

Nieves Alberola Crespo and Yvonne Shafer, eds. 2006: *¿Nimiedades para la eternidad? Pioneras en la escena estadounidense*. Castellón: Eliago Ediciones. 209 pp. ISBN: 84-95881-97-7

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The volume *¿Nimiedades para la eternidad? Pioneras en la escena estadounidense* is an essential purchase for any non-English speaking enthusiast of the American drama since it offers a unique opportunity to read *Neighbors (Vecinos)* by Zona Gale, *Trifles (Nimiedades)* by Susan Glaspell, Alice Gerstenberg's *Overtones (Directas e indirectas)* and Zora Neale Hurston's *Color Struck (Impacto de color)*; the plays are accompanied by brief introductory essays. The translations of the plays are by Nieves Alberola Crespo. The four women authors selected wrote in the early years of the twentieth century and, as the title of the volume suggests, they should indeed be considered among the pioneer contributors to the serious drama of the USA. In keeping with the general approach to American culture that was prevalent in the middle years of the twentieth century, women dramatists were silenced and forgotten, and Eugene O'Neill was raised to the rank of father of the American Drama. Although I do not wish to dispute here the worth of many of O'Neill's dramatic contributions, it does seem necessary to remind readers that earlier dramatists did write pieces of merit – Judith Sargent Murray, Louisa Medina, Anna Cora Mowatt to name just a few – and that the early twentieth century saw a burgeoning of regional, university and Little Theaters, all offering a stage to aspiring dramatists contemptuous of the demands of commercial theater. The volume under review redresses this imbalance by bringing the names of Zona Gale, Alice Gerstenberg, Susan Glaspell and Zora Neale Hurston to the attention of the reader.

Of these four dramatists, Hurston – the only African American – is possibly the best known, thanks to the work of Alice Walker; Hurston's novel *Their Eyes were Watching God* is frequently taught in American Literature courses, not only in the USA but also in Europe, and her short stories are anthologized in collections designed for high school and college courses. However, Hurston's dramatic work continues to be little known. Susan Glaspell, on the other hand, although known and loved for her short play *Trifles*, is still, in spite of recent works of criticism and productions of her plays, not recognized as the significant modernist novelist and dramatist she undoubtedly was (see www.susanglaspell.org; Ben-Zvi 2005; Carpentier 2006; Carpentier and Ozieblo 2006; Ozieblo 2000; Ozieblo and Dickey 2008). The other two dramatists in this collection, Zona Gale and Alice Gerstenberg, are still to be reincorporated into the canon of American literature; Gale, better known as a novelist, was awarded the Pulitzer Prize for her play *Miss Lulu Bett* in 1921 – the first woman dramatist to be given the prestigious award which Glaspell would receive for *Alison's House* ten years later. Gerstenberg devoted her life to the theater and was responsible for the first stage adaptation of Lewis

Carroll's *Alice in Wonderland*. Nevertheless, her work has been forgotten, except for *Overtones*, the play translated and reproduced in this volume.

The plays selected are the better-known pieces of their authors, at least to students of American drama and thus the volume renders an important service to the disciplines of literature and drama by putting these previously untranslated plays in the hands of the Spanish-speaking reader. Although a number of anthologies of plays by American women have been published in the USA (see Barlow 1985 or Kritzer 1995) and others are forthcoming, these have not been translated into Spanish. The plays in *¿Nimiedades para la eternidad?* exemplify the vitality of the American theater in the early years of the twentieth century and surely provide strong evidence of the value of women's contribution to this theater. Gale wrote *Neighbors* in 1910 for Thomas Dickinson's Wisconsin Players, a university theater devoted to the popularization of theater along the lines of the work that W. B. Yeats and Lady Gregory were doing in Ireland with the Abbey Theatre. Thus it is hardly surprising that *Neighbors* falls readily into the category of local or regional drama: it is a realistic, comic and touching rendering of life in a small town which must have been easily recognizable by its early audiences and which does not fail to move the reader today. It is not easy to understand why Yvonne Shafer, author of the introductory essay on Gale, feels it necessary to demote the play to the status of "una obrita simpática" (21) and to consider Gale herself unworthy of serious critical and dramatic attention. Gale's full-length *Miss Lulu Bett* was first written as a novel, but, although not theatrically innovative or experimental, displays a solid grasp of dramatic technique. Gale creates a situation and a group of characters that are memorably vivid, and she sustains the dramatic interest throughout, making Lulu's predicament – that of the exploited and abused old-maid – not only heart-rending but also intriguing and compelling.

The second play in the collection is Glaspell's *Trifles*, written in the summer of 1916 for the group that, in the fall, would become the Provincetown Players. The genesis of *Trifles* is well-known; Glaspell's husband demanded a play for a subscription season he had already sold tickets for, and so she sat on the stage and, in a few days, constructed a play from a disturbing experience of fifteen years before. At that time, she had covered a murder for the *Des Moines Daily News*; a farmer's wife was accused of killing her husband and, although there was no hard evidence of her guilt, she was condemned. This was the story that Glaspell converted into the detective mystery with an absent protagonist that feminist critics of the 1980s picked out as emblematic of women's silencing, men's inability to understand the language of women and the need for bonding between women as a strategy of survival (Oziebło and Dickey 2008). Curiously enough, most recent criticism of Glaspell's work adopts a different approach, centering more on matters of culture or class than on gender (see Gainor 2001; Hinz-Bode 2006).

Alice Gerstenberg's *Overtones* played in repertory at the Washington Square Players' Bandbox Theatre during their 1915-1916 season and has frequently been played since; a recent 2007 revival by Thespians Anonymous of Helsinki shows that the play still attracts an audience. Gerstenberg, following the highly fashionable craze for the Freudian concept of the subconscious that was sweeping America, divided her two characters into their cultivated and primitive selves and placed four actresses on the stage: thus Harriet/Hetty and Margaret/Maggie, while displaying their social graces to

one another, r are also allowed to say what they really think. The effect is an amusing criticism of social mores couched in an innovative stage technique that critics did not fail to remark on.

The translation of Hurston's *Color Struck* closes the volume; this short play, divided into four scenes, was awarded a prize in the 1925 *Opportunity* magazine literary contest, more – one imagines – for the theme of color prejudice it exposes than for its dramatic merit. The tragic ending is in sharp contrast to the gay, tumultuous beginning of the play, and Emma's jealous reactions to Effie and lighter-skinned people of color are not sufficiently accounted for or developed. Although her play *The Great Day* (1932) would be a critical success, as was *Mule Bone*, the play she co-wrote with Langston Hughes but which was not staged till 1991, Hurston is best remembered for her novels and her anthropological work.

As already indicated, each play is prefaced by a brief essay on the dramatist and her oeuvre. Alberola, who is the author of the pieces on Glaspell and Hurston, also translated Yvonne Shafer's introductions to Gale and Gerstenberg. Shafer's essays are taken almost verbatim (including the misspelling of Thomas Dickinson's name) from her 1995 *American Women Playwrights 1900-1950*. Alberola's pieces on Glaspell and Hurston, although relying heavily on Shafer's earlier informative introductory essays on these dramatists, do also use other sources. We must remember that these pieces do not purport to be conclusive studies of the dramatists and their works: they are intended as brief introductions to a group of writers virtually unknown in Spain and as such they fulfill their purpose. Biographical data is supplemented by summaries of the plots of the most significant dramatic works of the writer, thus presenting a perfect starting point for anyone interested in women's drama in the USA at the beginning of the twentieth century. However, it should be said that the editors do not seem to have clearly identified their ideal reader. Shafer's essays mention a host of writers and prominent figures of the early twentieth century that the reader who is not conversant with the American cultural scene of this period cannot be expected to know, such as, for example, Edna Ferber, Louis Untermeyer, Richard LeGallienne or the afore-mentioned Dickinson. The piece on Hurston by Alberola is more aware of the probable lack of familiarity of the Spanish reader with figures such as Alain Locke, for example, and offers useful explanatory notes.

The analyses of the plays tend to be superficial and limited to a brief account of the plot – which is understandable in short pieces that are merely introductory. However, the danger of such summary treatment of the oeuvre of a dramatist of the significance of Susan Glaspell can be exemplified by Alberola's categorization of *Close the Book* and *Woman's Honor* as expressionistic plays. The two are indeed comedies, as Alberola indicates but, although Christine Dymkowski (1988: 93) sees expressionism in the names of the characters of *Woman's Honor*, it is difficult to identify other expressionistic features in these two plays. For J. Ellen Gainor, *Woman's Honor* is an allegorical morality play, and, as she rightly notes: "Nothing in the style of *Woman's Honor* otherwise suggests theatrical expressionism, but much in the play mirrors the morality focus of the late medieval form, including the intermingling of humor with a serious message" (Gainor 2001: 83). Theatrical expressionism is also totally absent from *Close the Book*, a short skit portraying family life and prejudices in a small town

environment, which mingles stage realism with the melodramatic device of unexpected information coming to light at a crucial moment.

However, Alberola is of course right when she states that Glaspell integrated expressionistic devices into many of her plays; this is most true of *The Verge*, in which the expressionistic décor reflects the state of mind of the protagonist. A similar use of setting and scenery can be found in Glaspell's earlier plays, particularly the short play *The Outside*, in which symbolism merges with expressionism to create the grim interior of the life-saving station. The ways in which Glaspell contrived to blend nineteenth- and early twentieth-century European avant-garde theatrical devices with the Belasco style realism and melodrama of nineteenth-century American theater in the plays she wrote for the Provincetown Players attest to her skill as a playwright. For this reason, too, her plays are ideal teaching material for courses on American Drama and on the history of theater.

The Introduction to *¿Nimiedades para la eternidad?* is disappointingly short and offers no theoretical model for the analysis of the plays or criteria for the selection of the dramatists and their plays. Rachel Crothers, Zoë Akins, Sophie Treadwell, Angelina Weld Grimké, Edna Ferber, Marita Bonner are only a handful that must have jostled for space with the chosen four in this volume. These dramatists, together with others, are given brief chapters in *Otros escenarios: La aportación de las dramaturgas al teatro norteamericano* (Narbona and Ozieblo 2005). The obvious limitation in a volume such as that by Alberola and Shafer is that of space, nonetheless, since a full coverage of American women dramatists was obviously not the goal of the volume, it should have been possible to select plays that created a more harmonious whole. Gale's *Neighbors* (*Vecinos*) deals with the life of rural folks, and could have been interestingly juxtaposed with any of Djuna Barnes's so-called Irish plays, particularly with *An Irish Triangle*. Susan Glaspell's *Trifles* (*Nimiedades*), given its detective play structure, strong feminist message and total lack of comedy, would have better complemented Sophie Treadwell's *Machinal* than Gale's light-hearted *Neighbors*, while Glaspell's *Suppressed Desires*, a skit on psychoanalysis, would have worked well with Gerstenberg's *Overtones* (*Directas e indirectas*) and with Treadwell's *In the Eye of the Beholder*.

However, these are mere quibbles given the inherent interest of the volume to American drama studies in Spain. Playwrights such as Eugene O'Neill, Tennessee Williams or Arthur Miller have been translated and performed in Spain with relative frequency, and even recent Pulitzer Prize winning women such as Marsha Norman (*night, Mother*), Paula Vogel (*How I Learned to Drive*) or Margaret Edson (*Wit*) have found their way into the theaters of this country. We should not forget that many American women had turned to the writing of plays before them, and *¿Nimiedades para la eternidad?* will introduce four of them, Gale, Gerstenberg, Glaspell and Hurston to the Spanish reading public and, it is to be hoped, to theater audiences.

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