

Street Scene

by Elmer Rice

Study Guide

Girl Friday Productions

July 7-30, 2011

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Elmer Rice, ca. 1920

About the play

Street Scene was originally presented at The Playhouse, New York City, where it opened on January 10, 1929, ran for 602 performances, and won the Pulitzer Prize for drama in that year. Rice wrote *Street Scene* after a sojourn in Europe, and at a point in his life when he was unhappy with his career and "came to the conclusion that I lacked the qualification of a good writer." Nonetheless he embarked on a new play, which was based on part of an earlier play without words called *The Sidewalks of New York*. One setting in that play was the exterior of a typical Manhattan brownstone that housed ten or twelve families, and this became the sole background for the new play.

According to Rice, the play to some extent adheres to the classical unities: it takes place in a single setting, and the elapsed time is less than a day. It lacks, however, the classical "unity of action," filled as it is with multiple stories and actions. In his autobiography, *Minority Report*, Rice says:

"Blending and arranging these unrelated elements into a patterned mosaic and introducing the many characters in a seemingly natural way posed technical problems of the greatest difficulty. The play is, by all odds, the most experimental I have every attempted, a fact not readily apparent to the reader or spectator, for its construction depends not upon novel or striking technological devices, but upon concealed architectonics. I was helped by concert-going, as well as by picture-gazing. No musician, I yet had some grasp of the structure of symphonic music: the statement, restatement and development of themes, the interplay of contrasting instruments. Unconsciously I utilized my slight knowledge of the principles of orchestration.

"My characters were not epic heroes or demigods, nor did they inhabit a palace. Yet this was not Skid Row. They represented a fair cross section of what might be called the lower middle class. Of various national origins, religious faiths, political opinions and degrees of education, they included shopkeepers, clerks, artisans, students, a schoolteacher, a taxi driver, a musician, janitors, policemen. Like people at any social level, their lives comprised birth, death, love in its many aspects, economic problems, ideological conflicts, selfishness, self-sacrifice, kindness, malice, fears, hopes, aspirations. Not even a great master could expect to reproduce all of this complex tapestry. Aware of my limitations, I confined myself to a fragment of it."

Street Scene was made into a film in 1931, and an opera (Rice wrote the book, Kurt Weill and Langston Hughes wrote the music and lyrics) in 1946.

The setting and the characters

Rice describes the set as "an ugly brownstone . . . built in the 1890s." His stage directions also include a soundscape: "Throughout the act and, indeed, throughout the play, there is constant noise. The noises of the city rise, fall, intermingle: the distant roar of 'L' trains, automobile sirens and the whistles of boats on the river; the rattle of trucks and the indeterminate clanking of metals; fire-engines, ambulances, musical instruments, a radio, dogs barking and human voices calling, quarrelling and screaming with laughter. The noises are subdued and in the background, but they never wholly cease." The play takes place over two days, a very hot June 15th and 16th: Sankey mentions that it's the "hottest June fifteenth in forty-one years" in act one.

The families who live in the brownstone include:

Frank and Anna Maurant, and their two children: Rose, 20, who works in a real estate office, and 12-year-old Willie.

George and Emma Jones and their two grown children: Vincent, who drives a taxi, and Mae, who is a shop girl.

Filippo and Greta Fiorentino: he's Italian and she's German; they are approaching middle age and have no children.

Carl and Olga Olsen: they are Swedish, have a young baby, and are the building's caretakers.

Abraham Kaplan, a Russian Jew, and his two children: Shirley, a school teacher, and Sam, who's just finishing college.

Daniel Buchanan and his expectant wife.

Agnes Cushing, unmarried, who cares for her 72-year-old mother.

Laura Hildebrand, a young woman whose husband has deserted her and their two children, Mary and Charlie.

Others enter the action through their involvement with the central characters: Steve Sankey, a collector for the milk company; Harry Easter, Rose Maurant's boss; Dick McGann, boyfriend of Mae Jones; Dr. John Wilson. Many other city dwellers wander through the world of the play: a letter carrier, college girls, a music student, a police officer, a furniture mover, nurse-maids, and an amazing richness of passers-by.

About the playwright

Elmer Rice was born on September 28, 1892 in a 90th Street walk-up in New York City. His birth name was Elmer Leopold Reizenstein; both his maternal and paternal grandparents emigrated to the United States from Germany in the mid-nineteenth century. His paternal grandfather was the only one of the four whom he knew well: he had joined the rebels in Europe during the 1848 rebellions and Rice "wondered whether my own lifelong rebelliousness is due to hereditary influences." Both this grandfather and one of Rice's uncles boarded with the family and contributed to the household finances. This was important since Rice's father Jacob suffered from epilepsy and had some difficulty holding a regular job. Rice's only sibling, a younger brother, died of diphtheria and scarlet fever when Elmer was three.

Rice attended public schools, but found his true home in the New York Public Library: "It would be impossible for me to overstate my indebtedness to that noble institution. It was my university and my shrine." After eight years of formal schooling (six in grade school and two in high school), he learned that his parents could no longer afford to keep him in school. He was not yet fifteen. His work experience included work as a file clerk in a law firm, whose clientele include many people involved in theater. In his free time, as finances allowed, he went to plays. Though he knew he didn't want to be a business man (his first job was in business) or a lawyer, he did not see many options so he prepared to pursue the latter path by passing a dozen or more of New York State Board of Regents exams to achieve the equivalent of a high school diploma. In fall 1910, at the age of eighteen, he entered New York Law School, from which he graduated in spring 1912. He applied for admission to the bar when he turned twenty-one and was sworn in in December 1913.

Despite this apparent success, Rice knew he did not wish to continue his legal career and began to pursue writing. By summer 1914, his first play, *On Trial*, was in rehearsal; it opened on August 19th in New York after a weekend tryout in Stamford, Connecticut. The play was a huge success and Rice's career as a "dilettante and a litterateur" (his words) was launched. Over the course of his career, he wrote over two dozen plays, three novels, a non-fiction work, *The Living Theatre*, and his autobiography, *Minority Report*. He also helped to establish The Playwrights' Producing Company, for which he directed as well as wrote and was the first director of the New York office of the Federal Theatre Project. Rice died in 1967.

Fun tidbit: Rice was portrayed by Jon Favreau in the 1994 film *Mrs. Parker and the Vicious Circle*.

New York and Beyond in the 1920s

Nationwide Prohibition began in January 1920 following the ratification of the 18th amendment; it was repealed by the 21st amendment in 1933.

Benito Mussolini became the Prime Minister of Italy in 1922, and took the title "Il Duce" (the leader) in 1925.

In July 1925, Hitler published his autobiography, *Mein Kampf* (my struggle).

The play was written in 1928, and first produced in January 1929. In the presidential election of November 1928, Republican Herbert Hoover defeated Democrat Al Smith.

Health breakthroughs in the decade included the discovery of vitamins C and E, of penicillin—the first of the modern antibiotics, and of insulin.

Silent films gave way to talkies over the course of the decade. *The Jazz Singer* (1927) was the first major "talkie."

From 1892-1924 over twenty million immigrants entered the United States, over 70% of them through the port of New York.

The melting pot

From 1820-1860, 95% of immigrants were from northwestern Europe; from 1861-1900, that percentage had dropped to 68%, while 22% were from southeastern Europe; between 1900-1920, southeastern Europe represented 44% of immigrants and northwestern Europe 41%. Between 1820 and 1914, 30 million people emigrated from Europe; the main groups were: Germans (5 million), Irish (4.5 million), Italians (4.5 million), Poles (2.6 million), English (2.6 million), and Jews (2 million). During the same period about 700,000 immigrants arrived from Asia; the main groups were from China (370,000) and Japan (275,000). Following the second world war, immigrants from Europe and Asia were joined by significant numbers from Central and South America.

In the Twin Cities metro area, recent decades have seen immigrants from Vietnam, Thailand, Ethiopia, and Somalia. In 2008, 10.3% of the Twin Cities population was foreign born.

Resources

Books

Elmer Rice, *Street Scene* (NY: Samuel French, 1929)

Elmer Rice, *Minority Report: An Autobiography* (NY: Simon and Schuster, 1963)

Frank Durham, *Elmer Rice* (NY: Twayne Publishers, Inc., 1970)

Robert Hogan, *The Independence of Elmer Rice* (Carbondale & Edwardsville: Southern Illinois University Press, 1965)

Roger Daniels, *Coming to America: A History of Immigration and Ethnicity in American Life*, 2nd edition (NY: HarperCollins, 2002)

Anna Pegler-Gordon, *In Sight of America: Photography and the Development of U.S. Immigration Policy* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009)

Peter Morton Coan, *Ellis Island Interviews: In Their Own Words* (NY: Facts on File, 1997).

FAQ about immigration from the Minneapolis Foundation:

http://www.minneapolisfoundation.org/Uploads/CuteEditor/Publications/Community/ImmigrationFAQ_8.5x11.pdf

Websites

The Roaring Twenties: A Historical Snapshot of Life in the 1920s

<http://www.1920-30.com/>

The Immigration History Research Center, University of Minnesota

<http://www.ihrc.umn.edu/>

Immigration and U.S. History

<http://www.america.gov/st/peopleplace-english/2008/February/20080307112004ebyeessedo0.1716272.html>

Wikipedia entries on Elmer Rice, *Street Scene*, prohibition, immigration history, etc.

Poet Arthur William Edgar O'Shaughnessy (quoted in act one)

<http://www.poemhunter.com/arthur-william-edgar-o-shaughnessy/poems/>

Walt Whitman, "When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom'd" (quoted in act one):

<http://www.bartleby.com/142/192.html>

Tenement Museum

<http://www.tenement.org/>

We Are the Music-Makers

We are the music-makers,
And we are the dreamers of dreams,
Wandering by lone sea-breakers,
And sitting by desolate streams.
World-losers and world-forsakers,
Upon whom the pale moon gleams;
Yet we are the movers and shakers,
Of the world forever, it seems.

With wonderful deathless ditties
We build up the world's great cities,
And out of a fabulous story
We fashion an empire's glory:
One man with a dream, at pleasure,
Shall go forth and conquer a crown;
And three with a new song's measure
Can trample an empire down.

We, in the ages lying
In the buried past of the earth,
Built Nineveh with our sighing,
And Babel itself with our mirth;
And o'erthrew them with prophesying
To the old of the new world's worth;
For each age is a dream that is dying,
Or one that is coming to birth.

Arthur William Edgar O'Shaughnessy (1844-1881)

Arthur O'Shaughnessy is the poet quoted by Abraham Kaplan in the first act:

Organized charity, measured and iced
In the name of a cautious statistical Christ.

The lines were also quoted in two novels by American journalist and social reformer Ernest Poole: *Blind: A Story of These Times* (1920) and *Silent Storms* (1928). Poole also wrote about the lower east side of New York.

The poem included here is O'Shaughnessy's most notable; it was set to music by Sir Edward Elgar in 1912, and it seems to capture the energy and emotions of the characters in the play.