

PAL: Perspectives in American Literature - A Research and Reference Guide - An Ongoing Project

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Chapter 8: Elmer Rice (1892-1967)

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Primary Works

On Trial, 1914; *The Iron Cross*, 1917; *The Home of the Free*, 1918; *For The Defense*, 1919; *Wake Up, Jonathan*, 1921; *It Is the Law*, 1922; *The Adding Machine*, 1923; *Close Harmony*; *The Mongrel*, 1924; *Is He Guilty?*, 1927; *Cock Robin*, 1928; *The Subway*; *See Naples and Die*; *Street scene, a play in three acts*, 1929; *The Left Bank*; *Counselor at Law*, 1931; *Black Sheep*, 1932; *...We, the people, a play in twenty scenes*, 1933; *Judgment Day*; *Between Two Worlds*, 1934; *Two plays: Not for children and Between two worlds*, 1935; *American Landscape*, 1938; *Two on an Island*; *Journey to Jerusalem, Flight to the West*, 1940; *A New Life*, 1943; *Dream Girl*, 1945; *Seven plays. (On trial. The adding machine. Street scene. Counsellor at law. Judgment day. Two on an island. Dream girl.)*, 1950; *The Grand Tour*, 1951; *The Winner*, 1954; *Cue for Passion*, 1958; *The living theatre*, 1959; *Love Among the Ruins*; *Minority report an autobiography*, 1963; *Court of Last Resort*, 1965.

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A Student Project by Jane Mendenhall

Revised by [Stewart Ronk](#) (April 13, 2008)

Today most people have never heard of Elmer Rice. But in the 1920s and 1930s, he was a playwright who was as popular as Eugene O'Neill. His career is an example of the great American success story because as an amateur, his very first professionally produced play was a great success. Spanning fifty years and almost fifty plays, his career is a remarkable testament of a man's dedication to his art and his personal vision. Able to withstand biting criticism, he is a playwright that fervently fought for the integrity of the American dramatic artistic establishment. Though almost unheard of today, "Rice should not be denied his rightful place among those few who in the first half of the [twentieth] century brought the American drama to worldwide recognition" (Palmieri 197).

Born Elmer Leopold Reizenstein on September 28, 1892 in the heart of Manhattan to Jacob and Fanny Lion Reizenstein, Elmer Rice grew up in an urban, "inner city" setting. Later he adopted the pen name Elmer Rice because, he said, he felt for a writer "Reizenstein" was awkward and a nuisance because it would always be misspelled (Rice 164). He was an only child after his younger brother Lester died of diphtheria and scarlet fever when Rice was three (Rice 20). Becoming interested in drama as a young adolescent, Rice performed in Julius Caesar and Merchant of Venice in the seventh grade (Palmieri 4). Though his family, second-generation German-Jewish immigrants, was poor, they encouraged his interests, letting him enjoy quiet time in the local library and taking him to plays.

Categorized by many as a crusader and reformer, Rice's work reflects the influence of his youth, when he spent a great deal of time with his paternal grandfather who boarded with the family. Grandfather Reizenstein forsook his apprenticeship to a tailor and joined rebel forces to fight in political revolutions sweeping across Europe in the mid 1800s, and then came to America in 1850 to avoid political imprisonment (Rice 10). Palmieri supposes Rice's years of exposure to the idealism of his grandfather largely explains Rice's becoming so principled himself:

The rebelliousness and philosophical questioning of dogma inherited from his grandfather had made the playwright, in his own words, "particularly responsive to books that exposed the social structure's weaknesses and evils, or the hypocrisy, slavishness and sterility of human behavior." (26)

Rice's youth was fraught with economic turmoil. At age 14, as a sophomore in high school, Rice's parents asked him to quit school and work to help support the family, and so he regretfully turned away from his education (Palmieri 5). He found work at a manufactured goods distribution firm, but after the panic of 1907, he was laid off and began working with his attorney-cousin as a file clerk. He didn't really want to work in law, only taking the job out of necessity (5). At age eighteen, shortly after obtaining his equivalency certification for a high school diploma, he was admitted to New York Law School. Rice, however, found law classes boring, and during them, to occupy his mind and pursue his early interest in the theater, he read plays because he liked their manner of expression and form (Palmieri 6).

From Horatio Alger to Dickens and Twain, his literary tastes matured (Palmieri 5). During these years, he became greatly influenced by George Bernard Shaw, finding his moral didacticism and his use of the stage as a platform to promote ideas and condemn social ills especially appealing. Rice personally felt it a duty of the dramatist to correct obvious moral flaws, and dedicated himself to improvement of society "through the depiction and excoriation of existing economic and social ills" (26).

After two years (1912) of study and work as a clerk to help support his family, he graduated with distinction and, in 1913, Rice was admitted to the New York State bar. However, only weeks later and following a pattern which would prove characteristic, Rice suddenly out of principle quit the legal profession, because he felt that the practice of law was based in hypocrisy and, by its nature, compelled lawyers to make ideological and ultimately unethical compromises. But his years of association with the law were not completely wasted or forgotten, for his plays *On Trial*, *It Is the Law*, and *Counsellor-at-Law* are works concerned with legal themes. Rice's resignation, in the face of what many might have felt was certain economic disaster, also demonstrated his strong will and dedication to his personal vision. Though the break came as a shock to his family, it was a relief to Rice who had been writing plays in his spare time, and now he had an opportunity to pursue writing much more seriously (Durham 17).

As luck would have it, within months of his resignation from the law firm, Rice realized a windfall that few playwrights, writers, or actors ever experience. In August of 1914, just before his twenty-second birthday, his first professionally produced play, *On Trial*, skyrocketed to immediate success and earned him not only critical acclaim for its innovative

form and dramatic production technique, but also \$100,000 from its 350 performances (Vanden Heuven 1).

Rice's greatest contribution to the American theatrical community was his willingness, even eagerness to experiment, and his career as a dramatist was full of firsts. *On Trial* was heralded as the very first play that effectively introduced the "flashback" technique, Rice early on demonstrating his ability to manipulate form (Durham 20). His Pulitzer Prize winning *Street Scene* was the first urban drama, "a groundbreaking depiction of New York tenement life" (Vanden Heuven 43). Another first is Rice's inclusion of "a childbirth scene in full view of the audience" in *A New Life* (Palmieri 195). In *The Winner*, Rice uniquely cast a "Negro in a role in which the racial problem was not a factor" (195). In *Judgment Day*, Rice was the first American playwright to address Nazism, and he was the first to decry Nazism's presence in America in *American Landscape* (196). He was accused of being a communist, because of his apparent profession of with some of its beliefs in *Between Two Worlds* (Durham 102).

Often called a reformer, Rice's body of work offers a consistent theme: he liked to "dramatize the various threats that exist to the idea of personal freedom" (Vanden Heuven, 8). His long career and his versatility make any effort to label the playwright generally problematic. A list of his styles includes: melodrama, Expressionism, Naturalism, relatively violent propaganda plays, and one urban drama, *Street Scene* (Durham 139). Overall, his oeuvre demonstrates his mastery of form in all modes. Though critics often scathingly criticized his works, "few deny his well-nigh perfect technique, his deftness in construction" (Durham 17). This versatility beyond theme and style allowed him to stay current and innovative, granting him staying power.

But Rice was not often well received by critics. His personal life was tumultuous, being married three times and having five children in all. He openly admitted having many extramarital affairs (Rice 181-4), yet somehow his personal life never received the negative criticism that his work did. His staunch idealism made him a target and often he was simply too avant garde: "Paradoxically, when his plays were better, the critics misunderstood Rice's ideas and attacked him; when his ideas were understood and approved, they deplored his dramaturgy" (Durham 111). After a series of poorly received plays--*We, the People*, (1933), *Judgment Day*, (1934), and *Between Two Worlds*, (1934)--Rice, as abruptly as he had quit the legal profession, resigned from the American stage, at least for a time, after an impassioned speech at Columbia University that condemned the American theater for its crass commercialism and its corruption of American theatrical arts. In 1936 Rice also suddenly resigned as regional director of the Federal Theatre Project, a public program which he had been instrumental in organizing, when an article he wrote condemning Mussolini is politically censored (107). Rice felt infringement on artistic freedom to be unacceptable, and he was a tireless crusader freedom of speech and freedom of artistic expression his entire career. In his form of protest, he was not above sacrificing all to make his ideals publicly known.

Though most of his plays have faded into obscurity, *The Adding Machine* continues to be performed, and both it and *Street Scene* are widely anthologized. Though thought of as primarily a playwright, Rice also wrote novels, an autobiography, many editorials, as well as a mass of unpublished plays and other writings. A thorough biographical study of the playwright doesn't exist, there being only three books devoted solely to Rice and they barely address his private life at all. A recent renewal of scholarly interest in Rice's works is suggested by several doctoral dissertations written within the past decade.

On May 8, 1967, Rice died of pneumonia. Throughout his career, he demonstrated not only diehard staying power but also the ability to "navigate the commercialism of Broadway and yet maintain his artistic integrity" (Palmieri 197). Always a crusader, his work inspired negative criticism, but at least as much for its political content as for its artistic faults. But if Rice can legitimately be faulted for his tendency to political and social didacticism, he should be remembered for his tireless efforts toward innovation and experimentation and his striving for true, uncensored expression in the American Theater in the twentieth century.

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