Peter Barnes on American Drama

Interviewed by Bernard F. Dukore[1]

Dukore: Looking through the theatre listings in *Time Out*, you see five American musicals now playing in London at the West End and six American non-musical plays at the West End or at one of the subsidized theatres, including two by Arthur Miller, one at the National and one at the RSC. Would you say that's about standard?

Barnes: Musicals, yes. In fact, there are more British musicals on at the moment than normally. Normally, it's a clean sweep of American musicals, but since the [Andrew Lloyd] Webber stuff and the rest of it there have been a lot of British musicals. But it's a freaky thing about American plays because even Neil Simon doesn't usually get stuff on that frequently. I would have said that's very odd that there are so many—not the musicals, but the straight plays.

Dukore: Any explanation for the sudden vogue that Arthur Miller has had? Two of his later plays are on now [*The Archbishop's Ceiling* and *The American Clock*]. Next year, 1987, *A View from the Bridge*, is going to be done at the National.

Barnes: The English like serious naturalism.

Dukore: You were once quoted in an interview, maybe ten years ago, as saying that you're not interested in plays about a table and two chairs, and that pretty well describes most contemporary American plays: small cast, one set, usually the living room or kitchen.

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Barnes: Yes, that's right. I don't actually blame American playwrights for that. I think, in a curious way, it's not an artistic decision, it's more an economic decision, because with the climate in American theatre I would have thought that any American playwright presenting an epic play with thirty people, big sets, twenty scenes, would have no chance of ever seeing it on in his lifetime or the lifetime of his children. Playwrights, like all artists, have to look to (a) income and (b) the likelihood of getting their work either published or produced; and it is little good writing however great a play if it has virtually no chance of ever getting on. So the economics of the American theatre dictate to some extent what plays are put on and what plays are written.

Dukore: Isn't that to some extent also true of the British theatre?

Barnes: Unfortunately that's very true of the British theatre too. There were a few years ago about three or four subsidized provincial theatres that would undertake to put on a new play of some size and scope. Now they are not in any economic position to do that, and they are all playing safe by reproducing West End or RSC or National hits or putting on something very safe that they know is going to be box office, or they think is going to be box office, or something very small which if it does fail it doesn't hurt them too much.[2] That leaves the West End. The commercial theatre would never, even when the going is good, really look to big plays. The risks they consider to be too great. So it was always the subsidized theatres that you looked to to put on a big play.

Dukore: Might this partly explain the vogue of American drama?

Barnes: Yes, because that's another thing for the West End. They look to a play which has two or three people in it, one set, and not too stimulating and not too demanding.

Dukore: Are there any particular contemporary American dramatists you especially admire?

Barnes: I don't want to go into living contemporary Americans or living contemporary authors from any country, because it's invidious. I'm playing on the same field, and you have to have a very unique temperament to be able to get so detached that you can make objective comments on one's contemporaries. but I will say that the American playwright I do respect and admire very much is O'Neill. Looking over the man's career and the pressures

that were similar to what they are now—obviously they've intensified since—but that sort of granite-like integrity is absolutely a wonder, and the fact that he got better, that's something that rarely happens, and particularly in America. The cultural climate in America, certainly the theatrical culture, doesn't allow a playwright to flower. It needs instant successes, and if it isn't going to be instant success, it's instant failure. It's very rare for a writer to complete his writing career—and by that I mean to be able to go through youth, middle period, and then a late flowering of plays—and actually to get better, and it seems to me that O'Neill did that, and how he did it—I can only go back to the man as a person. He obviously resisted all the blandishments that American writers were subject to and which they still are. I don't know what is worse for a writer in America: to be successful or to be a failure. Obviously it's better to be a success for the man because it makes for a happier life, but in terms for a writer I don't know quite what is worse in America because of the terrible sort of wreck it's made of so many writers. There, success is as gargantuan as O'Neill's and the failures are as gargantuan as the country itself. So there's no way for a writer to actually build on a success in terms of his writing, and there's no way for a writer to pull up the shutters after a failure and get down to writing another play and getting it on and to actually learn from what happened with the last one, because America is so preoccupied with winning. In art, you don't know who's won and who's lost maybe for years and years after the death of the writer.

Dukore: You mentioned O'Neill getting better and better. Are you thinking of the plays of O'Neill after his, let's say, vacation from the theatre? He left in 1934 and returned in 1946.

Barnes: Yes, I was thinking of *Long Day's Journey* and *Iceman Cometh*. Whether you like him or not, they are a sort of a culmination of a lifetime's work in the theatre, of his work in the theatre, and they are mountainpeaks of his work. Whatever you think of his talent, my admiration for him is tinged with something like awe, to have survived the commercializing pressures of America. One goes there, and it's very difficult, I think, to talk to Americans, even in theatre, about drama and about literature because—I'm not talking about the universities now, that's a different matter—everything gets back to cash and success in terms of what will work and what won't in the most blatantly cash-oriented way. That is not to say that art is in an ivory tower, but you can't function as an artist when every consideration is motivated by "Will people like it?" Any writer that gets a second play on, which is totally uncompromising, is a figure of some unique importance in American theatre.

Dukore: What about the American regional theatre?

Barnes: That seems to be a bit more healthy. There seems to be a little more hope there, but from what I can tell, the worm in the bud even in those theatres is "Are we going to make a success of it? Are we going to get on to Broadway?"—that sort of syndrome. Although they won't acknowledge it—I'm sure they would deny it vehemently if one said it—it's still like every actor: "Can I get into movies? That's what I really want." And the parallel in American theatre is "It would be great if we could get on to Broadway," although, as I say, the facade would be, "We're not going to think of that." And it seems they're not doing as much as they should.

Dukore: By way of?

Barnes: By way of encouraging really extraordinary talents. What has baffled me always, and I'm not just saying contemporary American theatre, but it's American theatre. With the size of the country, the size of the population, and the make-up of the population—which is an extraordinary mix of so many ethnic communities—and the liveness of the American language, its continual changing, its continual vividness, it's really extraordinary that they haven't had a crop of dazzling playwrights—not just one, two, or three, obviously you can mention a number—but I'm talking about a whole slew of playwrights right back from the twenties onwards. I mean, there is still no real tradition of American theatre, there is nothing to compare with the Elizabethan or Jacobean playwrights, and we're a tiny country, yet produced so many great playwrights. It's baffling, and maybe the day will come, but I can only assume that the economics of the American theatre precluded any major flowering. The other arts have actually produced that, as they should with a country of that size: dance, of course, and the novel. But where is there the playwrights to match the achievement of those art forms in America?

Dukore: Let me play devil's advocate. Are all the Jacobeans so wonderful? Do you applaud Chapman?

Barnes: I applaud Chapman, Middleton, Jonson, Marston, Webster, maybe I draw the line at Ford. That's not bad going. Leaving aside Marlowe, that's not a bad crop for a short period of time.

Dukore: What about America in the twenties and thirties? There was O'Neill, and there were also Rice, Saroyan, Wilder.

Barnes: O'Neill yes. But look at the size of England and look at the size of America. I know it doesn't work in terms of just population, but drama does work from a sort of a mix, from a bubbling mix of people. During the Elizabethan and Jacobean periods, when England was in its vigor as a nation and was just beginning to flex its muscles, there was an intellectual stew. It would seem to me that America has had that period and hasn't produced the playwrights. That's strange. Because the American language is so dramatic. I can never really understand it except to put it down to economics. The other thing is, of course, that America has a film industry and a lot of very talented writers either go straight into movies or they are snapped up after one play or after putting a few words on paper. And that does siphon off, I grant, a great many talented people.

Dukore: What about the American musical theatre?

Barnes: That's different. That is a sort of genre which they have made their own.

Dukore: And which now the English seem to be doing.

Barnes: Not better, but certainly they are doing quite a lot of stuff. Maybe that's the American form of Elizabethan and Jacobean drama. Maybe it's taken its form in the musical theatre. The Marlowes and the Jonsons and the Shakespeares and the rest have been or are going to be in the American musical theatre.

Dukore: Then they became Rodgers and Hart.

Barnes: Yes, they became Rodgers and Hart.

Dukore: Or Cole Porter.

Barnes: Yes, Cole Porter, absolutely, or Jerome Kern.

Dukore: Getting back to American plays, even though more American plays may be done here commercially because of the small cast and one set, they wouldn't continue to be done if there weren't an audience for them, real or perceived.

Barnes: "Perceived" is the key word. But actually very few of them make it. If they fail here—a play with four or five people in it, at the most, in one set—a failure is not catastrophic. You can still recover. And so producers hedge their bets by putting those plays on. They think they know—obviously, all producers think they know—what the public want and they assume that an American play, for some reason, who knows, they think there's an audience for it.

Dukore: Let's take the cases where they're right. *Brighton Beach Memoirs* by Neil Simon is a proven success at the National, and it's transferred in the same production with some changes in the cast. Presently *The American Clock* is at the Cottesloe, the smallest theatre at the National, and it's so successful that it's going to be restaged for the largest theatre at the National, the Olivier.

Barnes: Yes. They [the English] like serious plays.

Dukore: *Brighton Beach Memoirs* isn't "serious."

Barnes: I think I'm right in saying that Neil Simon hasn't had a success in this country for, must be for fifteen, twenty years. That whole gaggle of plays he wrote, there's hardly one of them that made it here.

Dukore: This one seems to be a success.

Barnes: Yes, this one, but after a time, you know, you're bound to come up.

Dukore: It's the reverse here from Broadway. When I go to New York I'm often amazed at how many English plays are on. Here I'm often amazed at how many American plays are on.

Barnes: Maybe it's the exotic quality of a British play in America.

Dukore: Maybe it's a proven success. It's had its out-of-town tryout, so to speak.

Barnes: That is true. It's like me doing a radio version of a play before I do it on the stage. One's tried it out, and one knows it's worked. And it's even better if you've actually been in another country and actually put it on and seen that the audiences responded. It's like movies. Movies much prefer to buy a book to turn into a movie, and that's because there's a proven audience

for the book. It's been tried out. Also, for the producer that takes it out in movies, and the same in theatre, somebody else has taken the initial gamble. They haven't. There's nothing like second-guessing on everything. Somebody else has actually put their money down and actually put this show on or has had this book printed.

Dukore: *Glengarry Glen Ross* was produced here before it was produced in New York. *Wildfire*[3] opened here just a few weeks ago.

Barnes: The reason for *Wildfire* is obvious, isn't it?

Dukore: Diana Rigg wanted to do it.

Barnes: And I'm sure if George C. Scott got hold of a British play and said, "I want to do this," or if Robert Redford got a British play and said, "I want to do this on Broadway," they'd have to lock the doors to stop the stampede of producers who'd want to produce it. And then you'd say, "How is it that a British play that hasn't been done in Britain got on?" It's because you work from film stars. Here, somebody like Diana Rigg or Vanessa Redgrave or [Alec] Guinness or somebody like that can get a play on, has that amount of muscle from whatever they have been doing.

Dukore: Your kind of play, apart from the structure, the epic scale—you chiefly go for comedy and satire. Most American playwrights don't usually deal with those things. Can you account for that?

Barnes: I suppose reality is so weird in America that there's no way of treating it satirically, because you can't parody parody and you can't satirize satire. I think all you can do is to do it straight. It's so extraordinary, American life, I would imagine it would take another Swift to be able to actually satirize some aspects of American life. You would be hard put to it. A straight documentary on the Reagan administration, for example, or midwest life, or Florida, or anything in California would be satire by the very nature.

Dukore: But you find satire in fiction, you find satire in movies, you find it on TV. What you said about American politics and society can also be said about English politics and society, yet you find satires here. *Pravda*, the Brenton-Hare play, whatever you think of it, is a satire on the British newspaper industry.

Barnes: Maybe American writers have lost their nerve. I think in the twenties they did it, and there's no contemporary American writer that would dare write what Mencken wrote about America and about American patriotism and about the president. There is no writer living in America that would have the guts to do what he did. This isn't a matter of talent or his politics. I'm reading some of his stuff, and I'm continually amazed they didn't lynch him.

Dukore: Some people wanted to.

Barnes: Exactly. He wrote that America never attacks or would never go to war with a country unless that country had one hand tied behind its back or was so small there was no chance of it ever doing anything like defending itself.

Dukore: Isn't that an intelligent reason to go to war? You're not going to go to war with someone who could beat you.

Barnes: You would never say that. No American would print that now.

Dukore: But they have. When Reagan launched the Granada invasion there were American journalists who said that.

Barnes: Let me give you an example to link up with what I was saying about the difficulties of a talented playwright writing in America. This is in the twenties and thirties, when one would have assumed that the chances for a playwright to blossom, to actually control his career and work in the medium in which he was the best at, were really good. The playwright's Edwin Justus Mayer. He wrote one play called *Firebrand*, which isn't very good, but then he wrote a play called *Children of Darkness*,[4] which I take to be a very, very good play. It has flaws in it, it's overwritten, but the prospect of what he could do was absolutely laid out there for you, and you'd pick out that play, if you knew anything about the theatre, and say, "This is somebody who's really going to do something. This is a youthful play, but it really is a talent and a unique viewpoint on life." And you would predict, if he had been a European writer, that he would have gone on to have a very extraordinary career in the theatre. Now, what happened to him was that he went to Hollywood and he didn't write another play, or if he wrote one it's never been produced. He wrote a great number of screenplays. He wrote two well-known films. One is *Midnight*, a Mitchell Leisen film, with John Barrymore, Claudette Colbert, Don Amici, which is a very, very witty film. He either coscripted or wrote the

story.[5] Then, of course, his famous film is *To Be or Not To Be*, which he scripted.

Dukore: This is the first *To Be or Not To Be*, the Lubitsch one.

Barnes: The Lubitsch, not the abortion.[6] You can see that he didn't lose his talent. If he went to Hollywood and everything collapsed and there was no spark of what he had, then you could say, "Oh, well, he probably wouldn't have done anything then." But when you see something like *To Be or Not To Be*, then you realize the immense talent of the man was still functioning in 1942, but it certainly didn't function on the stage, where his obvious natural grain of talent should have been and was. That's just a case that I happen to know about, and I know of no sadder example. When I read a play like *Children of Darkness*, I ask, "What did he do next? That's what I want to know." There's nothing next. He didn't die, he just went to Hollywood, which is probably worse. So when I say I admire O'Neill so much, it's because that didn't happen, he had a tremendous sort of resilience and a sort of obsession. Probably—I'm gradually getting there—so many American writers are not obsessed with the theatre, it's a stepping stone to something else, to movies or. . .

Dukore: Not necessarily by intent.

Barnes: Not by intent, no, no, but that's what happens. It's a staging post usually for something else. The theatre is a sort of mistress that demands your complete devotion. She doesn't mind if you float off from time to time to do a movie, but you can't make the theatre second, it has to be first. Any art has to be, I think, any sort of medium has to be that. Anyway, to get to specifics: Williams. Has anybody ever thought why what happened to him happened to him?—because he is obviously a tremendously talented and rich playwright. That sort of petered out to some extent and the late plays, unlike O'Neill's, didn't get better. I think it has to do with the pressure. It's what I was talking about: it's the pressure of success and then the pressure of failure, one on top of the other. Being a success in America is beyond the dreams of avarice, aside from fame. Then on top of that, to be a failure, having a string of failures, then the pressure of failure. I don't know how a writer can function under those extreme conditions. It's very curious that his failures, the later plays, come from a breaking up, and Miller's failures come from a solidifying. It's the difference between a sort of Nova explosion out there and a sort of impounding into one's self. It's so heavy that it fails in the opposite way. Is

it that Williams deep, deep, down didn't take himself seriously and Miller deep, deep down takes himself too seriously?

Dukore: I don't know. Miller does take himself seriously, but he's earned the right to do that.

Barnes: Nobody earns the right to take himself too seriously. He's the one American that has fallen for the English syndrome, which to become a man of letters: pronouncement from Mount Rushmore, Moses bringing down the commandments. You get that all the time in England. It's not an American phenomenon, because usually they blow raspberries at that. He has managed to sort of cow people into thinking sententiousness is seriousness.

Dukore: May I quote you on this?

Barnes: I don't mind. Not out of context.

Dukore: Williams really has had more productions in his later years than anyone might have expected.

Barnes: Yes, it's curious.

Dukore: It wasn't till many failures that Broadway gave up on him.

Barnes: Absolutely. I retain more respect for him than I do for Miller.

Dukore: Because?

Barnes: Because to battle on, I suppose, to keep writing in crummy hotel rooms and to battle on through drugs, sex, failure, the rest, there's a certain sort of integrity about that.

Dukore: Is there more integrity in being and old roué than in being a man of letters?

Barnes: Yes, yes.

Dukore: It's probably more fun.

Barnes: More fun, absolutely. You do less damage, actually.