway-proven credentials of these men and their actors, the board felt confident that the goals set down for LCR would be met. They were wrong.
The two directors did not even make it through their second season before Whitehead was fired and Kazan resigned. A brief explanation, as far as can be determined, is offered below as a prelude to what Blau and Irving encountered when they took over the directorship in 1965.

The plays chosen by Kazan and Whitehead for the first repertory season were *After the Fall*, a new play by Arthur Miller (his first in nine years) which opened on January 23, 1964 and was directed by Kazan. Next, Eugene O’Neill’s *Marco Millions* directed by José Quintero opened on February 20 followed by a new play by S.N. Behrman entitled, *But For Whom Charlie*, which opened March 12. Audiences for the productions, especially the new Miller play, were good. Though in a published interview for the *Tulane Drama Review* Kazan admits to making a lot of mistakes that first season, he states he was “on the whole, pleased with it.”

Unfortunately, the critics were definitely not. *Dramatists Guild Quarterly* sarcastically stated that the attacks by critics only confirmed the success of the company; that the critics would have given them their full sympathetic support if the company were no good. The reasoning behind this comment sounds a bit unclear and more like sour grapes coming from a group of writers traditionally wary of critics. However, the problems of the company cited by the critics and quoted in *DGQ* were very clear: 1) “they don’t know what they’re doing, 2) their choice of plays is disastrous and, 3) their company is incompetent.”

Critics were particularly opposed to Miller’s

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new play even though it garnered a 1964 Tony award for Best Featured Actress in a Play for Barbara Loden and a Tony award nomination for Best Actor for Jason Robards.

The next season offered *After the Fall* (held over from the previous season) in repertory with *The Changeling* by Thomas Middleton directed by Kazan; another new play by Miller, *Incident at Vichy* directed by Harold Clurman; and a new translation of Molière’s *Tartuffe* by Richard Wilbur and directed by guest artist William Ball. Of the three, only *Tartuffe* garnered somewhat favorable reviews. The worst of them was Kazan’s production of *The Changeling* which Novick labeled as the “universally denounced production” which “nobody wanted to see.”

High-powered critics, namely Walter Kerr and Howard Taubman, disparaged the production and Kazan. After this production, Kazan resigned as director but stayed on as a consultant. In December of 1964, Robert Whitehead was fired which caused Kazan to quit in support of his partner.

What happened? There are numerous conjectures about the demise of the first directorship. They range from critics who were suspicious and even jealous of the corporate money which funded LCR to Clurman’s idea that an ongoing fight arose over the expense of the building of the ANTA theatre space between Whitehead and whom he alluded to as “the most powerful member of the board.” However, three major criticisms stand out as the most plausible. First, there is the choice of plays. Clurman reflected several years later that the best explanation for the failure of the first directorship was because of the “dire failure of *The Changeling* coming on top of the poor impression made by O’Neill’s *Marco Millions* and S.N. Berhman’s *But For Whom*.

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29 Reviews are quoted below.
Charlie.” He states that the two seasons, comprised mainly of contemporary American plays, could have been done just as well in some Broadway house.30

This leads to a second major criticism of Kazan and Whitehead. LCR was to present theatre that was different than Broadway but Kazan and Whitehead, having come from Broadway, apparently tried to bring it with them instead of create something new. They were criticized as being part of the Broadway Establishment and that their productions showed lack of vision and dedication to new ideas.31 Although their seasons included two new Miller plays, a new translation of Tartuffe, and a new Berhman play, the critics vilified the choices and the productions citing, among other things, what is the third major criticism of the Kazan/Whitehead regime - the quality of the acting and the skill of the company. A look at two major New York critics’ reviews of After the Fall and The Changeling reveals some of the problems.

Howard Taubman’s review of After the Fall was glowing. He praised Miller, the play, Kazan and the acting company. His review reads more like a fervent hope that LCR would succeed rather than a true assessment of the production and the play itself. The final paragraph is exuberant: “Rejoice that Arthur Miller is back with a play worthy of his mettle. Rejoice also that a new company has been born committed to theater of consequence, not only the new but the old that New York so scandalously neglects.”32 Walter Kerr, on the other hand, did not like the play and spent much of the space for his review tearing it apart. He comments that, although “an experiment essential to our

31 See Novick, page 180 and Clurman, page 584.
"theatre" had begun, the company, the directors, and the playwright needed more time to work and congeal into a strong ensemble.  

33 The reviews for The Changeling are another story. Taubman liked the play and believed that a permanent repertory company should tackle difficult classics. However, he stated the production was “shot through with glaring deficiencies” and that Kazan’s “zest for the large theatrical gesture” left nothing to the imagination and did not serve the play or the audience. As for the company, he believed they were too young, untrained, and inexperienced to handle the roles. He cites weak voices and a paucity of style being the main problems.  

34 Kerr was crueler to the production and called it “deeply embarrassing.” He said that he always expected the neophyte acting company to suffer through bad moments when it presented its first classic play. However, he did not expect the initiation into the classics to be so horrible: “With lamentably few exceptions, it shows little beginning instinct for honest reading of verse, little beginning talent for reading the mind of another century.”  

35 Kerr’s comment, though it is his own opinion, gives a clue as to the type of training, or lack thereof, of American actors. The essence of this comment comes back to haunt Blau and his production of Danton’s Death.

Subscriptions for LCR had dropped by fifty percent by the time the second season started. The bad reviews and drop in subscriptions worried the board members who were anxious to make LCR a financial as well as an artistic success. They fired Whitehead in December of 1964 and searched for new directors, ones with vision and


new ideas. Though the search was spread out across the country, it landed in San Francisco. Blau was contacted for an interview in January of 1965 and by March he and Irving were heading to New York and the Vivian Beaumont Theatre.

The three board members who interviewed and eventually hired Blau and Irving were Robert L. Hogue, Jr., Judge Samuel I. Rosenman, and Michael Burke; or, as Blau quipped, “The Banker, The Judge, and The-Man-Who-Bought-the-Yankees-for-CBS.”36 Hogue, the President of the Board, was Executive Vice President of First National City Bank. Judge Rosenman, a man with liberal leanings that coincided with Blau’s own, was one of Franklin D. Roosevelt’s speech writers during his presidency. Burke was a Vice President at CBS in charge of developing new business adventures for the company. Two of those included funding the first production of My Fair Lady on Broadway and buying the New York Yankees baseball team. It is abundantly clear given the qualifications of these men that LCR was a business enterprise run by, as Julius Novick pointed out, “philanthropic businessmen” who should have had “no say in how their money is being spent.”37 Sadly, this was not the case. Headed by Rockefeller, the financially powerful infrastructure of the board was not lost on Blau as he contemplated whether or not to take the position.

**The Move: Sell Out or Revolution?**

A shock wave reverberated through not only TAW but the city of San Francisco as well when the announcement was made in February of 1965 that Blau and Irving would be moving to New York City to take over the Repertory Company at Lincoln Center. TAW company members, theatre critics and scholars as well as Blau and Irving

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37 Novick 181.
contemplated whether or not the move was a sell out motivated by the lure of financial gain. Financial gain was a big motivator but so was the new, technologically advanced purpose-built Vivian Beaumont Theatre. After years of struggling with rented spaces and arguing with city officials for a space of their own, the co-directors of TAW could not help but be attracted to the offer solely because of the Beaumont. However, for Blau there was also the prospect of proving to the nation that his professional regional theatre, created in San Francisco, could also thrive in the nation’s theatre capital. Was the decision to move a financial sell out or a calculated artistic move made to prove that professional theatre can be born in the regions of America and compete with Broadway?

TAW had been a testament to the decentralization of Broadway ever since it was created in 1952. Decentralization is defined for purposes here as taking the emphasis off of Broadway and distributing premieres of new material, directors, and actors more evenly across the country in an effort to prove that Broadway was not the sole repository for American theatre. Blau was the most vociferous leader of the decentralization movement in San Francisco insisting, along with Irving, that good, professional theatre was possible 3,000 miles off Broadway and that it was their duty to provide it. He was most insistent when it came to the actors of the company whom he felt were resistant to his ideas at first and who seemed to be working with a lesser degree of commitment to the cause then he was. Blau believed in loyalty to the company and was fully aware of the sacrifices he was asking his company to make: “This is one of the paradoxes with which the theater, our theater at least, has often to
live, that we make intolerable demands on those who have already made intolerable
demands on themselves in the service of their art.”38

In the beginning years, the Workshop had no money to pay the actors. Consequently, they had to work regular paying jobs in order to make ends meet. Blau and Irving themselves donated part of their meager teacher's salary at San Francisco State to pay rent on the loft at Divisadero Street. Unfortunately, not all of the actors were willing to make this sacrifice for the sake of decentralization of American theatre. Many of the actors would stay for a production or two and then leave when a paying acting job came up. Blau was frequently frustrated with actors and, as he termed it, their “recurrent stupidity” of having to “go through the experience of New York.”39 He was convinced that San Francisco, and specifically the Workshop, was where the new American theatre (later termed the New Establishment at the conference) would surface:

Here was the place to work, we said, here were the people to work with.

The clear-cut issue: did you want to work toward the consolidation of what you said you believed in, or did you want to go off and make a living at your ‘art’; that is, on the radio and TV, if you were lucky; or in stock or Broadway crap, if you were luckier.40

Blau knew that New York was still considered the epitome of theater, even after all of his progressive work in San Francisco. The hard work and sacrifice of Blau and company began to pay off in 1960 when, as he stated, “the continent began to tilt, and

38 Blau, Impossible 161.
39 Blau, Impossible 161.
40 Blau, Impossible 161.
money flowed out of corporate headquarters in New York.”⁴¹ TAW received a generous grant from the Ford Foundation based on their success as a regional, repertory company which allowed them to retain ten professional actors on fulltime status. The formal wording for this segment of the grant is as follows:

   In an attempt to determine whether audiences and actors will support repertory theater, the Foundation approved grants totaling $559,000 for four nationally recognized theaters: the Actor's Workshop, in San Francisco; the Alley Theatre, in Houston; the Arena Stage, in Washington, D. C.; and the Phoenix Theatre, in New York. The grants, which require that the theaters match them on a one-to-one basis, will enable each theater to retain ten first-rank professional actors on full-season contracts at $200 a week, thus achieving the residential companies necessary to the maintenance of high repertory standards.⁴²

The final lines of the statement are pertinent to this particular discussion about actors and the lure of New York: “The test of the actors' commitment - particularly of those thirty who decide to leave New York, the theater capital of the country - is crucial to the experiments.” Even the wording of the grant labels New York as “the theater capital of the country.” What the grant queries is whether or not the four regional theatre recipients could maintain the level of work needed to satisfy professional actors from New York. If they could, then would the actors stay committed to the cause for longer

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⁴² The Ford Foundation website no longer retains Annual Reports older than the year 2000. I originally accessed the report for 1960 in April of 2007. Halle Easley, communications manager at the Foundation, told me that the older reports are in transition and will eventually be archived at the Rockefeller Foundation and no longer available online. She hopes the transition will be completed by March of 2012.
than a show or two, thereby firmly establishing the theatres as permanent. As stated in Chapter One of this study, one of Blau’s reasons for starting TAW in the first place was so that his wife, a professional actress from New York, would stay in San Francisco and have a good place to work. However, decentralization only works if the regional theatres maintain not only a professional standard but a certain amount of work to keep the actors busy. The goal of the grant was for the regional theatres to pay a core group of actors so that some stability in the company could be established thereby allowing the companies to concentrate on creating new styles and directions for the American theatre that were not on Broadway. The grant enabled Blau and Irving to hire professional actors and to begin paying several of their own actors who had remained steadfast with the company, like Robert Symonds. The money enabled a more stable troupe of actors which, in turn, created a stronger ensemble. Still, after the years of hard work, negotiating with various organizations, and shuffling around theatre spaces to establish TAW as a professional repertory theatre in San Francisco, the question remains - why would Blau and Irving leave?

The decision was not any easy one given all that Blau and Irving had worked for and considering what Blau had said about the state of American theatre, particularly Broadway, in his recently published book, The Impossible Theater. Richard Schechner wrote an article on the move and the possible reasons for the decisions that were made. The article contains portions of the letter that Blau and Irving wrote to their supporters and subscription holders. In the letter Blau clearly states that the decision to move was so that they could take the conception of TAW (the desire to do good work with diverse material) to the national level while still remaining, ideologically at least, 3,000 miles off
Broadway. But there were other, more personal and practical reasons for the move. As has been noted, Blau and Irving were constantly struggling to find the funds and the performance spaces to keep TAW in operation. Like a nomadic troupe of performers, when one space was torn down to make way for a freeway, they found another, larger space to move into. The biggest thorn in Blau’s side was that the city of San Francisco never offered to build them a permanent home of their own; one that would support and encourage the growth and permanence of the company. Blau sums up the problem in the following statement:

> We were aspiring to be a civic theatre, but the civic administration of San Francisco never really helped us out…It wasn’t until we were invited to go to Lincoln Center that there was an immense civic uproar about the potential loss of The Actor’s Workshop. By the time we left San Francisco we had anywhere from three to five theatres playing simultaneously in miscellaneous spaces, but we never had an adequate theatre, not even remotely like a European state theatre. The city, from time to time, would promise to do something for us, but never did. No sooner were we invited to go to New York than the city immediately promised to build us a theatre. We told the city to go to hell, and left.

In 1959, Blau had received a Ford Foundation director’s grant that enabled him to travel to Europe and study theatre. Many things he saw on his trip impressed him but the

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most impressive were the state theatres and the civic support behind them. The fact that city officials in San Francisco had not mandated funds to build TAW a theatre that was theirs alone grated on Blau even more after this trip. This was obviously on his mind when the offer to move to Lincoln Center’s brand new state-of-the-art theatre was presented to him.

Daniel Sullivan, a new member of the company at that time, remembers how he felt the moment he heard about the impending move:

I was completely surprised. I was doing Pinter’s The Collection in the Encore space when an interviewer simply dropped by the theatre and made the announcement. Of course we were completely shocked and surprised by this because we had been held in place by this idea that you do not go to New York…We had no idea what to do. All our friends were in the company. I had extremely mixed feelings about going along because I had just graduated from college and had so bought the idea of this theatre hook, line and sinker. To suddenly fall away from that idea was a big surprise and I was not aware that things were not working in San Francisco.

Sullivan believes that the reason for the move was motivated by Blau’s desire to take his ideas to a large cultural center and reiterated that the city was as taken by surprise by the move as the company was.

45 Blau, “Meanwhile, Follow the Bright Angels,” Tulane Drama Review 5:1 (1960): 89-101. This is the letter, published later by TDR, that Blau wrote to his company describing the many things he was learning about European theatre and their own while traveling through Europe on a Ford grant in 1959. Aside from learning about Blau’s thoughts at this time, this article contains many firsthand observations about European theatre and would be of interest to anyone studying theatre in this time period.

A number of theatre critics and scholars offered their thoughts on the highly anticipated move of Blau and Irving. Paine Knickerbocker, whose professional relationship with Blau had been rocky at best, believed that the community did not fully accept TAW because Blau and Irving had not intended that it should. They did the work they wanted to do and were not swayed by public opinion, threats of dropped subscriptions, or reviews. Their ability to not capitulate to the expectations of others is admirable and enabled Blau and Irving to create the type of theatre they had envisioned in San Francisco. However, Knickerbocker cites in his article this same ability as one of the reasons for lack of community support and warns that “if such a company is to continue, it may make some softening gestures to the community.” Knickerbocker did not, at that time, believe the move was motivated by selfish reasons and realized it was time for them to move on: “The two men have done as much as was possible here. Now they should be permitted to conserve all their energies for their challenge ahead.” He mourned the loss of TAW and its eclectic repertoire and states that Barefoot in the Park, which was playing at the Geary at the time, was the “innocuous sort of theater San Francisco wishes.”

Knickerbocker’s professional relationship with TAW started with his critiques of Mother Courage and ended with a statement of realization - that San Francisco had lost a truly innovative theatre.

Richard Schechner states in his article on the move: “I don’t think any artist who moves to where he has more artistic freedom is selling out.”


the move left TAW in a bind because Blau and Irving took ten of their best actors with them to New York. Schechner knew instinctively that where Blau and Irving go, so go the ideas that made TAW what it was - one of America’s strongest professional regional theatres. Although Schechner hoped that TAW’s new managing director, Ken Kitch, would succeed in keeping TAW operating, without the leadership of Blau and Irving he knew it would be a completely different company.\(^50\) Schechner makes another interesting comment concerning the move: “Ahead lies the program of *The Impossible Theater* now made possible through the fat LCR wallet.”\(^51\) This rather snide comment belies his statement earlier regarding artistic freedom and reveals his true thoughts on the move. Blau was combining corporate money with his ideas of revolutionizing the American theatre. However, Sullivan did not believe that money was the biggest motivator for the move and that to “make a national statement rather than a local statement” was more likely the deciding factor.\(^52\)

Did Blau and Irving sell out to corporate money or was the move based purely on artistic reasons? The answer is it was a combination of both. Financially, Blau and Irving constantly struggled to keep TAW operating, even after the Ford Grant. They had endless meetings with San Franciscan businessmen and council members to get funding. They paid rent out of their own salaries, scrambled to find theatre spaces, and even relied on Irving’s gambling skills for money. A brand new state-of-the-art theatre backed by large sums of corporate money would be difficult to turn down even by the most diehard of theatre revolutionists. And that leads to the more artistic reason for the

\(^{50}\) Though Kitch and company gave it a valiant try, TAW closed forever in the summer of 1966.

\(^{51}\) Schechner, “Blau and Irving at Lincoln Center” 16.

\(^{52}\) Daniel Sullivan, personal interview, 2 April 2007.
move. Blau was, at that time, a self-professed theatre revolutionist. The opportunity to take his brand of theatre to the national stage and finally get worldwide attention for his efforts was too titillating to pass up. Given the financial and artistic rewards awaiting them in New York, it is no wonder that Blau and Irving accepted the job.

Yet, what does the move say about Blau's mantra that good, professional theatre could thrive 3,000 miles off Broadway? As Sullivan said, he had bought into this idea fully because that was what was expected of a member of TAW. If Blau truly believed in this ideal, why did he not stay in San Francisco and see it through? Again, the answer is national recognition. Blau wanted to prove that America could have a national theatre based on the ideals and goals that established TAW; that American theatre could be based on thorough exploration of both new and established works through stage production and not on financial gain. The money that came with LCR, corporate or not, would give Blau and Irving the financial security they needed to strive for this goal. For Blau, the move gave him the chance to revolutionize American theatre by creating a successful, professional repertory company that was different and, he hoped, far superior to Broadway. And that, whether selling out or revolution, was why he was hired to be co-director of the Repertory Company at Lincoln Center.

Expectations for Blau, Irving and Company

Blau’s first words to Hogue when he interviewed for the job in January of 1965 were “I want to change you.” 53 He wanted to finally realize the goals set down for LCR as stated above; goals that Kazan and Whitehead had failed to achieve. Though the Board of LCR was cautious of Blau’s revolutionary attitude and, as he terms it, his “subversive” wish to save the world through theatre which he proclaimed in his

manifesto, the truth is he was brought in expressly because of these ideas. The board at LCR wanted to change what was being done, or not being done as it turned out, by Kazan and Whitehead. They wanted fresh, younger blood and quicker results and felt that Blau had the vision and artistic spirit to produce them.

When Blau and Irving arrived in New York in March of 1965, the immense scope of the task before them became clear. Blau reflects in Take Up the Bodies that almost instantly they had to:

change the repertoire, shape up a divided company, avoid the use of stars, alter the economic structure of the theater, renovate the unions, develop a newer audience, protect the actors from sudden firings, open a new theater and test out the stage, use the machinery, introduce a new and radical music, bring in the blacks, take on the Vietnam war, anticipate the self-defeating excesses of protest, educate the Board, reconcile the Underground and the Establishment - and stay, in spirit, 3000 miles off-Broadway.

There are many, perhaps too many, idealistic goals in this statement, the most problematic being the reconciliation of the Underground (anything not established Broadway) and the Establishment (Broadway). Blau realized that all theatrical eyes were on him and Irving as they attempted to bring these two disparate factions together into one cohesive American theatre. Blau and Irving, in their desire to make a difference on a global scale, went overboard in their expectations of themselves and

54 Blau, Take Up 32. Blau relates that the board members “avidly” read The Impossible Theater and said it was one of the reasons they called him in for an interview.

55 Blau, Take Up 40.
their company: “What we had proposed was a virtual reformation of the American theater at almost every level, aesthetically and politically.” It is highly doubtful that anyone could have lived up to these expectations but Blau and Irving knew that they not only had to live up to them, but exceed them.

Kenneth Brown relates his disbelief in Blau and Irving’s venture in his article, “The Affluent Society Builds a Theatre.” He thought that nothing Blau and Irving could do, no matter how devoted and talented they had been in San Francisco, could ever live up to the expectations of the Board. The main problem as he saw it was that Blau and Irving had been accustomed to doing the theatre they envisioned at TAW while always on the edge of financial ruin. Even after the Ford Foundation grant money came in and they were finally able to start paying their actors, TAW was never monetarily flush to the point of being comfortable. This made Blau and Irving feel in control of what they did and how they did it. It added passion to their visions because their operating money came mostly from their efforts and not from any corporation. However, at Lincoln Center the constant struggle for money that had kept them on the edge had been taken away and, as Brown pointed out, a “very unhealthy challenge” arose. Blau and Irving, according to Brown, now had to “live up to the expectations of a group of people who are so saturated with false ideals that it is impossible to know what will satisfy them. The necessity of satisfying them at all is, of course, disastrous.” In his pre-

56 Blau, Take Up 40.

Oddly, Blau did not have Brown’s prescience about the Board when he first came to New York. He knew of the money that was funding the operation, snidely referring to it as “the fringe benefits of a permanent war economy,” but felt confident in his abilities to make positive changes at LCR while holding to his ideals.\footnote{Blau, \textit{Take Up} 37.} The pressure Blau did keenly feel on the eve of his move to New York was from the theatre world. How would the public respond to his ideas? Would the critics understand what he was attempting to do and give him the time to do it? He felt all eyes upon him when he wrote in his journal: “I must think very carefully now about what I’m saying because nobody will \textit{not} believe me anymore.”\footnote{Blau, \textit{Take Up} 61.}

\textbf{Danton’s Death}

Blau, eager to set the tone for his co-directorship from the start, wrote a program note for his 1965 production of \textit{Danton’s Death} in which he equated the play’s subject matter - the Reign of Terror during the French Revolution - with the escalation of American troop involvement in the Vietnam War. The note was intended to be the warm-up to what Blau hoped the audience would see on the stage - a connection between the political thoughts and actions of both wars performed solidly by his company. The note caused great concern among critics, the Board members at Lincoln Center, and some of the actors of the company, the ones who were not used to Blau’s outspokenness. In fairness to Blau and because of the controversy caused by the note, the majority of it is reprinted here for thorough scrutiny:

\begin{quote}
The French revolution was a series of small nuclear explosions climaxed by the reign of terror. It came at the end of the 18\textsuperscript{th} century
\end{quote}
when enlightenment looked over the abyss to anarchy and, in our own
time, absolute unreason. The terror was designed by the Committee of
Public Safety as an instrument of order. ‘Terror but not chaos.’ The
bloodletting seemed required by history. Terror, according to
Robespierre, Castro, Verwoerd, Mao Tse-tung, and President Johnson,
is the moral whip of virtue.

This is not to equalize all aberrations of power, but to recognize—as
Buechner did at 21—that nobody has a premium on tyranny. By fault or
default, from whatever good motives, we are all executioners. ‘What is
it in us that whores, lies, steals, and kills?’ The question may be hard
tack for a new season. But we may as well begin where our world
leaves us: with the balance of terror. We would hold our peace if we
had it [. . .].

The heroes of the Revolution were responsible for murder, rape,
arson, cannibalism, atrocity of every kind, and the horror is they were
no more (or less) sadists than the men responsible today for releasing
napalm over the jungles [. . .].

The Terror is the mind’s revenge on itself. . . .The guillotine,
introduced as a humane method of capital punishment, quick and
surgical, is the absurd chop-logic of the bureaucratic mind, like the
tumblers [sic] of the computer that decides how many people are
expendable in the next holocaust. People submitted to it as we submit
to our own most impossible conceptions [. . .].
The Revolution may have been a time when, for their little day, the poor were the terror of the earth. But the guillotine was the debraining machine of the bourgeois world. The executioner, like Eichmann, was a respectable man, an obedient part of the mechanism. Revolution comes from oppression, but the price indices rose then as they do now with Viet Nam. Buechner creates a scene where prosperity promenades while murder is laughing in the streets.  

Blau posited difficult questions to answer during a very heated time of the Vietnam War. Is tyranny any different or better if it is committed for a perceived just cause? Are gunfire, bombs, and napalm - the weaponry of the Vietnam War - any less tyrannical to the modern world as murder, rape, and cannibalism were in the days of the French Revolution? What Blau was trying to point out was the random ruin of life caused by political powers that indiscriminately kill people - whether directly through guillotining or indirectly through napalm bombs dropped in jungles - for financial gain. And yet, as Blau states in his program note, “we submit to our own most impossible conceptions” as did the people of France.

Even though Blau states in the note that he did not intend to “equalize all aberrations of power,” the mere mention of President Johnson’s name in the same sentence with Fidel Castro and Mao Tse-tung was enough to raise public ire. Irving publicly supported Blau and his right to say what he did. Robert Hoguet, in an article for The New York Times rather surprising states that Blau and Irving had “artistic autonomy” and that he did not find the program note to be an attack on President Johnson. However in the same article, William Schuman, president of Lincoln Center

60 Blau, Take Up 70.
states their position on the matter very plainly: “I wish to stress that the member institutions, including the Repertory Theater of Lincoln Center, are autonomous bodies and as such are wholly responsible for the content of their productions and the manner of their presentation. The views expressed by Mr. Blau in the program notes for last night’s preview are his own.” After one production, initial worries about Blau’s penchant for radical thought and outspokenness were confirmed, and the Board, especially Hoguet, henceforth kept a wary eye on him.61

The critics had a field day with Blau’s production note. Milton Esterow of the New York Times, for example, sensationalized the note by titling his article, “Johnson Linked with Dictators.” The first paragraph sums up the effect Blau’s program note had on the public: “Herbert Blau and Jules Irving, the new artistic directors of the Lincoln Center Repertory Theater, have associated President Johnson with Robespierre, Mao Tsetung, Fidel Castro and Prime Minister Henrik F. Verwoerd of South Africa in an article on ‘Danton’s Death,’ a 19th century drama of the French Revolution attacking dictatorship.” Within the article are quotes from a few first preview night patrons who comment that Blau’s equating Johnson with the others was “questionable,” “out of place,” and “hitting below the belt.”62 Blau attempts to his explain his Johnson comments in the article by saying:

The grouping was not in any way intended to discredit President Johnson. It simply says that nobody has a premium on tyranny. One of the key questions of the play is what is it in us all - Robespierre,


62 Esterow, “Johnson Linked with Dictators” 56.
Johnson, Castro, Blau, Irving that whores, lies, steals and kills from whatever good motive…Johnson is meant to be a symbol of our own involvement. A man in a position of power is often compelled to take actions out of his own sense of rightness that go over the border of self-righteousness.

Esterow asked Blau outright if he was criticizing President Johnson and his handling of the war to which Blau replied: “My attitude is irrelevant to what I’m saying in the article.”63

The part of the note quoted above was taken out before the opening of the show and all that appeared in the program for the rest of the run was a brief historical piece on the French Revolution. Blau refers to the editing of the note as “the most shameful thing” he has ever done in the theatre but stated he did it to ease the fears of the actors - mostly the ones left over from Kazan’s directorship - and not to appease audiences or critics.64 He has regretted his actions ever since but was persuaded at the time that too much was riding on this first production and, as he recalls, “when principle started to look like vanity,” he relented.65 Right or wrong, Blau, in a very short while, created an atmosphere of alienation about him that would be hard to shake. New Yorkers were not used to his candor and lambasted him. Blau, stunned, tried to continue on in the spirit of revolution but the die had been cast and his directorship was in question.

A further attempt to justify his controversial program note happened at the aforementioned conference hosted by TDR. Blau explained in more detail his thoughts

62 Blau qtd. in Esterow, “Johnson Linked with Dictators” 56.

64 Herbert Blau, personal interview, 17 July 2008.

65 Blau, Take Up 71.
on the Viet Nam War as they related to Danton’s thoughts about the French Revolution. He referred to the “notorious sentence” that mentioned Johnson alongside Castro and stated that he thought he had written it “with a great deal of precision, and qualified it considerably afterward.” The sentence in the program note that follows the “notorious” one states: “This is not to equalize all aberrations of Power….” Though this might seem like a qualification to Blau, the words still suggest that President Johnson belonged in a group of men who skewed their positions of Power (capital “P” kept for emphasis). Blau further qualified his statements given at the conference by saying he “simply wanted to say that nobody has a premium on tyranny.” Again, it appears that Blau was not attempting to mollify his comments, merely explain them more thoroughly in hopes of clarifying his position.  

He further explained that “the purpose of the note, which I did not construe as a political note, was to establish certain preoccupations that we found in our work with Danton’s Death: The people whom you see in Danton’s Death are a group of self-defeating idealists.” According to Blau, he was not intending to be political onstage. He believed his program note was precisely written in accordance with his vision of the play and the discoveries they made while rehearsing it as they coincided with his views on the American involvement in Viet Nam. Some of Blau’s more, as he termed them, “intensely rational friends” believed that it was wrong for American troops to be in Viet Nam but, given the state of the war and the rapid escalation of violence in that part of the world, their presence was demanded. Blau understood this reasoning but, though he might be convinced on a political level of the government’s stance on Viet Nam, he


still considered it morally offensive; a necessary evil that people were just meant to accept and not question. He subscribes this feeling to Danton, whom Blau stated, “is himself perhaps convinced of the moral necessity of the reign of terror” and is violently opposed to it.  

Blau’s attempt to soften the impact of his words failed. He recollects in his later book, Take Up the Bodies, that critics accused him of a “nasty show of pseudo-intellectualism” and alienating the audiences with his high-handed remarks. Blau’s usual outspoken, blunt manner of relating his thoughts and ideas - a style he fought to cultivate and maintain in San Francisco - did not work on the nation’s stage in New York. Blau, through the character of Danton, realized that for the most part protest is ineffectual in the face of controlled, political power whether in government or in theatre. 

Critical Response: “The largest ambitions require the most persuasive performance.”

Blau, usually fastidious about explaining his conception of the plays he directed, said that it would be “ludicrous” to explain his work on Danton’s Death because, whatever he did, it did not work. One main issue that comes to the fore in most of the reviews of Danton’s Death pertains to Blau’s efforts to use the entirety of the immense stage and its machinery and the effect it had on the acting. In Blau’s words “the place was so huge that the hundreds of lights in the remote ceiling are like a galaxy of dying

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69 Blau, Take Up 71.
70 Blau, Take Up 43.
stars, and that if you don’t take precautions to give the actors amplitude and voice they will look...not only smaller but younger, and acoustically forlorn.”

Blau had never worked with such a large space before. He began his directing career in a small loft, advanced to the slightly larger Elgin Street Theatre, and finally, the 650-seat Marine’s Memorial Theatre. His staging work was developed on far smaller spaces than the Beaumont’s stage. The loft on Divisadero Street and the Elgin Street Theatre allowed him to explore the use of arena staging, which is a more intimate arrangement than a proscenium setup. The Marine’s Memorial stage, though a proscenium stage, is small, not very deep, and allows for tight, ensemble staging.

Developing his directing skills on these smaller spaces allowed Blau to explore the whole space, mostly by letting the actors discover the movement themselves through improvisation. This technique did not work on the Beaumont’s stage, and Blau believed that the “unmastered difficulty of the space” left his stage images straddling the fence between improvisation and design.

Howard Taubman of The New York Times commented that the early crowd scenes in Danton’s Death came off as “a commotion caused by people screaming and racing hither and yon, but instead of the illusion of the mobs in bloody, feverish Paris, one has the impression of actors going through their paces.”

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71 Blau, Take Up 44.

72 I was taken on a personal tour of the Marine’s Memorial theatre in December of 2011 by Roxanne Goodfellow, the theatre manager. Along with exploring the space, I was shown some theatre graffiti on a backstage door. Apparently, one of the members of TAW had written on the door, “Crucible, Actor’s Workshop, April 15, 1955.” This was their premiere production at the Marine’s Memorial.

73 Blau, Take Up 45.

stated that Blau was justified in his attempt to use the entire space and that any director new to the space would desire to do the same thing. Norman Nadel of the New York World-Telegram and The Sun stated that Blau’s staging was “aflame with revolutionary fervor, and alive with theatrical invention. It commands attention.” The 1965 review in Time magazine states that Blau’s direction resembled “a wind machine blowing actors around like autumn leaves.”

Blau’s staging was usually filled with movement and activity, sometimes to the detriment of the meaning of the play, as noted earlier in the New York reviews of Blau’s production of Waiting for Godot. Robert Brustein cited the same difficulty with Blau’s direction of Danton’s Death. Brustein viewed the play itself as a “beautifully written death scene in four acts” that should be probed and explored. According to Brustein, Blau staged what he interpreted as an “intimate” work like an “historical pageant.” He noted that Blau injected “activity, tumult, and clamor at every opportunity” instead of letting Danton’s quiet death knell sound. The fact that Brustein’s criticism of Blau’s direction coincides with comments made several years earlier by the critics who reviewed Blau’s production of Godot, is noteworthy. Apparently, Blau fell into the same trap Kazan did with The Changeling. He got caught up in the theatricality of the piece rather than the story. Schechner commented that there was “not much to choose


between Blau’s *Danton* and Kazan’s *Changeling*. This comment foretold the beginning of the end of Blau’s involvement at Lincoln Center.

The real stars that opening night in 1965 were the stage and the stage technology. The acting in *Danton’s Death* was found to pale in comparison. The following is Daniel Sullivan’s personal reflection about his experience acting in *Danton’s Death*:

I was the first person on the Beaumont stage. It was crazy. The theatre itself did not work, but Herb tried to figure out how to make all of it work. Therefore, *Danton* was presented in thrust and proscenium style. The Board poured millions and millions of dollars into that space. Later, French acousticians came in and placed hundreds of little microphones all over the space so that now, an actor can turn upstage and still be heard. But we did not have that back then so we had to yell. Anyway, at the beginning of the play, a young French nobleman runs onto the stage pursued by these four Amazonian women who gut him with scythes and leave him dead on the stage. The Beaumont stage had a huge turntable that Herb wanted to use. So, I got killed with these big wooden scythes (I do not remember how exactly that happened) and I fell down and the turntable turned so that my body was taken offstage. It was a silly thing to do. And that was the beginning and, metaphorically, the end of Herb. It was not a particularly good production.79

Nadel commented that the actors were up against stiff competition from a stage “so ingeniously designed and so well equipped that the very employment of it threatens to be more interesting than what is being enacted on the boards.”

This is not difficult to believe considering there was a full-size, working guillotine complete with metal blade and gruesome sound effects that was used to “execute” the prisoners. Gordon Rogoff stated that it was both the overwhelming stage mechanics and the poor acting that was to blame for the failure of the production. He said that the actors were “powerless in their art” and completely helpless to maintain any sort of control over what was happening to them.

The quality of the acting came under fire from Brustein as well who stated that the acting was “rarely integrated,” the ensemble failed, and that Alan Bergman, who played Danton, was “depressingly inadequate.” Rogoff’s comment is even more damning: “Everybody shouted. The mob shouted. Robespierre shouted. St. Just shouted…Shouting is, of course, only the surrogate villain. The evil genius behind it is the absence of selection.”

The interpretation was lost in the production; something that would happen to an amateur director, not a seasoned one like Blau. Blau would never have allowed this to happen at TAW where he believed in rehearsing a play until it was ready and prided himself on gaining a thorough understanding of the script and relaying it to his cast before a word was spoken on stage. Rogoff’s observation that


80 Nadel 298.

81 Rogoff 94.

82 Brustein 38.

83 Rogoff 94.
“the lines kept passing one another like proverbial ships in the night”\textsuperscript{84} and Brustein’s comment that the play was “overproduced and underdirected” are indications of how far Blau had traveled away from the original intentions of TAW. Brustein told Blau and Irving to “loosen into their old quiet work of intelligent, lucid production.”\textsuperscript{85}

Rogoff labeled the actors in \textit{Danton’s Death} “Blau’s actors” indicating that he believed the poor quality of the acting was directly due to Blau’s use of actors from his San Francisco company. The truth is, a good majority of the actors were either holdovers from Kazan’s company who were still under contract or New York actors hired through auditions. \textit{Time} magazine also made this error: “Instead of drawing from the pool of New York’s unparalleled acting talent, Lincoln Center has chosen to import too many of the San Francisco minor-leaguers of Irving-cum-Blau.”\textsuperscript{86} Blau stated that he purposefully kept most of the imported TAW actors in the smaller, walk-on roles (like Daniel Sullivan) and gave most of the leads to the New York actors in anticipation of just such comments. A glance at the cast list in the program proves this to be true. Of the ten TAW actors, only Robert Symonds, as Robespierre, had a leading role.

Blau believed the actors were attacked in the papers because they were mistaken for San Francisco actors; that the mere association with he and Irving was enough to garner a bad review. Blau’s controversial preview night program note most likely did not help matters much either. And, history has shown that, sometimes, very little can be done to change a critic’s mind if it is set against something. All of these points aside, whether from San Francisco or New York, ultimately, it is the job of a director to work

\textsuperscript{84} Rogoff 94.

\textsuperscript{85} Brustein 38.

with the actors and pull a good performance out of them and by most accounts, Blau failed to do this.

Did Blau understand how an actor develops a character through some type of method or training first, then takes and assimilates the director’s concept of the character into that work? It was not that Blau did not respect the actor’s work. In fact, he called actors “the most selfless of all artists” and believed that “the director must first learn to treasure his actors.”\textsuperscript{87} His respect for actors is attested to time and again in his theoretical writings and his later work with the KRAKEN group at Oberlin College. Yet, when asked whether Blau understood the process the actors went through, Sullivan replied:

No. And again, I feel it is about the actor. As a director, if you do not have that love that makes you pursue questions such as: ‘how does the actor work?’; ‘how did the actor get that?’; ‘how does that performance happen?; ‘what process did the actor go through to cheat that?; then you cannot get there, you cannot understand the acting process. If a director does not have that love, but has the love of the idea, they just cannot get there.\textsuperscript{88}

To Sullivan, Blau was more a theoretical man of the theatre, not a practical one. Blau was more in love with the idea of theatre and less passionate about the practical processes of the work needed to realize the idea.

Despite the negative responses that have been highlighted, there were positive outlooks for the company under Blau and Irving’s direction by two highly reputable sources - \textit{The New York Times} and \textit{The Sun}. Taubman wrote in the \textit{Times} that, even

\textsuperscript{87} Blau, Impossible 142.

\textsuperscript{88} Daniel Sullivan, personal interview, 2 April 2007.
though there were many problems yet to be solved, “the new leadership of the Repertory Theater of Lincoln Center has plunged into its task with energy and boldness” and that there were “heartening signs of a viewpoint and a commitment.”89 Nadel put aside the political furor over the program note and got down to the basics of Blau’s direction. He called Blau an “impressive man of the theater” and praised the pacing, the use of the entire stage, and the ensemble desire he brought to a group of actors that Nadel believed were not yet sufficiently trained.90

Despite these positive responses to his work, Blau knew he needed unconditional praise from the start in order to satisfy the board and validate his artistic views for the American theatre. Yet, because of the acrid statements concerning Broadway and the state of American theatre made by Blau in The Impossible Theater, Sullivan believed that “the critics [in New York] were definitely waiting for him” and he was doomed before he even arrived.91 Be that as it may, these mixed reviews called for time to fix the problems of the company. Though time may have proven that the company could congeal into a world-class ensemble worthy of the title of America’s National Theatre, time was not an option for Blau, as it was not for Kazan and Whitehead before him.

Conclusions: “We came, we did not conquer, we were inept”92

Blau reflects on his motives for moving to New York and taking over the directorship of LCR in this excerpt from an interview in 1992:

People with innovative capacities will take over one or another of our


90 Nadel 298.

91 Daniel Sullivan, personal interview, 2 April 2007.

92 Blau, Take Up 40.
regional theatres. We hoped that would be the model when, in the 60s, we went to Lincoln Center in New York, which we thought might be the focus of a national theatre. One could say that was simply a desire for power, even a self-betrayal, since I had been the most polemical voice on behalf of decentralization of theatre in America…We really had some access to power, we thought it might be exemplary. Well, it didn’t work then, and the idea of a national theatre was always an untenable notion, the merest vanity now.93

Blau’s goal was to bring his innovations developed at TAW to what he termed as “the biggest public soapbox in the country” but he went about it in the wrong way.94 First, he “risked the baroque” by starting with a large-scale, difficult play that the critics said he did not thoroughly understand. Then he tried to connect the play to the political happenings of the time by inserting comments in his program notes about President Johnson that, although clear and concise to him, nevertheless incensed the public and critics and made the LCR Board wary of him. Lastly, he did not understand how to use the huge stage of the Beaumont with all of its technical contraptions. The turntable broke down almost as soon as it was used; the acoustics were terrible and had no proper amplification; the sightlines were awful; and, the stage was too large. It is no wonder that Blau had the actors running all over the stage to compensate for the poor sightlines and lack of proper acoustics. To his credit, Blau was the first director to attempt to work with the space. Danton’s Death was the first production at the


94 Blau, Bonnie Marranca, and Gautam Dasgupta, 22-23.
Beaumont and as such, illustrated fully the flaws of the theatre itself. Given these facts, the critics should have given Blau and company due credit for their efforts.

Problems of the theatre aside, Blau tried too hard to say and do all at once all that had taken him thirteen years to comprehend back in San Francisco. As he did with Irving in San Francisco, he should have been more patient. He should have gained a solid footing in the new territory with its overbearing theatrical stage by working on the text and the actors and then, gradually introduce his outspoken views on the American theatre, the Vietnam War and any other issues he thought pertinent. Instead, he jumped the gun, alienated the critics, and did not have a strong ensemble of actors to back up his ideas. He got criticized for the performance and his views and felt foolish, as the following quote attests to:

Nevertheless, I wasn’t long at Lincoln Center before I felt rather like Captain Ahab on the third day of the hunt-log, chart, and compass gone-throwing his hot heart against the whale and ending up wrapped around it, caught in his own line, sounding. Or maybe it was a hubris less heroic, even foolish, like the Yippies trying to levitate the Pentagon.\textsuperscript{95}

Rogoff’s concluding thoughts on Blau are more damning. He stated: “Somehow, it seems relevant to say that apocalyptic visions are best left to popes, angels, and other assorted troublemakers. In art, coherence and relevance can be left as afterthoughts only at the artist’s grave personal risk.”\textsuperscript{96} What Blau wanted to do with \textit{Danton’s Death} was to merge his ideas about the Vietnam War with the work on stage to make it

\textsuperscript{95} Blau, preface, \textit{Take Up}, x.

\textsuperscript{96} Rogoff 96.
relevant to society. His comments at the TDR conference after the fact come across as back peddling; as if he feared the repercussions from his first attempt to imbue theatre with the political on the nation’s stage would hamper what he was trying to do at LCR and might even get him fired. He attempted to contextually explain his comments on Johnson without negating them entirely. Even though other theatre artists supported his right to say what he believed, Blau felt the need to explain more thoroughly his comments and admit that the art was not there to back him up. He stated: “It seems unquestionable that whatever you take your theatre to be you’ve got to prove it on stage. It’s either got to be there or it’s not there. And apparently for many of you whatever it was that I felt about Danton’s Death it did not make it on stage.”97 This thought reverberates in him now as he still believes that “anything you put onstage is different from what’s up in my brain.”98

Despite the initial reaction to his work by the theatre crowd in New York, Blau tried to retain the work ethic he and Irving had established for the Workshop many years ago in San Francisco; establishing a solid company of good actors, deep and thorough understanding of the plays, and incorporating their ideas into the physical work on stage so that the audience could fully appreciate the work as a whole idea. He was forewarned by friends and critics alike that “the knives were out for him!” to which he replied: “that’s nonsense, the knives are always out for you. The only way to deal with the knives is to be powerful in your art.”99 For Blau, unfortunately, the knives remained out and sharpened over the next two years. Subsequent productions presented by Blau

and Irving that first season were received with varying degrees of disappointment and outrage, with the main concern revolving around the acting quality. Blau’s confidence sank and he felt the true weight that corporate money added to his artistic work. He offers a lengthy and rather conciliatory explanation of the Board’s reaction to his work and the bad reviews he received in his book, *Take Up the Bodies*. To his credit, Blau does not offer any excuses nor does he place any blame on anyone but himself. The Board, euphemistically stated by Blau, gave him the marbles and told him to “shoot or shut up.” Blau shot and everyone from critics to friends began talking about his and the company’s inability to come through on the goals they publicly proclaimed.

After *Danton’s Death*, the Board’s support of the revolutionary Blau slowly and steadily waned. They entered the second season with Blau’s dream of a secure, reputable company quickly dying. Rumors started flying around that Blau was going to be replaced. Support from critics, agents, even friends started to drop off. In 1967, Blau was asked to resign. He left Lincoln Center confused, humbled, but mostly, silenced. Blau relates the mixed emotions his years at Lincoln Center created in him in this excerpt from *Take Up the Bodies*:

> At the end of that beautiful book *Out of Africa* . . .Karen Blixen found herself looking for a *sign*. . .Then she saw the encounter between the Cock and the Chameleon. The Chameleon, turning error to bravery, flashed its tongue. The Cock was amazed for a second, but only a second, then dropped its beak like a hammer and pulled out the Chameleon’s tongue. Blixen was stunned but then killed the Chameleon,

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which lives by eating insects, to spare it a slow dying. She concluded
from the event, which was her sign, that duress was meant to be, however
harsh and sudden. . .I couldn’t tell about the rest, but for a while after
Lincoln Center, it felt as if they’d pulled out my tongue.102

It is apparent from this assessment of his experience, that New York had taken away
Blau’s voice. His New York experience taught him many things about theatre and about
himself in the theatre. Blau lost the revolution and lost himself in the bargain. In a
moment of self-evaluation, Blau pondered: “the bottom line is this: ‘What is it in me that
denies me?’ All justification - all politics - becomes meaningless at that level...The
Revolution can be damned when it comes to that.”103

It is clear that Blau was an outspoken, energetic director who was eager to
transport his ideas to the national spotlight. Whether his reasons were financial, vain, or
artistic is secondary to the fact that the pressure he felt from the corporate money, the
national spotlight, and even his own friends proved too much for him. He had lost the
intimate connection with the material that he had prided himself on in his work in San
Francisco. The love of the idea overrode the love of the process and this realization
drove him away from professional theatre for good.

102 Blau, preface, Take Up x.

103 Blau, Take Up 77.
CONCLUSION

From his humble beginnings at the loft on Divisadaro Street in San Francisco to his foray into the limelight of Lincoln Center and beyond, Herbert Blau has created a wealth of theatrical experience and theoretical writings that demonstrate his deep commitment to the exploration and understanding of theatre. During his first years as a director at TAW and then at LCR, Blau fervently sought a new theatre ideology to quell what he viewed were the stultifying efforts of American theatre in the 1950s and 60s. While at Stanford, he discovered one key element missing from theatre studies - intelligent inquiry into the why of theatre. Finding out the why of theatre has been the motivational force behind Blau’s work as a director and as a theorist. His directorial style, developed during the fervent years of the Cold War, is a combination of his intellectual exploration of the material and his physical representation of it through the actors on the stage.

Reviews of Blau’s book, The Impossible Theater: A Manifesto, highlight Blau’s brutal honesty about the state of American theatre. They also hail the book as the “rash, candid, vigorous and disarmingly vulnerable” musings of a “mind at work in an area where mind has always been anathema.”¹ It is true that The Impossible Theater is filled with fervent admonishments against the modern practice of theatre. But what these early critics missed is, that infused throughout Blau’s recollections there is a sense of hope for the resurrection of theatre, a belief in the power of mankind, and a feeling that Blau will never give up trying to understand it all. The hope Blau felt grew out of his own seemingly boundless energy and from his sense that life is filled with all

types of humor - dark, light, physical, and mental. Blau looked for the humor in all of the pieces he directed through the words, actions, and meanings of the plays. This idea of hope - a final component to Blau’s directorial style - is what drove the action and created the energy in his productions. He attempted to fill every moment with some activity, motion, or energy that he believed amplified the importance of that moment, sometimes to the detriment of the quieter moments of the play.

Though Joseph Blau was a union plumber who took Blau to some of the meetings, he was not particularly political, nor is his son. Herbert Blau is not a political activist nor did he, during the timeframe of this study, expressly explore politics through his work. As Josephine Harris described him, Blau was more of a living room politician rather than a street corner, soapbox orator. Blau comes across more as a political writer than didactic director. It is true that The Impossible Theater is labeled “a Manifesto” and uses the events of the Cold War as a contextual canvas on which Blau paints his recollections of the theatre. But, Blau directed the plays more with an eye toward exploring his artistic theories through the staging and not his politics. Blau’s program note for Danton’s Death illustrates an attempt to be more overtly political in his statements. Yet, when the outrage over his comments equating President Johnson with Castro and other dictators hit the newspapers, Blau retracted his statements. He deeply regrets the retraction now, but at the time it was necessary to save his position and the company. Had he had more of a desire to use the stage as a mouthpiece for his thoughts on how the American government was handling the Cold, Korean, and Vietnam Wars, Blau’s play selections would reflect it. Blau did use the Brinkmanship controversy to gain recognition for his production of Mother Courage but did not use the
policy as his concept for the play. Blau was more concerned, from a director’s standpoint, on working on plays that explored many comments on society and not just his own. His decided bent toward European playwrights was because the material offered him more to work with as an intellectual and as a director. Also, most of the plays were new to American theatre audiences and the prospect of working on something never tried before in America was appealing to Blau. Simply put, though vocal about his distaste for American theatre and American Cold War policies in his writings, Blau’s directing focused more on how to combine his intellectual inquiry with the practical staging and the work of the actors.

Blau always questions the other side. One minor example of this is illustrated in his questioning of the character Iago in Shakespeare’s Othello: “If Iago is not right, one still has to ask the question, is he wrong?”\(^2\) Never comfortable with the discovery, Blau was always looking for the “other” in order to answer his main motivational questions of, “why” and “what is beyond the finished work?” The “other” is not used here in any theoretical sense, but the literal meaning of the word as it pertains to the ideas, themes, motives, moments, and responses that remained, waiting to be explored beyond what was actually there. He never felt confident that he had discovered all he needed to in his productions. The Blauian style of directing reflects this constant quest. Blau’s focus on the extreme physical exploration of the work through the words, ideas and themes drove him beyond the what that was there to the what that was not there. His subsequent theories relate to his drive to find the answers in the not there. His discovery process sometimes lost the interest of some of the actors of TAW and caused a distinct disconnect with them that Blau keenly felt.

\(^2\) Blau, Impossible 114.
Blau wanted to see his ideas for each play he directed fully realized on the stage. In order to do this, he had to not only develop his practical directing skills but had to develop an understanding of the processes that make theatre - specifically, the actor’s process. The liaison between a director’s theory and realized vision of the play, and an audience’s understanding of it is the actor. If actors do not understand the theories they cannot translate them onto the stage and then to the audience. A major component of a director’s job is the ability to communicate his or her ideas to the actors through a thorough understanding of how the actors then use the ideas to create their characters. Dan Sullivan related: “The actor’s work is small and focused. Finding a way to feed that is where theory has to finally take a backseat.”

Blau never really had a firm grasp on how to translate his ideas through the actors onto the stage. It is rather like Plato’s concept of the ideal chair. First, there is the idea of the chair. Then there is the physical creation of the chair. Finally, there is the artist’s rendition of the chair. For Blau, there is his initial conception of the play. Then, there is the relay of his concept to the actors through his direction and their subsequent physical interpretation. Finally, there is the audience’s response to the work. For Blau, it was the jump from step one to step two of this process that confounded him. Blau’s inability to clearly communicate with actors appeared early on in his career when, as described in Chapter Two, Blau left TAW due to the animosity he felt from some of the more established actors of the company. They did not appreciate his lectures or the pace at which he drove them. This problem (born out of criticism and corroborated by Blau in writings such as *The Impossible Theater* and *Take Up the Bodies*) grew as Blau continued to introduce his company to new and often unheard of

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works such as *Mother Courage* and *Waiting for Godot*. Members of TAW often attributed Blau’s play selections to his off-the-wall attitude and some even refused to be in them because of the strangeness of the material. Blau and company started to go in two different directions as they worked on these productions - Blau toward a more theoretical understanding of the play and the actors toward the presentation of the piece. Had Blau been able to relate his theories to the actors in terms they could understand and use, based on his own understanding of the actor’s process, then perhaps the company members would have felt more confident in his direction and less like they were being left out on the proverbial limb.

The focus of this study - analyzing Blau’s theoretical and practical approach to theatre through key representative productions - could be applied to other seminal directors in American theatre who were attempting to decentralize theatre in the 1950s such as José Quintero, Zelda Fitzlander, and Nina Vance. A focused study defining the goals, philosophies, and practices of these directors could lead to a clearer definition of a style of directing that lead to successful off-Broadway and regional theatre movements but also to the American style of directing. Studies such as these will also provide insight into various theoretical and practical approaches to directing and build upon already established research on understanding the director’s process.

Further research can be done on Blau’s directorial style as it applies to his work with KRAKKEN - a group he created and worked with at Oberlin College from 1971-1981. Two alumni of the group are stage and film director, Julie Taymor and Bill Irwin, an actor/clown of exceptional quality. The purpose of the group was to explore the physical limits of the actors through intense body movement and human structures.
“Elsinore,” an adaptation of Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*, is the most prominent example of the type of work Blau created with the company. KRAKEN was the last group Blau directed and he refers to this time as the formal beginning of his theoretical work. A thorough study of this group—its purposes, practices, and theories—would complete the study of Blau’s directorial style and his attempt to combine theory with practice.

Two topics touched upon in this study, not directly related to Blau’s work, are worthy of further research. First is the call for improvement in America’s cultural offerings that started in the mid-1950s by such noted men as George F. Kennan, Henry R. Luce, and Walter Kerr. As noted in this study, America had emerged from World War II a world power along with Russia. Isolationism was no longer an option. American statesmen had to develop an identity for the country based on what the world knew - its economic and military strength - and what the world did not know - its cultural values and artistic identity. The creation of the United States Information Agency (USIA) helped bring American ideas and values to the world, but it was not enough. Hollywood movies and television brought a type of homogenized, mass culture to the world that was decried by the more serious thinkers of the time period listed above. A study that concentrates on America’s efforts to create an international artistic identity through government agencies would define the state of the arts in America in relation to the American identity at this time.

The second topic would address two questions: where is America’s national theatre, and is one even possible? Broadway was always intended to be a commercial market. It was never to be the type of experimental, government-funded theatre such as The Berliner Ensemble, for example. America is based on consumerism/free trade
enterprises. Broadway amply reflects this fact. Based on this fact, it can be said that Broadway is more “American” than any other theatre simply because it is profit-oriented. Many theatre artists, like Blau, who were critical of Broadway’s rampant consumerism, were holding it to European standards that were not born into it from the start. Broadway is not social drama - it is money and always has been. Blau and Irving, like Kazan and Whitehead before them, wanted to create a national theatre at Lincoln Center. They wanted to experiment with new works and new techniques of staging in order to define a style for American theatre that was Ideologically different than Broadway. Both directorships failed to accomplish this goal. The question still remains today - does America need a national theatre? Daniel Sullivan’s answer is clear: “No. I don’t really see that happening. It would take companies that have an aesthetic that is so on the edge. They are the only ones who can do it.”

Sullivan did not believe one company could fairly represent the different aesthetics present in the many varied theatre companies throughout America. A history of America’s attempts at a true national theatre would clarify the reason why there is not one today.

It is an historic fact that radical moves often spring from a certain complex ideology, yet they have a simple goal - to change the way things are done. Blau’s practical work on the stage developed his ideological thoughts about theatre. However, when these two factions of Blau’s work reversed and the ideological took over the practical - on stage - Blau’s directorial style faltered and he left his professional directing career. He has been searching for the reasons why this happened ever since through his various writings on his experiences.

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4 Daniel Sullivan, personal interview, 2 Apr. 2007.
From its inception, the members of TAW pledged to do good productions of good plays. They wanted to create an ensemble, give voice to new playwrights, and raise the theatre to a higher standard of performance. Even though Blau's directing faltered, he did ultimately achieve these goals. He and Irving created a professional regional theatre in San Francisco that, in turn, introduced American audiences to such seminal playwrights as Harold Pinter, Marie Irene Fornes, and Samuel Beckett and inspired artists such as R. G. Davis and Luis Valdez to create new avenues in theatre.

A near constant theme that Blau uses when speaking or writing about the theatre is that it is an impossible medium; “the kind of impossible,” he states, “that makes your teeth clench and your blood pressure rise.”⁵ Even though he is smiling when saying this, the frustration that theatre has caused him over his long and varied career still shines in his eyes. Normally, theatre artists approach theatre as something to do. Blau approaches it as something to be solved, like a giant puzzle that he has to fit all of the pieces into perfectly. Yet, the pieces never do fit perfectly. The theatre cannot be solved. It is an impossible medium. It does not do what he wants it to do.

“The mind performs more thinking acts in an hour than this sluggish organism, the body, can imitate in years…Whether thought becomes action, whether the body carries it out, is mere chance.”

Robespierre, Danton's Death⁶

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