



The STORY of GREENWICH VILLAGE
compiled from most original sources and
written comprehensible to both
morons & other artistic
folk.
By ROBERTVS EDOVARDVS B.R.L.



Scene at Polly's, from an old print in the collection of Vincent Pepe.
"Mike" was the only waiter in that historic hostelry.

PART VII

We are now approaching the zenith of the golden days of Greenwich Village culture. In the preceding installments we have outlined the rise of the Washington Square Players, but we only hinted at the tremendous effect this struggling band of amateurs had upon the drama of our great land and the world in general. It was not long before the great German producer, Max Reinhardt, heard of

them and companies were formed in Germany and Sweden as much like them as possible. Lady Gregory came over from Ireland with a troupe of home talent and home-made plays. It seemed that the factory or standardized type of play had had its day.

Plays like "The Old Homestead" and "East Lynne" were rapidly being abandoned by the wise guys of Broadway. One Granville Barker came over from London with a company of unstereotyped players and a load of curtains. He came to show New York that the Washington Square Players were on the right track. Even the goat of David Belasco emerged and he took a chance on a little trick scenery.

Although the effects of this organization was tremendous, it was soon doomed to destruction through certain policies which in the end wreck every theatrical enterprise. After their tremendous success (and in due time they began to play for successes) they began to have ideas on what their public wanted. The abused public were willing enough to endure the early works of Maeterlink and some of the jumbled episodes that Russians accept in lieu of plays, but when the W.S.P.'s fell back on producing only such dramatic experiments as were con-

structed according to the low-brow formula of one Prof. Baker, the audiences rebelled. For, contrary to the general belief, as many lowbrows come from Harvard as any other modern university. Besides all this, the W.S.P.'s as we have suggested, were tainted with a shrewdness that never quite achieved. In order to take advantage of the terrible influx of amateur aspirants that threatened to swamp their office force and destroy the privacy of rehearsals, the W.S.P.'s opened a school of dramatic art. That about finished them, of course. The Shuberts completed the destruction.

Besides the rebirth of the drama, certain personal results were gained. Helen Westley became one of the fixtures of the American stage. Phil Moeller launched himself as a playwright, so did Susan Glaspell and Lawrence Lagner. Helen Moeller, Frank Conroy, Henry Hohl, and many others were given a chance to add distinction to the professional stage. Lee Simonson, Bobby Jones and Bobby Locher got their early training as scenic virtuosos. Later, after the war, the prime movers of the W.S.P.'s reorganized under the name of the Theatre Guild—which is, as you know, one of the most distinguished theatrical companies of the world, including the Scandinavian.

Now "Down in dear old Greenwich Village," as the song says, another company was formulating itself. At the time of its inception these Greenwich Villagers were in their summer migrating ground, Provincetown. It has been the custom for centuries for such Villagers as can raise the boat fare, to jump their rent and set up house or tent-keeping in the various sheds and shanties of that picturesque Portuguese settlement. There they subsist on fried fish and huckleberries until the chill of late fall approaches and they try to persuade some city friend to send them the return fare to New York.

Some of the writers, those who are successful enough to have a secretary, have most curious customs. Frequently a covey of authors are seen hiking it over the sand dunes, each followed by a faithful shorthand expert, who takes down the winged words as the writer dictates. It is a picturesque sight, as some of the costumes are extremely comfortable and are worn with a simplicity and lack of conformity to custom that is as charming as anything ever seen in Tahiti. It was in this delightful atmosphere that the Provincetown Players came into being.

Vaguely stirred by the Washington Square

Players, a tribe into which they had intermarried but were not otherwise identical with, the Provincetown crowd put on sporadic dramatic productions of their own inventions on one of the abandoned wharves. Susan Glaspel's and Jig Cook's play, "Suppressed Desires," was the first, and has since been rendered by every little theatre organization from here to Portland, Oregon. Likewise this play dealing with the dread Teutonic succuba-psychoanalysis automatically introduced the nation-wide hunger for sex discussion, for the people of Main Street had to read Freud to get the points of the play. It is the only blot on the record of the little theatre movement that this most foul and insidious of German Propaganda should have been innocently distributed by them.

"Suppressed Desires" was presented in the Village in the Provincetown Players' Restaurant, where the Samovar is now. Then being encouraged and determined, they built a theatre on Macdougal Street, in Mrs. Belardis front parlor floor. Later Jig Cook built a larger theatre, where, it is alleged, Pegasus was once hitched. They will show you the identical ring he was attached to when the place was a stage.



Jefferson Market

by Hans Stengel

It seems that the Washington Square Players dug up so much early Maeterlink and other high-sounding European oversights that there was apparently no chance for a Village playwright. Consequently, the Provincetown Players called themselves the Playwrights' Theatre, and none but

American plays were considered.

It was by a streak of luck and good judgment that they gave Gene O'Neill's "Cardiff" on the first bill. That made them, and it also made O'Neill, for it is the opinion of experts in the drama that the lugubrious regions of the hereafter would have frozen ere any commercial theatre had taken a chance on America's greatest playwright.

The Provincetown Theatre then being entirely a band of literary people came actually to become what they started out to be, a Playwrights' Theatre. The Washington Square Players were more interested in production, individual advancement, scenic effects, and what would please the Shuberts and their patrons, who became more fashionable as the theatre deteriorated. As long as the Provincetown Players continued to play to amuse themselves they were excellent, and it was a long time before megalomania, the aggression of dominating through mediocre actresses, and a regard for the public's desires marred the sincerity of their work.

Even the tremendous success of Eugene O'Neill did not demoralize them, perhaps because Mr. O'Neill himself did not seem acutely aware that he was writing works of distinction. Certainly the

actors were not given the chance to make stars of themselves on the strength of Mr. O'Neill's lines—as is so often the case in the professional stage—when actors talk about recreating a part.

It was thru this organization that the enchanting Miss Edna St. Vincent Millay came to be known as an actress—and later as a poet and a playwright. And we may well add that such is her real name—even to the St. Vincent. She first appeared in a play by Floyd Dell, and whether the play was any good or not history cannot remember, for the personality of the actress was so redolent with charm.

George Cram Cook or Jig as he was known, built a good part of the present theatre with his own hands, when the younger men were in the great war. He kept the organization going in spite of great odds. For one thing it would seem that the police, the building departments, the health, tenement, fire departments and the whole Tammany wigwam conspired to hinder in many petty ways. It was necessary to sell seats by subscription, for there is an ancient law preventing people from giving dramatic entertainment unless a tax and license is paid that is out of all proportion to the profits on a small enterprise. So, in accord with the usual

police persecution, all manner of inspectors, detectives and petty grafters kept annoying Jig while he was building the theatre. And when it was finished and plays were finally produced, even with due regard for the technicalities of the laws of 1812, Jig was obliged to keep an enormous retinue of officious bullheads in benign alcoholic condition. Many a performance was nearly ruined by the ungentlemanly comment of the plainclothes men who had butted in and threatened in loud tones to stop the show, until Jig produced the Bacchic emollient or led them away to the nearest dispensary of illegal beverages.

The success of the Provincetown Players continued until Jig took the keys and went to Greece. The chances are that it was just as well, for O'Neill, Dell, Dreiser, Miss Millay, Miss Barnes, Miss Glaspel, Mary Carolyn Davies, Rita Wellman and Rollo Peters had graduated, and not enough new blood had been taken in to continue the high standard that had been set by this unusual but self-sufficient group of people.

(To be continued)