Despite global recognition of American drama afforded by Eugene O’Neill’s 1936 Nobel Prize, it would not be until after World War II that American theatre took flight, came into its own, and developed its own distinctive identity. These postwar years through to 1960 can be viewed as a Golden Age for American drama as new plays, new staging, and new acting styles emerged that could be viewed as distinctly American and would become increasingly influential worldwide. Though developed through the exigencies of this particular period, what audiences witnessed would provide benchmarks for future American theatrical productions in every decade to follow.

Although the Federal Theater Project had been shut down in 1939 and Group Theatre had disbanded in 1941, these theatrical pioneers had offered productive training and proving grounds, as well as excellent sounding boards for ideas and talent that would continue to grow as America began to prosper financially and become able and willing to support a more specialized theatre. Also, the Theatre Guild, established in 1918, encouraged theatrical excellence into the 1970s and sponsored many burgeoning playwrights. When coupled with the tremendous optimism of an age in which the United States had emerged as a world superpower – concerned with establishing its own cultural exceptionalism and validating its socio-political beliefs – we witness American artists of the period determined to create both drama and musical theatre that were uniquely their own.

Changing social and political forces in the nation inspired dramatists to rewrite what was possible on an American stage, and plays of the time expanded on themes, styles, and character types previously witnessed as they began to explore the varied mosaic of American types and concerns and eschew mere entertainment for personal and national scrutiny and contemplation. Edward Albee defines this collective aim in his description of how Arthur Miller’s plays “hold a mirror up to us, saying, ‘This is who
These playwrights were assisted by the introduction of new techniques that brought greater realism and depth to how actors performed, as well as innovations in directing and stage design. The American musical was wholly reinvented, with the “book” becoming a virtual necessity to craft strong narrative arcs over previously episodic sketches and adding an additional voice into the teams that conceived these productions. Musicals of this period experimented with darker material and more advanced choreography and composition, melding together story, character, lyric, music, and dance to form a perfectly integrated whole that would inspire all musicals to come.

Many of the period’s theatrical successes and innovations were fueled by groups of creative artists – enthused by those earlier theatrical pioneers – whose collective vision helped bring these new scripts, scores, and aesthetics to the stage. Though white males continued to dominate the theatrical field, and equal rights still seemed distant, women and minoritized groups began to make strides in writing, directing, and producing drama in mainstream theatres. It was becoming clear that women had a place in every aspect of mounting a play, and the work of several African Americans led the way for Lorraine Hansberry’s *A Raisin in the Sun* to become the first play written by a Black woman and directed by a Black director, Lloyd Richards – who also helped advance other Black playwrights – to become a Broadway smash in 1959 and point to the need for greater diversity in theatre. Sadly, Asian Americans and Latin Americans had yet to make such inroads as their stage representations over this period were created by nonethnic writers, who, despite becoming more sympathetic, had the tendency to create fetishized stereotypes. Nevertheless, the period began the move toward a fuller exploration of American multiculturalism.

Despite a contraction of venues and productions from earlier in the century – many of which had been focused on entertainment rather than “art” – the period saw Broadway establishing its primacy in both musical and nonmusical theatre, remaining strong against the inroads of movies and television. Due to rising costs and changing tastes, Broadway’s audiences were becoming increasingly elite, and thus economic changes and artistic aspiration also eventually fueled the growth of Off-Broadway, Off-Off-Broadway, and a future growth of regional theatre to help create an even more vibrant national theatre for the future. Many of these regional companies would entertain resident artists and produce new plays alongside classics and other contemporary works and so ensure that people need not travel to New York to see a decent play.
Economic, Social, and Political Challenges

After World War II, America had become a leading world superpower with economic and population booms to support this new identity. Unemployment stood around 4.6 percent, with continued military spending from both the Cold and Korean Wars to keep the economy buoyant. The democratic American image of freedom and prosperity was spread globally, enhanced by media that depicted an opulent suburban American lifestyle, glossing over the inequities of continued segregation. Society was vastly altered by this postwar prosperity and the surface conformism of a growing middle class determined to grasp a bright new American future. This was modeled around the perfect nuclear family, while holding at bay the demons of communism, the atom bomb, and juvenile delinquency. These common fears were fed by radio and television programs, films, magazines, and newspapers, all eager to cash in on being able to grab the nation’s attention, and to that end would often oversensationalize their stories. Not surprisingly, there was a corresponding growth in psychoanalysis and tranquilizers as people tried to deal with the stress of living in a growingly materialistic society in which postwar xenophobia encouraged everyone to “buy American.” As corporate profits tripled and American per capita income more than doubled, many could afford to do this, though not all shared in the general prosperity, and discrimination remained evident regardless of a rise in education and literacy.

Despite prosperity, these were mentally uncomfortable times; brutalities uncovered during the war had sorely tested people’s trust in humanity, and rampant consumerism caused new jealousies and social divides. Alan Petigny suggests that while publicly, many conformed to conservative middle-class ideals and quietly lived in suburbs with their large families, attending church and avoiding radical politics, conservatism was losing ground and, privately, attitudes toward sex, parenting, and religion were moving away from a traditional conservative framework. However, when Alfred Kinsey’s *Sexual Behavior in the Human Male* appeared in 1947, people were shocked by his exposure of the gap between actual sexual practices and what people wanted to believe. His 1953 sequel, *Sexual Behavior in the Human Female*, which dared to suggest that premarital sex led to more successful marriages, was met with furious disagreement, and he lost his funding; but even Kinsey could not bring himself to normalize homosexuality. People wanted to be titillated, possibly fueling the growing popularity of playwrights such as Tennessee Williams, but
they were not yet ready to openly discuss sexual issues; that would not occur for at least another decade.

In the 1940s, many women had moved into the workplace to help with the war effort, but with the return of the men, who were fearful of being replaced, there was retrenchment; women were once more relegated to home and family. Even while nearly 50 percent of wives worked for at least some period during their marriage (no doubt to afford those extra luxuries), gender roles remained pretty rigid – underscored by toys, cookbooks, magazines, and the rest of consumer culture – and only heterosexual relationships had societal approval; little did drama of the period directly challenge any of this. Again, it would not be until after the upheavals of the civil rights era that these issues could be more openly explored.

Referring to the practice of making accusations of subversion or treason without real evidence, the term “McCarthyism” is possibly Senator Joseph McCarthy’s biggest legacy. His grandstanding demands to investigate people he suspected of communism, coupled with hearings called by Congress’s House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC), became a polarizing feature of American history. Hounding people for their past connections to the Communist Party, and forcing many to give the names of friends to save their own careers, HUAC fed a political and social paranoia that distorted American freedoms throughout the 1950s. The harsh treatment of the group of producers, directors, and screenwriters who became known as the Hollywood Ten – who were refused the protection of the First Amendment regarding the right to free speech when called to testify before HUAC and who were sent to jail for up to a year – scared many into going along with whatever the Committee asked. During this time, the entertainment industry became fiercely divided between those who gave names and those who refused. More than 300 actors, writers, and directors were denied work in America through the informal blacklist that evolved. Some left the country to find opportunities, while others wrote under pseudonyms or the names of colleagues: Dalton Trumbo was unable to claim the Oscars for his screenplays *Roman Holiday* (1953) and *The Brave One* (1956) because he had been forced to use another name.

The theatre was less targeted by HUAC – whose energies focused on those involved in film and television – and blacklisting never became official on Broadway as it had in Hollywood, but as Brenda Murphy insists, “the show business investigations had a tremendous effect on American drama and theatre between 1947 and 1960,” becoming a “persistent subtext” in many plays of the period.3 Arthur Miller bravely
addressed what he saw as the dangers of mob rule and an overly conservative governance through dramas that include his translation of Henrik Ibsen’s *An Enemy of the People* (1950) and *The Crucible* (1953), but his was not a solitary voice. Even light comedy, such as John Van Druten’s *Bell, Book and Candle* (1950), contains commentary on the ridiculousness of theHUAC activities with its references to hexes and witch hunts, and Jerome Lawrence and Robert E. Lee provided several popular works that centered on people taking a stance against limiting individual freedom, satirizing self-serving authoritarians. American drama was not afraid to critique its own culture and, given a constitutional right to freedom of speech, could not be silenced. The issue of American freedom was also growing among the country’s varied ethnic groups.

In the first half of the century, the Jewish population of America had quintupled, and by 1950, it was 5 million, which constituted almost half of the world’s Jewry after the atrocities of the Holocaust. Anti-Semitism was on the decline but still evident, and so many Jews became more “secular” or fully assimilated, an option not available for those of color still dealing with Jim Crow laws in the South. Incidents of racial violence were common throughout the era, including the awful lynching of Emmett Till, and membership in the Ku Klux Klan was on the rise. However, there was also Rosa Parks’s refusal to leave her seat that led to the Montgomery bus boycott and the desegregation of public transport, the government-enforced desegregation of schools in Little Rock, and the welcome rise of Martin Luther King Jr. While the major social changes of the civil rights era would not be enacted until the 1960s, much of the groundwork was being laid, both in the real world and on the American stage.

**Play Production and Demographics**

At the turn of the century, many cities had resident theatre companies, with more than 2,000 professional establishments across the country. New plays could spring up anywhere, although the majority were entertaining escapism rather than the explorations of humanity and ideas that would become common after World War II and put American theatre on the map. However, the growing importance of New York City as a producing center, coupled with the lower costs of touring and a desire to see longer runs of a single production, led to a small section of Manhattan that came to be known as Broadway becoming the center of American theatre, to which most talent was drawn. At this time, many regional theatres closed as
people just wanted to see the latest Broadway hit; the few that remained were predominantly amateur, summer stock, or used for Broadway tryouts.

By the 1920s, Broadway consisted of 70 to 80 theatres that produced more than 250 plays a season, many imported from abroad, and often with huge casts. Fifteen daily papers meant that most productions could win one critic’s support to help keep them running, but as Brooks Atkinson points out, “when Broadway was at its best, the awful plays were still in the majority.”4 After the war, rising property costs made theatres expensive real estate, and many were converted into more lucrative properties. Changing postwar finances also drove up the cost of producing a play to ten times that of prewar rates; it now cost $60,000 to mount a straight play, while a musical cost $250,000. The break-even point had risen to around 200 performances for a play and 300 for a musical. Producers were gamblers, but while a hit play could return the initial investment fourfold, only 20 percent recouped their initial investment. Broadway suffered a severe contraction despite the population of New York City more than doubling in the first half of the century, and by 1950–51, around thirty theatres were left, and new productions had dwindled to an annual total of eighty-seven.5 While the number of theatres would rise, the number of new productions would halve by the close of the century, and Broadway theatre would become a venue predominantly for out-of-towners.

In 1948, state law was changed to make Sunday performances legal to try to increase the profit line. Only seven daily papers remained, which made it more imperative to win critical approval as, given the increased running costs, shows needed to make a profit swiftly to stay open, and this would only worsen by the century’s end. By the close of the 1940s, one-third of attendees had become out-of-town visitors who might see as many as five shows during their stay. Some cities organized “show trains” that combined travel and tickets into one easy package. Broadway was becoming a more upper-middle-class venue, with less than 10 percent of attendees identifying themselves as “working class” and ticket prices averaging eight times those of movie attendance. People also no longer dressed for the theatre, and dramatic tastes had changed.

Theatre box offices reflected a growing lack of enthusiasm for foreign plays, with Agatha Christie’s suspenseful courtroom drama Witness for the Prosecution (1954) being one of the few imported successes. American audiences wanted to see American plays that were not escapist but dealt with current American issues. Responding to the uncertainties of the times, even comedies and musicals began to demand a more serious edge. Atkinson suggests that “during the war, the public mood had changed.
Plays in styles that had been acceptable before the war no longer interested the public.” He illustrates his point by noting how *Life with Mother* (1948), the sequel to the runaway smash comedy of 1939 *Life with Father*, despite having the same writers and lead actors, was a flop.

The biggest-selling productions of this period were musicals. However, some comedies could still run for more than 1,000 performances. Mostly designed to seem outrageous to titillate the audience, they retained reassuring conclusions to satisfy the nation’s conservatism. Good examples of this are George Axelrod’s *The Seven Year Itch* (1952), which allows a man to explore his sexual fantasies while bringing him back to the fold, and John Patrick’s *Teahouse of the August Moon* (1953), in which Captain Fisby tries to impose American values on the residents of a Japanese island but gets seduced by the natives, who end up keeping their traditions. Other, more serious plays also proved box-office gold, including Miller’s *Death of a Salesman* (1949), about the implosion of the American Dream; Lawrence and Lee’s *Inherit the Wind* (1955), about issues of free speech as a schoolteacher is tried for teaching evolution in the Bible Belt; *Two for the Seesaw* (1958), about a damaged couple attempting to connect in the big city; and *The Miracle Worker* (1959), depicting the relationship of teacher Anne Sullivan and her deaf and dumb student Helen Keller, both by William Gibson.

Numerous alienated figures can be found in plays of the period: individuals cut off from the larger society by unpopular politics, morality, or mere appearance. An insistence on paying attention to those deemed lesser in society, and concern for the effects of such uneven hierarchies in a supposedly democratic society, encouraged a future proliferation of plays from Tony Kushner’s two-part *Angels in America* (1991–93), with its exploration of AIDS and homosexuality, to any of Lynn Nottage’s or Suzan-Lori Parks’s plays about those marginalized by class and/or race. Such works emulate Tennessee Williams’s evident desire to depict the lives of those deemed social outcasts in order to engage for them a greater empathy in the wider community, as well as his dedication to experimentation in how that might be accomplished.

Bruce McConachie suggests that the 1940s reliance on radio and telephone for communication provoked a move toward greater abstraction and allegory in 1950s theatre as playwrights moved away from realism and audiences were more willing to accept such innovation, just as the onset of television would change the writing styles of the following decade. The introduction into stage drama of the flashbacks and stream-of-consciousness often utilized in radio drama certainly gave playwrights

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more options. Writers drew on different theatrical styles and ideas from home and abroad to create a variety of engaging theatrical hybrids. This cross-cultural pollination has only increased over the years to produce such blockbusters as Lin-Manuel Miranda’s *Hamilton* (2015), with its mélange of musical styles, blatant color-blind casting, and scenery and dance that underscore and advance the narrative rather than simply embellish it.

Many writers of the 1940s and 1950s had developed their craft during the Great Depression and leaned toward socialist agendas with an interest in those on the margins; they were happy to expose inequities that lay beneath the country’s prosperous veneer. In some, a darker understanding emerged that everyone is capable of evil, that unselfish goodness is a rare commodity, and that we are often our own worst enemies. Under the social and political persecution of McCarthyism and continued intolerance, partly because it was not as dependent on finance as the films, theatre provided a safer refuge for dissenters and original thinkers – a tendency that would not change.

**Emerging Dramatists**

Eugene O’Neill and Thornton Wilder had shown the world that American dramatists were capable of more than copying their European forebears, but Tennessee Williams, Arthur Miller, and William Inge collectively created a distinctively American theatre that traversed and reflected the entire nation and fully realized new dramatic forms and theatrical characters. Miller explored the lives of those living in the North both past and present; Williams explored the complexities of the South; and Inge brought audiences previously overlooked images of the small-town Midwest that were less than the expected ideal, filled with dissatisfaction, frustration, and desire. The three played with realism and expressionism to produce engaging productions that spoke to the inner lives of their characters and presented tragedies and comedies of everyday Americans. Their audacity would lead American playwrights who were writing in the 1970s and 1980s to further explore and expand on what it means to be both American and human, from Sam Shepard looking out West to Lanford Wilson or Larry Kramer, among many others, exploring what it means to be gay.

Critics tend to view Miller as a predominantly political commentator on America, exploring moral and social concerns through the lives of ordinary people, while Williams is more poetically engaged with the psychological and emotional problems of society’s outcasts. However, Gerald
Berkowitz’s all-too-common description of them as “the pamphleteer of social issues and the poet of loneliness and fear” being “poles of a continuum on which most other dramatists of the late 1940s lay” is somewhat of an oversimplification. Even while their tone and philosophy may differ, both playwrights focused on social, political, psychological, and emotional issues in their work; both were wary of American idealism; and both were identical in their strong work ethic, embrace, and innovation of new theatrical aesthetics and their mutual goal to change America and American theatre. This courage and commitment would inspire subsequent playwrights, such as Edward Albee, who came to notice in the 1960s, David Rabe in the 1970s, and David Mamet in the 1980s, who each acknowledged this influence to successfully push theatre to even newer boundaries.

Williams’s semiautobiographical The Glass Menagerie (1945) explores the tortured existence of the Wingfield family, trapped in unfulfilled lives and unable to extricate themselves from their psychological burdens. Miller’s All My Sons (1947) passes comment on the moral injustices of an acquisitive capitalist system that causes the deaths of innocent pilots fighting for their country. That Miller beat O’Neill and The Iceman Cometh for the Tony Award that year underlines the extent to which the theatrical world was welcoming this new talent. Though critical of their nation, both Miller and Williams remained highly successful, and their next plays would set the bar even higher.

David Halberstam insists that A Streetcar Named Desire (1947) “was not just a play – it was an event. Its frank treatment of sophisticated sexual themes marked it as a part of a powerful new current in American society and cultural life” that would shatter “the pleasant conventions of American life.” Its depiction of a tragic, deluded Southern Belle was as evocative of southern decay as Death of a Salesman (1949) and Miller’s portrayal of washed-up salesman Willy Loman would be of the dehumanizing capitalism of the North. As Atkinson opined, “nobody had written about the dark side of the American fantasy with the sympathy and knowledge Mr. Miller brought to it.” Both plays became seminal within American theatre for their subject matter and creative design, and for their extension of the possibilities of sympathetic characterization and how modern tragedy could be defined.

Miller followed this with what has become his most produced play, The Crucible (1953), comparing the show trials of HUAC to the witch trials of Salem, to expose the savagery of McCarthyism and the self-serving hypocrisy on which it rested. Williams was no less political in a play he produced
that same year, *Camino Real*, in which a naive American wanderer, Kilroy, gets caught up in a nightmare town filled with tyranny and corruption. Having the central character run around the auditorium was also highly inventive for the time, though nowadays it is almost commonplace.

Williams further cemented his reputation with *The Rose Tattoo* (1951), *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* (1955), *Suddenly Last Summer* (1958), and *Sweet Bird of Youth* (1959), which collectively offer celebration and warning of the sexual life and commentary on the callousness, cruelty, and mendacities of modern life. His plays would grow increasingly shocking, as if to challenge the conformity of the times, with references to abortion, castration, and cannibalism, and they were also swiftly made into popular movies. Less prolific, partly due to his dalliance with Marilyn Monroe, whom he would marry in 1956, Miller produced *A View from the Bridge* (1956), the story of a troubled longshoreman caught between morality and desire, in which he sought to further assert his view of the “tragedy of the common man.” The frequency with which both playwrights continue to be revived is further testament to the strength and continuing influence of their work.

Inge was less technically innovative than Miller and Williams, but despite their stature, his impact was hardly lesser in terms of showing Americans the darker truths about their often-stunted lives that people preferred to avoid. His hits of the 1950s—*Come Back, Little Sheba* (1950), *Picnic* (1953), *Bus Stop* (1955), and *The Dark at the Top of the Stairs* (1957)—sold more tickets than the plays of either Miller or Williams over the same period (a fact about which Williams was terminally jealous, especially since he had encouraged Inge to write). Thomas Adler correctly views Inge as “the most significant dramatizer of the Midwest.”

Despite surface comedy, which possibly made them more palatable to the masses, Inge’s plays are filled with the same nonjudgmental depictions of outcasts and damaged characters as are Miller’s and Williams’s, and the works of all three playwrights expose inequities of gender and class and the problems of a society that may seem prosperous on the surface, yet is filled with people unable to attain this prosperity and longing for something better.

Inspired by these three, other playwrights expanded on dramatic topics, characters, and styles throughout the era, presenting psychologically troubled individuals in a variety of mainstream plays, such as Carson McCullers’s *Member of the Wedding* (1950), about adolescence and race, or Robert Anderson’s *Tea and Sympathy* (1953), about sexual orientation and related prejudice. Theatre paid attention to those marginalized, giving a venue for the growing liberal voices of the nation to air concern and express belief in the more positive values of American democracy they saw
endangered. Even a popular comedy like Garson Kanin’s *Born Yesterday* (1946) highlights the dangers of corruption with its characterization of Harry Brock, who made a fortune selling junk to war industries and believes anyone can be bought. For Atkinson, through Kanin’s exposure and denigration of the potential corruption against which the nation should be aware, *Born Yesterday* “demonstrates a belief in the American democratic system that service in the war induced in many men. Fascism lurks in the back of its mind as a pitfall into which democracy might easily fall.” Many plays of the period featured individuals taking an ethical stance as warning against the loss of personal freedom in an overly conformist society, setting a clear standard for future works to remain vigilant in maintaining the freedoms offered the nation by its Constitution. Their work would be assisted by profound changes during this period in how plays could be presented on the stage.

**Collaborative Models: Direction, Staging, and Methodology**

Though the short-lived Group Theatre, with its mission to present naturalistic, socially relevant, and highly disciplined theatre to the American public, had closed its doors in 1941, its influence persisted. Its artists, whose vision helped bring new scripts, scores, and aesthetics to the American stage continued to work together. Formed in 1931 by Cheryl Crawford, Harold Clurman, and Lee Strasberg, the Group had embraced the theories of Konstantin Stanislavsky, by which actors learned their characters from the inside out by tapping into their inner emotions to create an authentic performance. Referred to as the Method, it became the preferred style of performance on stage and film, much changing how plays were performed, though it continues to be interpreted differently by different people.

Formed in 1947, Strasberg took over direction of the Actors Studio from Cheryl Crawford, Elia Kazan, and Robert Lewis in 1951 and expanded it from a free workshop for gifted stage performers into an influential, though controversial, acting school. Strasberg added his own psychoanalytical ideas to Stanislavsky’s teachings; instead of asking actors to search their memories for clues as to how to respond in an acting situation, he wanted them to reconstruct a character’s life from childhood. Strasberg asked actors to delve into their own, often darker subconscious – not to *think* but to *feel* the part. Some saw this approach as abusive, but actors such as James Dean, Geraldine Page, Al Pacino, and even Marilyn Monroe deeply admired his techniques, and his influence continues today through acting schools on both coasts.
Stella Adler joined the Group Theatre at its inception, but after spending time with Stanislavsky, she grew resistant to Strasberg’s use of affective memory, realizing an actor could use imagination supplemented by research to forge a character rather than personal experience, and with less danger to the psyche. She established the Stella Adler Acting Studio in 1949, with a curriculum that went beyond just speech, voice production, and make-up to include script analysis, characterization and acting styles, and improvisation. She taught actors like Marlon Brando, Eddie Albert, Warren Beatty, and Elaine Stritch to build characters more pragmatically from material within the text and the play’s historical context, and her techniques also continue to be taught across America. Another Group alumnus, Sanford Meisner, followed Adler’s lead and split off to develop a behavioral method that relied more on instinct, focusing on other actors rather than the self, and many current figures have trained in his methods, from Jeff Goldblum and Tom Cruise to Amy Schumer and Stephen Colbert.

Creating a landmark play had become more than writing a great script; it also depended on finding the right production team. This period began to acknowledge this by often placing the names of directors or actors above that of the playwright in theatrical advertising – a practice still common. Dynamic and innovative directors such as Josh Logan and Elia Kazan were much sought, despite the demands they made on writer, cast, and crew. As a skilled theatrical craftsman, who directed with great emotional force, Logan was able to create hits out of comedy (Mister Roberts [1948], which he also co-wrote), drama (Picnic [1953], Middle of the Night [1956], and The World of Suzie Wong [1958]), and musicals (Annie Get Your Gun [1946] and South Pacific [1949], also co-written). He frequently assisted with writing and production on the material he directed, and his contributions in this period are considered his best. Less provocative than Kazan, he knew how to please an audience and worked predominantly with expert stage and lighting designer Jo Mielziner.

Kazan was possibly the best-known and most influential director of the era, and that influence would only grow. After his death in 2003, Mervyn Rothstein would refer to him as “one of the most honored and influential directors in Broadway and Hollywood history.” Having honed his craft while acting and directing for the Group, he continued to produce with fellow alumnus Clurman. A solid but less forceful director than Kazan, who tended to let the actors find their way in a role rather than impose readings, Clurman often championed new plays and playwrights, being a co-producer of All My Sons. He was best directing subtle dramas, such as
Member of the Wedding, Bus Stop, and Lillian Hellman’s The Autumn Garden (1951). Clurman’s biggest impact in this period, however, was through his work as a drama critic for The New Republic (1948–52) and The Nation from 1953.

Using the Method, Kazan worked closely with actors. Skilled at drawing out intensely realistic and edgy performances, he helped create many new stars such as Marlon Brando, Rod Steiger, James Dean, Julie Harris, and Natalie Wood. He energized productions with lots of stage business, creating countless mini-climaxes to engage audiences and maintain a constant sense of onstage movement. Tending toward the new and the provocative, he had little interest in musicals or classics. Without him directing their plays, it is likely neither Miller nor Williams would have been as successful as they became; he also directed the movie version of A Streetcar Named Desire. Both Logan and Kazan balanced their talents between stage and screen, and it may have been partly their familiarity with cinematic techniques that led them to try different things on stage. Like Logan, Kazan often worked with Mielziner as his stage and lighting designer, but he also collaborated with Boris Aronson and other designers.

Acknowledging the importance of their contribution, especially as scenic design moved away from single-room sets to offer a variety of inventive designs, Tony Awards for scenic designers were offered from the awards’ start in 1947, and designers were often nominated for more than one show in the same year. The use of representational scenery, scrim, transparencies, and the forestage allowed playwrights far greater scope in how they could present place, time, and even state of mind. Two of the best at this were Aronson, who designed thirty-six shows during this period, of which thirteen were nominated for a Tony, although he only won once, and Mielziner, who designed an amazing seventy-eight shows during this same time, of which seventeen were nominated for a Tony; he won three times.

Mielziner was a master of understatement; influenced by Robert Edmond Jones, who preferred delicate designs, Mielziner used subtle nuances of light and shade to create an aesthetic unity. His lighting often used windows to illuminate actors, and he utilized a variety of scrim and effects to accomplish swift scene or mood changes. His designs evoke a cinematic sensibility, and his sets were famed for their flexibility, ingenuity, and ability to create a sense of fluidity in time and space. He had won the Tony Award in 1949, not only for Death of a Salesman, but also for South Pacific, Anne of the Thousand Days, Summer and Smoke, and Sleepy Hollow, showing his ability to work on any kind of production. His
frequently abstract, skeletal, and minimalistic scenography had moved stage design away from the detailed minutiae of realism that had previously dominated, yet got closer to each work’s emotional and psychological truth. His design for *Salesman* became so iconic that many subsequent productions would emulate it, including the 2012 Broadway revival.

Bolder than Mielziner, Aronson preferred epic dramas requiring complex and often asymmetrical staging filled with obstacles and odd angles to better challenge an audience; avoiding flat painted scenery, he preferred a three-dimensional approach that offered actors a greater range of movement. Using a “constructivist” style, he interpreted rather than copied real life to bring out a work’s inner essence. He designed such plays as *The Crucible, A View from the Bridge,* and *A Memory of Two Mondays, Bus Stop, J.B.*, and his biggest commercial success, *The Diary of Anne Frank,* for which he created a cross-section of the building, filled with small compartments, each with its own representational clutter to convey character, in which small details were changed to show the passage of time and keep the production fluid.

It had become clear that it took a full team to create a hit, for without the collaboration of Kazan, Aronson, and ANTA Playhouse on Archibald MacLeish’s chilling *J.B.* (1958), it seems doubtful that a verse drama based on psychiatry, theology, and Marxism, featuring an updated version of the biblical Job, would have had such a lengthy run and won the Pulitzer Prize. Frank Rich spoke of Aronson’s circus tent design as “the most significant achievement in American theatre design since the Mielziner sets for *Death of a Salesman* and *Streetcar Named Desire* a decade earlier.”

Another major advance during this period assisted by such collaborations was in the realm of musical theatre, which, by the 1960s, had worked its way into dominating how musicals were written and produced worldwide.

### Musical Theatre

After the breakthrough hit of *Oklahoma!* in 1943, in which the farmers and cowboys ended as friends, despite some dark moments surrounding the rivalry of Curly and Jud, Richard Rodgers and Oscar Hammerstein had discovered a formula that would flourish on Broadway and change the face of how musicals were created. They offered well-developed characters, strong narratives full of romance and humor, though not without a dark tinge, and song and dance that built character and advanced the storyline. They had created what came to be known as the “integrated” musical, in which all the elements of the show align into a combined whole.
Rodgers and Hammerstein’s other successes include *Carousel* (1945), with its tragic antihero carnival roustabout, and *South Pacific* (1949), about the tribulations of forces oversea...(the rest of the text continues unabridged).
Known for his deft hand with comedy and musicals, George Abbott was revered for his ability to craft hit shows out of even moderate material, with swift pacing and solid construction. Hal Prince, especially, would follow his guide into the 1980s, and many current directors continue to follow this style. During this period, Abbott directed twenty-five shows, eighteen of them musicals, including *Wonderful Town* (1953), *The Pajama Game* (with Jerome Robbins), *Damn Yankees*, and *Fiorello!* (1959), many for which he also wrote the book. Perhaps key to Abbott’s success was his ability to recognize and nurture up-and-coming talent, including Jerome Robbins and Bob Fosse, both of whom would have a profound effect on how musicals were presented.

Robbins had mostly worked as a choreographer in the 1940s, and first directed in 1945, helping both Abbott and Logan on various shows. Trained in ballet, he brought elements of this to the musicals he directed such as *The King and I*, Mary Martin’s *Peter Pan* (1954), and *West Side Story* (1957). He created the narrative dance and oriental styling of “Small House of Uncle Thomas Ballet” for *The King and I*, as well as the memorable “March of the Siamese Children” and “Shall We Dance.” His balletic choreography, alongside the Latin moves he created for *West Side Story*, so match the characters that it is almost impossible to think of the musical without their recall, and this matching of choreography to character and situation has only grown more central in today’s musicals.

Coming from a jazz background, Bob Fosse’s alternate but equally distinctive style of dance includes the use of turned-in knees and the “Fosse Amoeba” made up of sideways shuffling, rolled shoulders, and jazz hands. Fosse also commonly used props, especially hats, canes, and chairs. He would win three Tony Awards for Choreography in the 1950s alone – for *The Pajama Game*, *Damn Yankees*, and *Redhead* (1959) – the same as Michael Kidd who won for *Guys and Dolls* (1951), *Can-Can* (1954), and *Li’l Abner* (1956). Like Robbins, Kidd had an interest in ballet but believed that dance should be derived from ordinary everyday movements in life. He would take these and enlarge upon them to create a dance form that organically related to the character’s behavior and personality – the perfect approach for the integrated musicals of the day, and the future. This period not only expanded on how dance was used in musicals, but also the types of music composed.

As a serious musician, Leonard Bernstein created some of the most ambitious musical theatre scores of the period, blending classical, jazz, and pop into distinctive productions, and elevating the complex musical possibilities of the form. His score for *Wonderful Town* (1953) included an
aria, a comic duet, innovative jazz, and a wild conga. *West Side Story* had the pure operatic strains of “Maria” and “Somewhere,” alongside the vaudeville of “Gee Officer Krupke,” the Latin sound of “America,” the hit ballad “Tonight,” and several jazz compositions, and has become his most memorable. It presents an amalgam of high and low culture; Arthur Laurents’s book based on Shakespeare’s *Romeo and Juliet*, updated to depict street gangs in a modern city, coupled with libretto written by the up-and-coming Stephen Sondheim, heralded the development of another new kind of American musical. In *West Side Story*, violence spirals and the young hero lies dead, reflecting a more pessimistic and deterministic worldview than most preceding musicals. Though it may have lost out to Meredith Willson’s more conventional *The Music Man* (1957) for the Tony that year, it would be revived countless times and become one of the most celebrated Broadway musicals. Also, its lyricist, Sondheim, would change the Broadway stage forever through his creation of the “concept musical” that is built around an idea rather than a traditional narrative, and presents even deeper psychological characterizations, shunning sentimental romance or complacent reassurances, to address more complex social issues.

The musicals of this period established how musicals would develop into the future, with their creative commitment to exploring techniques in writing, including strong narrative arcs and topics with an often-serious agenda, as well as their innovations in composing, directing, and choreography. This period also saw some major advances in women’s theatrical involvement.

**Women in the Theatre**

Throughout the nineteenth century, outside of acting, few women had influence or authority in the theatre. The number of women writing for the stage could be improved only when women began to take a larger role as producers and directors. In 1910, women directed less than 5 percent of Broadway shows, and most of those were only given this opportunity because they had written the play. However, in 1935, it was a woman – the dynamic and charismatic Hallie Flanagan – who was chosen to head the Federal Theatre. Although Congress closed this down in 1939 for fear of its integrationist policies and socialist sympathies, Flanagan had done an amazing job. After the war, the number of female directors initially rose to 11.6 percent as more women challenged the odds, forcing their way into directing, and also into staging and producing. The number involved in
these fields would plummet to 2 percent during the 1950s, most likely due to a conservative backlash against female advancement, but it would eventually improve. The pioneering and innovative women who broke through at this difficult time helped pave the way for future female artists by reminding everyone of what was possible.\(^{17}\)

To show that women could direct, they needed to be seen at the helm of serious drama, and not just “women’s plays,” and they needed to show that they could innovate as well as their male counterparts, and be equally successful. Margaret Webster arrived from England in 1937 to direct Shakespeare with actor Maurice Evans. George Jean Nathan declared she was “the best director of the plays of Shakespeare that we have.”\(^{18}\)

Committed to integrated casts, she pioneered the first Black Othello on an American stage, directing Paul Robeson with Uta Hagen and José Ferrer in *Othello* in 1943, and at 296 performances, this remains the longest run of any Shakespeare play on Broadway. Her 1945 *The Tempest* also broke records and featured African American actor Canada Lee in the role of Caliban. In a relationship with Eva Le Gallienne since 1938, having met during a production of *Hamlet*, Webster jumped at the chance to help form American Repertory Theatre in 1946 (not to be confused with Robert Brustein’s later manifestation) with Le Gallienne and Cheryl Crawford.

A leading proponent of repertory theatre, Le Gallienne had run the Civic Repertory Theatre from 1926 to 1934, mounting classic European plays, including several of Ibsen’s that she herself translated, and staging worthy American plays, especially those by women, such as Susan Glaspell’s *Inheritors* (1927) and *Alison’s House* (1930). Though only running from 1946 to 1948 due to finance, the American Repertory Theatre followed the same program as Le Gallienne’s previous Rep and won critical acclaim in its short tenure, again proving that women were capable of producing effective drama. After it closed, Webster’s relationship with Le Gallienne ended, and she formed the Margaret Webster Shakespeare Company to tour the country, an experience she personally credits as being “the most valuable contribution I ever made to theatre in America.”\(^{19}\) However, in 1950 she also became the first woman to direct Metropolitan Opera and once again was able to effect change as, under her guidance, the Met’s operatic productions became more theatrical. She also staged operas for New York City Opera and thus made her mark in yet another field.

Where Webster had proven women could direct Shakespeare and opera, Mary Hunter was a pioneer in directing musical theatre. The huge budgets and large casts of musical theatre had mostly male producers thinking
female directors would be unreliable. When Hunter was hired to direct *High Button Shoes* in 1947, she was replaced two weeks before rehearsals began by George Abbott, explaining they needed a bigger name. Supported by fellow theatricals she brought a grievance; Mielziner testified: she was “one of three or four people in the profession who understood all the elements that go into a musical show.” New York Supreme Court awarded her an unprecedented $40,000, agreeing it had been sexism that had resulted in her firing. Her innovative combination of folklore and Americana with musical theatre, through such pieces as *Ballet Ballads* (1948) and her touring production *Musical Americana* (1953–55), suggested new ways to integrate song and dance. Robbins hired her as assistant director for *Peter Pan* (1954), but the following year, she retired to marry and start a family.

Cheryl Crawford, however, was dedicated to the theatre throughout her life. Possibly the most influential female producer on Broadway to this day, she produced over 100 plays, helped create one of America’s most influential acting schools, and helped the careers of many well-known actors. She was a graduate of the Theatre Guild’s school, whose co-founder, producer Theresa Helburn, was the impetus behind getting *Oklahoma!*, *Carousel*, and several of Inge’s dramas to the stage. Fascinated by theatre, but not wanting to act, Crawford took various administrative positions within the Guild until joining fellow employees Clurman and Strasberg to form the Group. She also helped found the American Repertory Theatre and the Actors Studio. In addition, she became an important independent producer, with such successes as *Brigadoon* (1947), *The Rose Tattoo* (1951), *Paint Your Wagon* (1951), and *Sweet Bird of Youth* (1959). In 1979, both she and Margaret Webster were inducted into the Theater Hall of Fame, Crawford being, at the time, possibly the first nonacting female to gain that honor (inductees need twenty-five years of distinguished service in American theatre and at least five major production credits on Broadway). Women such as Crawford and Helburn proved that one need not be male to become a successful producer, fully involved in the life of the theatre, and both blazed an inspirational trail for future women wanting to follow in their capable footsteps.

Though likewise in a minority, women writers also proved their worth during this period. Librettist and lyricist Dorothy Fields, with her brother Herbert Fields, wrote books and/or lyrics for several musicals including *Up in Central Park* (1945) that investigated crooked politics and proved women need not be restricted to safe topics, as well as *By the Beautiful Sea* (1954), *Redhead* (1959), *Annie Get Your Gun* (1949), and *A Tree Grows in
Brooklyn (1951), all of which feature strong female protagonists. Working with Adolph Green, Betty Comden also thrived, writing books and lyrics for such rollicking hits as On the Town (1944), Wonderful Town (1953), and Bells Are Ringing (1956). These may not have privileged female characters, but they proved women could write successful musicals, albeit with a male partner. Bella Spewack also worked with her husband Samuel to produce the book for Kiss Me Kate (1948), a hugely successful musical adaptation of Shakespeare’s Taming of the Shrew.

Women were also making progress in regular drama with Mary Chase becoming the fourth woman to get a Pulitzer Prize for Harvey (1944), an imaginative tale about a man guided by a “pooka” in the form of an invisible giant rabbit, which was directed by Antoinette Perry and has spawned several revivals and filmed versions. In 1952, Chase had further success with Bernardine, another original offering about a group of teenagers, and Mrs. McThing, the first children’s play to be produced on Broadway. Ketti Frings also gained a Pulitzer in 1958 for her adaptation of Thomas Wolfe’s bildungsroman novel, Look Homeward, Angel (1929). None, however, engendered more acclaim than Lillian Hellman, who can be viewed as America’s first successful female playwright, viewed as equal to the men of her time, and thus a normalizing inspiration for future female dramatists.

Having come to prominence before the war, Hellman continued to produce strident drama that critiqued American complacency as much as that of Miller. Her insistence on living life on her own terms caused several scandals – over her sexual exploits and dismissive treatment of HUAC – but also placed her firmly in the spotlight. In 1952, concern with the sociopolitical atmosphere led her to revive her 1934 play Children’s Hour about how malicious gossip ruins lives. She also adapted Jean Anouilh’s The Lark (1955), viewing the trial of Joan of Arc as a fitting emblem of victimized innocence, and Voltaire’s Candide (1956), in which the titular character and others are sentenced to die on spurious evidence. Other less political plays included a sequel to The Little Foxes, Another Part of the Forest (1946), which showed how the awful Hubbard family had evolved, The Autumn Garden, about the difficulties of middle age, and Toys in the Attic (1960), about sisters who sacrifice their lives for their wayward brother. Plays written by women in the 1950s were as successful as those by men, but they overall penned less than 20 percent of the plays produced on Broadway, and it would be several decades before that improved.

On an interesting note, the Tony Awards for drama began in 1947, named after a woman, Antoinette Perry – actress, director, and co-founder
of the American Theatre Wing. Outside of the awards for actresses, up until 1960, Fields and Spewack won awards for their books, Fields and Comden won for their lyrics, Frances Goodrich won best play for *The Diary of Anne Frank*, Agnes de Mille and Helen Tamiris each won for choreography, and Lucinda Ballard, Mary Percy Schenck, Aline Bernstein, and Irene Sharaff won for costume design. No women were even nominated for any music award, director, or stage design. There was clearly still much to do, but ground had been broken. A similar story can be told of the growth of African American theatre.

**Minoritized Inroads**

The Harlem Renaissance (1918–37) gave African American writers a voice, but aside from a few outliers, these voices were not often heard in the theatre until after World War II when we witness a growing African American presence both on and Off-Broadway. A committee was formed to try and increase African American employment in Broadway shows, combat racial stereotyping in the theatre, and encourage upcoming African American writers. Many African American soldiers had fought against fascism, only to find themselves despised on their return in a supposedly democratic country. African American plays of the period offered positive identities for Black people to counter offensive mainstream stereotypes and bring the plight of people of color to the nation’s attention.

Owen Brady points out how Theodore Ward used “history to shed light on the problem of racial justice in 1940 America” in his challenging play, *Our Lan’* (1947). It addressed the Reconstruction period in the South and even had a short Broadway run, though white producers did not present it as effectively as its initial production, adding music and lessening its impact. Off-Broadway, William Branch had success with *A Medal for Willie* (1951), about the way African American servicemen were treated, and *In Splendid Error* (1954), which depicts a meeting between Frederick Douglass and John Brown in which they discuss the efficacy of rebellion. Taking another approach, Louis Peterson’s *Take a Giant Step* (1953) depicts a young Black man growing up in a predominantly white middle-class neighborhood to explore the pressures of assimilation and its attending self-hatred, and Loften Mitchell wrote *A Land Beyond the River* (1957), about a Black couple joining the legal fight against school segregation. All effectively reflected the psychology of being segregated and constantly treated as second-class citizens, but they were also predominantly written from a male perspective.
By the close of the 1950s, Lorraine Hansberry’s *A Raisin in the Sun* (1959) would show the nation what an African American woman writer could achieve, but it was prior work of Alice Childress – as actress, activist, director, and playwright – that did much to make Hansberry’s success possible. Addressing Black and gender concerns, and having characters confront white antagonists on stage to encourage interracial casts, Childress began writing plays to create decent roles for Black actresses. Despite a veneer of comedy, such plays as *Florence* (1949), *Just a Little Simple* (1950), *Gold Through the Trees* (1952) – the first play written by a Black woman professionally produced with Equity actors on a New York stage – and *Trouble in Mind* (1955), she encouraged protest and political commitment, presenting authentic representations of Black life on the stage. While writing a column for Paul Robeson’s newspaper *Freedom*, Childress met, inspired, and encouraged Lorraine Hansberry.

Rather than strike audiences as combative, as much drama from 1960s African American playwrights appeared, *A Raisin in the Sun* spoke as much to white audiences as Black, for as McConachie suggests, “Hansberry used the specific language, cultural habits, and social situations of a particular ethnic group to suggest the dilemma of many groups at a similar stage of history.” Thus, “the African American experience of the Younger family could be both particular and universal.”22 The Younger family wants to live in a nicer area, but a representative from a white neighborhood organization tries to bribe them not to move. Rediscovering his self-hood, the family’s son refuses the offer, and the story ends as they leave for their new home. The play offered challenges to American racism and sexism and won an African American woman the New York Drama Critics’ Circle Award, as well as becoming the longest running play on Broadway by a Black writer for a quarter of a century. Its success partly depended on a continuing growing openness in American theatre at that time for new ideas, new writers, and new ways to present. As the 1950s drew to a close, it was becoming increasingly evident that Broadway alone did not represent all that was happening on stage.

**Experimental Theatre**

For theatre to remain vital, it must have the opportunity to continuously experiment. Despite, or possibly because of the commercial restraints on mainstream drama, since the Provincetown Players of the 1920s, American theatre had struggled to maintain that prerogative. During this period, the success of Broadway indirectly generated the development of
Off-Broadway, and, by the close of the 1950s, Off-Off-Broadway allowed resourceful practitioners to continue to explore new possibilities for the public that would also keep the mainstream invigorated.

The best examples of this would be Julian Beck and Judith Malina, who founded Living Theatre in 1947 to create a venue that offered intense experience beyond simple realism. They adopted Antonin Artaud’s theory on “Theatre of Cruelty” that demanded an audience feel plays intimately, breaking down the separation of actors from audience, to create organic productions of communal expression. Experimenting with avant-garde pieces by Pablo Picasso, William Carlos Williams, and Gertrude Stein, they moved around a variety of small nontraditional performance spaces, which were frequently closed due to finance or conflict with city authorities. Jack Gelber’s largely improvised play about drug addiction, The Connection, was produced by them in 1959 to disturbing effect. Their dedication to create a noncommercial alternative to Broadway that freed people to experiment was a clarion call.

In 1949, the newly formed Off-Broadway Theatre League negotiated a contract with Actors’ Equity to allow Equity actors to perform at token salaries, which gave theatre practitioners opportunity to try new ideas without going bust, while allowing them to maintain a high professionalism. As well as providing opportunities for more talented actors and directors to come to the nation’s attention, Off-Broadway influenced Broadway and the growing regional American theatres that were springing up in a variety of ways. The use of different theatrical spaces and their effects on staging, the passion and determination to produce ideas beyond the mainstream as well as forgotten classics, and the pioneering of color-blind casting, were all largely led by the Off-Broadway theatres.

Several theatres contributed to the growth of the movement, but Circle in the Square, established in 1951 by director José Quintero and others, is often credited as leading the way. Using an old nightclub with an arena stage configuration, they produced a mix of American and European plays, but their successful 1952 revival of Williams’s Summer and Smoke (which fared better than the 1948 Broadway production) proved it was possible to have a hit play Off-Broadway and made the careers of Quintero and leading actress Geraldine Page. Quintero was far less analytical and doctrinaire than Kazan, and not as technically savvy as Abbott, but he was an instinctual director with a strong emotional commitment, who allowed his actors to find their own way into a role. He also understood the different blocking and staging demands of the arena configuration. His revival of O’Neill’s The Iceman Cometh in 1956, not only made Jason Robards a star,
but also helped rejuvenate the playwright’s reputation and led to O’Neill’s widow giving him *A Long Day’s Journey into Night* (1956) to direct on Broadway, years ahead of O’Neill’s intent – a play many now consider O’Neill’s finest work.

Success also came for Marc Blitzstein’s adaptation of Kurt Weill and Bertolt Brecht’s *The Threepenny Opera* in 1954 at Theatre de Lys. Blitzstein softened the anger of Brecht’s vision, which made it more engaging, and although an incoming booking initially forced the play to close, it reopened the following year and broke all records by running for more than six years. It proved that shows did not need the opulence and glitz of a Broadway production to succeed and presaged the success of Tom Jones and Harvey Schmidt’s low-budget *The Fantasticks* (1960) that ran for an incredible forty-two years.

Mention should also be made of Joseph Papp, who founded the New York Shakespeare Workshop in 1954 “so that poetic plays can be done on the stage in a highly realistic way without sacrificing the poetry and the style”23 with the aim of making Shakespeare more accessible to the masses. His first “free” Shakespeare in the Park was in 1956, and by the next decade, Papp had created the Public Theater to nurture new artists and audiences, operating from five stages.

It became clear that to keep American theatre vibrant, alternate venues to Broadway needed to be maintained. “Between 1950 and 1962 Off-Broadway theatres presented close to one thousand productions, of which a third were new American plays.”24 In 1956, the Obie Awards were created by *Village Voice* to bring attention to their efforts, promoting up-and-coming playwrights, such as Horton Foote and Edward Albee, whose work would gain wider acceptance in the 1960s. Complaints that Off-Broadway was starting to mirror Broadway, rather than offer an alternative, led to the opening of Joseph Cino’s Caffè Cino in 1958, and the Off-Off-Broadway movement began. The next decade would see the establishment of many more groups – such as La MaMa, Judson Poet’s Theater, and Theatre Genesis – to ensure experimentation in American drama would continue to flower. In 1964, their productions would become eligible for Obie Awards, and they would bring writers such as Sam Shepard, Adrienne Kennedy, and Harvey Fierstein to the nation’s attention.

### Conclusion

Without the energy and creativity of the post-1945 to 1960 period, American theatre would not be what it is today in terms of its content,
staging and acting, and attraction toward innovation. This “Golden Age” took Broadway beyond simple realism and allegiance to European theatre to develop its own unique style and voice that has now been globally recognized. The works of Arthur Miller alone have been translated into multiple languages and are regularly performed around the world. American theatre has become as complex as the nation itself in its variety and continued commitment to the exploration of what it means to be an American. It is perhaps this endeavor, begun in earnest during a period of tremendous optimism, that allowed the national drama to sustain an ongoing celebration and critique of the “American experiment” rather than embrace the cynical absurdism coming out of Europe in the 1960s. Instead, Americans continued to insist on meaning, even while acknowledging their own divisions and inequities. Demands to be heard and recognized by the country’s ethnic, sexual, and gender identities would soon become more strident, but within the light of a humanistic belief that the country could be made better, containing a bedrock belief that drama could make a difference in that endeavor.

Notes

3. B. Murphy, Congressional Theatre: Dramatizing McCarthyism on Stage, Film, and Television (Cambridge University Press, 1999), pp. 2–3.
5. Ibid., p. 418.
6. Ibid., p. 394.

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