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Anywhere But Home: The Life and Work of Barrie Stavis

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The American playwright Barrie Stavis is a paradox in his own country. “A prophet without honor” may exaggerate the case, but Yugoslavian critic Dragan Klai‘c does see Stavis as a subtle but important kind of prophet, whose work precedes European efforts to re-establish a theatre of commitment:

to separate values, moral principles, and simple human concerns from compromised ideological projects. Disappointment about European developments, the sense of danger caused by racism, fanatical politicians, and ecological nightmares, bring theater back as a field of argumentative, activist aesthetics. Nothing old-fashioned, romantic, 68ish in all that—only a sense of moral outrage and a feeling that theater and theater artists cannot remain silent. ("Friedrichswald" 110)

This sort of commitment is a rare commodity in the American theatre, but Stavis has spent a lifetime honing his commitment, his “argumentative, activist aesthetics.” As an American, he found himself without an audience and without much prospect of any. His work has been staged across the world but not
performed professionally in his own country since 1975.

Stavis' "dramas of forged character," written over the last fifty years, have been performed in Tokyo, St. Petersburg and Santiago, in Belgrade, Bristol, Berlin, Leipzig, Brno, Prague, Debrecen, Stockholm, Sudbury (Quebec), Ibaden, Manila, Buenos Aires and Caracas. Productions including Lamp at Midnight (1947), The Man Who Never Died (1954), Harpers Ferry (1960), and Coat of Many Colors (1968), the four plays composing Stavis' first tetralogy, are pending in Tbilisi, Nicosia, Moscow, and Istanbul.

Of a planned second tetralogy of plays about George Washington, Abraham Lincoln, Miguel Hidalgo, and Simon Bolivar, only the Washington play has been completed. The Raw Edge of Victory received its premiere in an amateur production in 1976.

Stavis' most recent play, The House of Shadows, performed at the Komissarzhevskaya Theatre in St. Petersburg in 1992 and slated for publication in Spain, where The Raw Edge of Victory was recently published (1991), is not a "drama of forged character" in the same way as the five previous plays. Instead, it examines the lives of persons trapped between private values and public causes, between inner fears and outer circumstance. Its heroine runs her determined course not with but against the tides of history.

What do these plays offer to audiences, particularly in Eastern Europe, that may be less apparent, less urgent, in the United States? Critics have suggested that it is the images of liberty, of the struggle to make fundamental changes in the government of peoples, to right massive wrongs, to strive for justice against all odds. Robert Weimann, a Shakespeare scholar from East Berlin, sees Stavis' Galileo as an early post-modern tragic hero, trapped in a circumstance in which he finds he has fomented chaos where he meant to create order, induced fragmentation where

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he hoped to make unity (127-143). The dark side of Stavis' heroes has become more prominent in his later work.

Dragan Klaić, working now in Amsterdam, has developed an interesting view of the theatre in Eastern Europe in the early 1990's, one into which the work of Stavis, as he sees it, fits very neatly. He notes that the theatre has been through severe oscillations since the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989. An "atmosphere of triumphalism" has been replaced with "a strong sense of alienation" from a new bureaucracy accountable to no one, a "re-emergence of chauvinism and xenophobia all over the continent, an avalanche of refugees and asylum seekers," and a massive loss of jobs ("Friedrichswald" 106). In these circumstances he sees the new sense of commitment arising in the theatre.

However, also under these circumstances—audiences and resources shrinking, old structures collapsing, and new ones "emerging in conditions of rampant mercantilism—" few new plays of merit appear. This, he says, is normal in times of rapid upheaval and change. What does emerge, he calls a Theatre of Anticipation. The productions of Shakespeare by Jovanović prefigure, he argues, the events at Sarajevo, and our feeling of "helplessness and non-involvement." And the plays of Witkiewicz, once labeled as the "ramblings of a maniac," are now seen as anticipations not only of "Auschwitz and the Gulag" but also of "our present malaise: carnivals of intellectual bankruptcy, charades of political power games." The plays "summarize the defeat of intellectual and artistic integrity under the onslaught of the market economy and populist demagoguery" (108). Eventually they will lead to a new sense of "power and purpose," to plays which "re-imagine the collective experience of past regimes," and take advantage of the "polemical drive and emblematic potential of the stage" (110).

Klaić argues that Stavis' Lamp at Midnight is
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a play which captures perfectly the anguish of the ordinary East European while the post-ideological dust is still settling, and which meets the criteria he will set for the Anticipatory Theatre two years hence.

Since the author [Stavis] invokes the future as a time frame in which Galileo's contradictions might be resolved and his anguish relieved, the conclusion of the play is charged with anticipatory emotion...More than 40 years after it was written and originally performed, this American play, that could have been perceived at that time as a reaction to the Moscow trials of the 1930's...or to the ongoing American anti-Communist hysteria of the McCarthy period, acquires different meaning in the world-wide circumstances shaped by...the sudden transition from the highly ideologized collectivist societies to those that prophesy a respect for the individual and his conscience. Barrie Stavis' play does not offer ground for facile unsubstantiated triumphalism. On the contrary...the burden on the new politics will be to overcome the apparatus of the old, particularly in the treatment of scientific innovation and in respect of human rights. (“Midnight” 153)

Indeed, Klaić sees Galileo as a kind of trailblazer, whose response to oppression and crisis under difficult circumstances, trapped between the church and his scientific work, serves as a powerful, transcendent example.

As spectators bring their fresh experience of individual and collective life under the dominance of the demised ideologies, Lamp at Midnight grows in complexity; it transcends its historical genre and the specifics of Galileo Galilei and his martyrdom. Galileo is an extraordinary scientist, but ordinary citizens can identify with his anxieties, his quest to belong to some meaningful system of beliefs while also maintaining his personal scientific views. That even he had to succumb and be humiliated is a soothing example to those ordinary citizens who were themselves intimidated, pressured, forced to recant their views, or
to collaborate and go on mimicking their loyalty to long ago compromised ideologies, or even worse, who had to attempt to reconcile a belief in the value of an ideology with their own personal contradictory experiences. Because he did not become an activist, a dissident, an émigré, Galileo is especially akin and relevant to the ordinary masses of contemporary citizens who could not accept any of these options and by not accepting them suffered a secular kind of fall from grace. (152-3)²

Thus Stavis is seen by Klaić as a prophetic poet for a popular theatre, but one that is only beginning to be realized in Eastern Europe.

Who is Barrie Stavis, and how did America develop a writer whose sensibilities seem so welcome in Europe? Now 88 years old, Stavis has had a long career, and not without its distinctly American moments. For instance, Stavis' Lamp at Midnight opened in December of 1947, two weeks after Charles Laughton's production of Brecht's Galileo, and got much the better of the comparative notices in the New York press. This was particularly notable since The ANTA Experimental Theatre had bespoken the Stavis play, then dropped it in favor of the Laughton/Brecht production, causing much public controversy (Porter). New Stages then took up the Stavis play, and did its best to play up the contrast between the two plays.³ In The Crown Guide to the World's Great Plays from Ancient Greece to Modern Times—which includes Lamp at Midnight and The Man Who Never Died, editor Joseph Shipley quotes at length from the English critic Milton Shulman and others comparing Brecht unfavorably with Stavis. Shipley concludes, "To use a figure familiar to Brecht's admirers, one may say that the playwright's [Brecht's] vogue has gone up like a rocket; one may expect it to fall like the stick. There is more illuminating substance in the work of Barrie Stavis" (742).
In 1966, George Schaefer produced *Lamp at Midnight*, starring Melvyn Douglas, on television for the Hallmark Hall of Fame. In the mid-sixties, Tyrone Guthrie took up Stavis’ work. Arthur Ballet, writing the essay on Stavis in *Contemporary Dramatists*, points out that to “non-Americans particularly, as Tyrone Guthrie indicated, Stavis represents the clearest and ‘most American’ voice of the time. As perhaps is still true with O’Neill, Stavis seems most American to those who are least American, and he seems most ‘universal’ to his American audiences” (506). Guthrie staged *Harpers Ferry* at the Guthrie Theatre (The Minnesota Theatre Company) in 1967 and then staged a tour of *Lamp at Midnight* in 1969, starring Morris Carnovsky. Guthrie had plans to bring Stavis’ other works into production, but this enterprise was terminated with his untimely death in 1971.

In October of 1960, Jason Robards Jr., who was attracted to Stavis’ work, heard he was working on a play about John Brown called *Banners of Steel* (later to be *Harpers Ferry*). Robards organized a reading at Stavis’ apartment in New York which started near midnight after the evening theatre performances. Present were Christopher Plummer, Lauren Bacall, Lee Richardson, George Grizzard, Donald Harron, Frederick O’Neal, Larry Gates, and eight others, what Stavis called “simply a wonderful cast.” Stavis taped the reading and used it to revise the play on a subsequent working trip to Europe (Funke).

Stavis knew fairly soon after his success in 1947 that the American scene was going to be a hard one for him. After *The Man Who Never Died* was published in 1954, Stavis had sent about one hundred books out to his own contacts, and to persons others suggested to him all over the world. There was a marvelous response—translations, publications, and productions, from the Philippines, Japan and China to Argentina, Sweden, Germany, and Russia. Stavis suddenly be-
came well-known. But he could not go to Europe to enjoy and enhance this success because sometime in the anti-communist hysteria of the early fifties his passport had been revoked. It was eventually reissued, and in 1956 he left for an extended trip to Europe. His immediate purpose was to work with the production of *Lamp at Midnight* at the Bristol Old Vic (originally slated to be directed by Tyrone Guthrie, but when he fell ill, by John Moody, starring John O'Connor as Galileo and Peter O'Toole as the Pope). When this was over, he stayed for more than six months, visiting six countries in Western Europe, making numerous contacts, distributing scripts, and staking out prospects for productions and publications everywhere he went.

While there he also heard of more productions or publications, mostly of *The Man Who Never Died*, in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union (including radio and television), but determined he would not venture into the Soviet Union until he was invited by the Writers Union. This finally happened in 1978. In 1957 an extraordinarily successful production of *The Man Who Never Died* was staged in Leipzig and ran for three years. Stavis, who was very poor when he set out on his six-month journey to Europe in 1956 (at the age of 50), was even poorer on his return. He could not make another trip in 1957, and never saw the production.⁴

Bertolt Brecht responded to the publication of *The Man Who Never Died* in the mid-fifties. Brecht wanted to do the play at the Berliner Ensemble and informed Stavis' translator. However, Stavis soon learned that what Brecht wanted was to do his own version of Stavis' script. Since Brecht and the Ensemble were at the height of their fame, he was seldom refused and apparently assumed Stavis would accept. His account of the refusal captures Stavis' energetic tone and total commitment to his work:
So I said under no circumstances would I allow this. I wanted very much for the play to be done, but it's my play. And if there are minor revisions, [let's] go ahead and do them, but it's my play, I'll be doing the revisions, and nobody gets any credit. And I was told by my translator [who negotiated for Stavis] that Brecht flew into a rage. Now you must understand that...the great big posters announcing the program for that coming year were already up...and it was already announced...And Brecht was enraged—"What do you mean, he doesn't want my work? I'm going to make this a great play!" And I said, "My play stands." So he said "Fine," and he withdrew the play. A big tragedy for me, but on the other hand I had no intention of it being Joe Hill, The Man Who Never Died by Bertolt Brecht, from the play by Barrie Stavis, or adapted from or with thanks to, or with notes from [Barrie Stavis]... (Interview 98. See note 4.)

Brecht then proceeded, Stavis says, to "besmirch" him in theatrical circles in Berlin. Interestingly, John Fuegi's recent book, Brecht & Company, depicts Brecht as an inveterate thief of other people's work, to whom he seldom or never gave the honest amount of credit. If Fuegi's picture is correct, Stavis made a wise decision. However, it is hard to imagine Stavis surrendering any measure of control over his text to anyone.

Ernst Busch, a very important actor in Berlin, was to have had the leading role in Brecht's production. It turns out that Stavis had met Busch previously, in a hospital in Spain in 1938, and Busch subsequently told Stavis how upset he was not to be able to do the part. Stavis now grieved doubly that not only had he missed having a Berliner Ensemble production, but also having Busch in the leading role. To this day, none of Stavis' plays have had a production in Berlin, though an opera adapted from of The Man Who Never Died, with music by Alan Bush and libretto by Stavis, was
staged at the Deutsche Staatsoper in 1970.

Meanwhile, after the Leipzig production began its run in 1957, *The Man Who Never Died* was produced in New York in 1958 at the Jan Hus Theatre. Not forgetting the 1966 television production of *Lamp at Midnight* for the Hallmark Hall of Fame, this was Stavis' last professional production on a stage in his native city.

For both emotional and historical reasons Stavis' plays are appealing to audiences in different parts of the world, particularly in Eastern Europe. Stavis attributes their success to the seriousness and importance of the theatre culture in Europe, and the long tradition of theatre-going which has crossed all class lines, and which was encouraged in social groups, unions and workplaces, and made possible by very low ticket prices. Also, he often emphasizes the way the plays work on the stage, the technical aspects of the plays, which make them an exciting theatrical experience. Stavis believes very strongly that the movement of the play is propelled on stage by its technical structure, and that one production after another in different parts of the world shows that his structures speak a universal theatrical language. Stavis has developed these structures precisely and has used them consciously for many years. He has recently completed two articles on technique which will soon be ready for publication. This brief exposition is derived from preliminary drafts of those articles.

In a previous interview, Stavis revealed that he searched deliberately for common elements among famous plays that had managed to endure (Goldstein 86-87). He first managed to get a glimpse of some unifying principles when he was studying *Oedipus Rex, King Lear, and Macbeth*. His technical structures hinge on three key ideas: stake, catalyst, and objective versus subjective character. The stake is that which is the object of the dramatic conflict. In *Lamp at Mid-
night the stake is first the telescope and then the book. Through these physical objects, the stake enlarges to the truth about the physical world and the choice to seek, and then teaches this truth in the face of external power and internal conflict. In \textit{The Man Who Never Died} the stake is Joe Hill himself and who will have power over his life. Through this, the stake enlarges to the truth about Joe Hill's guilt or innocence, and through that to the struggle for the rights of the working people. In \textit{Harpers Ferry} the stake is the arsenal at Harpers Ferry, and through that, the fate of slavery. In \textit{Coat of Many Colors} the stake is the water of the Nile and who will control it. Through that, it enlarges to the question of who will control Egypt, and through that to the possibility of improving the lot of humans by liberating them from hardship. In \textit{The House of Shadows} the stake is Josephine's house, her refuge against the tide of history. Through that we see what it means when a lost soul can find himself by leaving the comfort of the refuge, by choosing commitment to that tide, facing the challenges of his new life. Finally, in \textit{The Raw Edge of Victory}, the stake is the Army, and through that the saving and sustenance of a new civil republic.

The catalyst is that event which changes a stasis, a balance between opposing forces, into open conflict between the protagonist and the antagonist. The two sides are at first in an uneasy equilibrium. The catalyst gives one an advantage, upsetting the equilibrium, and turning the stasis into action. When Galileo inserts the lens into his telescope, what is visible through it is no longer simply an argument, but threatens to overturn an entire system of thought. When John Brown attacks the arsenal at Harpers Ferry, the continuance of slavery is no longer simply a controversy. A titanic battle has been launched to abolish it. When Joe Hill gets on his soapbox and sings his first song, the force of organization this engenders means
that nothing will be the same again between the owners and the workers.

The third element in Stavis’ stagecraft distinguishes between the subjective and objective character; it addresses the difference between a character who asks the ethical question, “Which way of life shall I choose?” and one who makes the ethical statement, “I know the way of life I must follow.” A character can begin the play in the objective position, “forged,” as Stavis calls it, knowing what he or she must do, having made the relevant choices, and prepared to take the consequences. Galileo, Joe Hill, John Brown, Joseph of Egypt, George Washington, and Josephine Rivot are all “forged.” They may win or lose, but they stay forged. In Stavis’ plays, forged characters do not lapse back into subjective conflict. They know what they must do in the world, and they persist at it until the end.

Characters in subjective conflict, by contrast, don’t know what they should do. These characters may change, and sometimes do, as with Pedro in The House of Shadows who becomes forged by the end of the play. He finds the courage to leave Josephine and the stifling shelter of her protective nest, to join the civil war which awaits him in Spain. Other examples Stavis cites (see note 6) of characters in subjective conflict who become forged during the action (usually at the end) of the play include Proctor in Miller’s The Crucible and Nora in Ibsen’s A Doll’s House.

In all of Stavis’ plays except The House of Shadows, the forged hero embarks on a determined action which will help shape the course of history, help stake out the guideposts for the justice, fairness, and equality which mark the sacred ground Stavis stands on. Galileo, in the face of the constraints imposed by the church, in the face of the loss of his freedom to advance his views and his method for finding the truth, still asserts that truth. Joe Hill writes the songs that will condemn his executioners and advance the move-
ment he stood for. John Brown's courtroom eloquence against slavery is a clarion call to the world, and Joseph's ideas for using power to advance the good of the people, so seriously misapplied by him, continue to live on, waiting for those who will make an opportunity to correct his errors. And finally, Washington's huge effort to save the republic from the army, in all the uncertainty of its outcome, lives on after him in the struggle which the citizens of his country must continue to wage.

In *The House of Shadows*, Josephine Rivet's clarity and force are focused on establishing and maintaining an island of graciousness and quiet repose, a refuge in an unquiet and violent world. She tries to hold back Pedro and Gabrielle, to keep them from understanding that they must face the world, to prevent them from going out and making their way in it. She does not succeed, and as they leave her, her house both literally and figuratively crumbles around her. She opposes the tide of history, and in the end, she is shaken but determined, still forged, ready to rebuild and try again exactly as she has done before. The collision between Pedro and Josephine, between a "subjective" and "objective" character, became fascinating to Stavis during his work on *The House of Shadows*. In his present play, he continues to explore the problems of subjective vs. objective characters. This play, like *The House of Shadows* is not part of the second tetralogy (Goldstein 85-87).

Stavis is also concerned with the unpredictability of the characters and the action in his plays. While he desires that the major "arc" of the character's life and action be clear and consistent, he wants the details of the scenes and the specific conduct of his characters to be unpredictable, surprising, thus insuring interest, even fascination, for the audience. He also wants to portray the full complexity of the action, and of the issues implicated by the action, by dramatizing within
both the protagonist’s and antagonist’s camp the conflict and variety which is arrayed on either side.

It is not hard to see that since most contemporary drama in America portrays people trying to decide what to do, to “find themselves,” rather than strong people determined to find the way to do what they already know they must, Stavis’ plays run adamantly against the grain (Larner 1981). Whether the theatre is changing for the better in this respect is hard to say. Stavis has written, “I believe with Chekhov that ‘Every playwright is responsible not only for what man is, but for what man can be.’ With Aristophanes, I seek to banish the ‘little man and woman affair’ from the stage and to replace it with plays which explore ideas with such force and clarity as to raise them to the level of passion” (Stavis 1973). Stavis is intrigued by the combination of theatrical imagination, political interest, and moral cogency in Tony Kushner’s Angels in America, parts I and II. Whatever the problems and weaknesses of their plays, their huge public appeal has been such a new and startling phenomenon, that it has given Stavis renewed hope that his outside-the-mainstream work may yet find a home in America.

While Stavis continues to write (he is working on two new plays), and to push for the production and publication of his work, we might think of him as the eternal optimist willing to press on through much disappointment and diluted success. In fact, the plays themselves point to a kind of optimism in tragedy. Galileo is willing to yield to save his Holy Mother Church, but in doing so he finds the transcendent strength of his search for scientific understanding. Joe Hill is convicted and is executed, but in standing his trial, his message to the working man sings out all the louder, clearer, and farther. John Brown dies in what is surely a hopeless cause, but his larger objective, the abolition of slavery, is accelerated by his action.

However, with Coat of Many Colors a darker
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tone begins to emerge. Joseph is murdered at the end of *Coat of Many Colors*, caught in the web of his own mistakes, his own error in failing to include the people in his plans for them. His search for a way to empower the people by controlling both nature and the politics that oppress them is utterly destroyed and reburied in the desert for centuries. Thus, though the tone of the play is often exuberant, like Joseph himself, full of humor and playfulness, it is all the darker for the ironic turn at the end. Not only is Joseph lost, but all his efforts are reversed.

Near the end of *The Raw Edge of Victory*, George Washington wins. For the time being, the military will not control the civil. But a terrible price has been paid, and the survival of the republic, beset with military and predatory proto-capitalist wolves, is utterly uncertain. We recognize that even with the passage of 200 years, our ability to prevent the military from controlling the civil has been, and is, highly variable and uncertain. In an increasingly violent world, Washington’s dilemma with the protestors in his army no longer seems so extraordinary or especially horrifying. When the Fugs satirically chanted “Kill for Peace” in the 60’s, we hardly anticipated how violent the world, and our own society, might become, and how often we might be in the position of considering that kind of action legitimate.

And finally, in *The House of Shadows*, while Pedro has won, it is terribly ironic that we know the battle he must join will be lost, as the loyalists are overwhelmed by Franco’s fascists and their Nazi backers. And it is just as bitter in the end that Josephine, hater of the world’s violence and ugliness, with her counter-world crumbling around her, appears to be starting again, from scratch, unchanged. That is, even losses this severe will not change her course. But she begins again with a heavier charge of pain and the dead certainty of more loss to come.
Thus Stavis' earlier plays show reasons to take heart, to make our choices, to make our way in a conflicted, flawed, dangerous, deadly and destructive world. They show us the values Stavis believes are worth struggling for—the justice, the equality, the "fair shake" that he so often found missing while he fought his own struggle out of his family, fought to know the truth about the ways power is wielded in the world, and finally forged his own course as a playwright during World War II.

But Coat of Many Colors, The Raw Edge of Victory, and The House of Shadows throw the heroic outcomes in doubt. They question the very survival of our values, let alone the ultimate victory of those values, which Stavis once saw as inevitable. "If you read the successive drafts of The House of Shadows," he says, "you will see the texture of the play get darker, draft after draft" (Interview 138). Stavis also traces his awareness of this darkness overwhelming him to the time when he was writing the execution scene in what would become The Raw Edge of Victory, so obsessed by his work and by the horror of what he discovered in his own scene, that the world seemed to recede from him.

In the eighties and nineties the darkness has taken a still more marked turn. Stavis clings to his basic belief that peace, justice and fairness can be achieved, but, he says, the chaos and violence of recent years, the plagues of AIDS and TB, the horrible hatred and genocide in the Balkans, returning as if only in suspended animation for seventy years, the mass starvation and tribal exterminations in Africa, the murderous regimes in South America, the drugs, violence, and hunger in America—all this has left him with a sense of doom, an aura of darkness, a horror that will not go away (135). He had been heartened by the Nuremburg declarations regarding the responsibilities of individual soldiers. He had thought that the lessons of World
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War II had been learned. By the sixties, in the wake of Vietnam, he had thought that perhaps we had entered an era of "greater tolerance, greater compassion, greater understanding." (135) But somehow, that simply "does not seem to happen." We do not improve. The mass assassinations, the genocide in Central America, Rwanda, and Bosnia, the starvation and oppression in China—the chain of horrors seems never-ending. It is as if the screaming horror Stavis witnessed as a child, the sight of a Negro man sitting in a fair booth, being hit on the head by the gamesters throwing baseballs, has been inflated to a hideous, escalating trauma of nightmarish proportions.

But his response has not been to write plays in which he sees the world as overwhelmed by evil. On the contrary, he seems to find more and more humor as he goes, lacing his realistic view of an aberrated world with the irony that arises from the darkness, the near hopelessness he finds around him. The play he is presently working on (whose subject he does not wish to divulge), has, he says, a witty and playful tone amidst its typically epic seriousness. It contains, he says, "a marvelous and witty villain." Its hero, like Washington, undergoes a terrible battering while achieving an enormous victory against huge odds. The tone, though dark, will still have his distinctive note of gritty optimism: "The Lincoln play will not be tragedy. The Hidalgo play will not be tragedy. My present play is not a tragedy. But, they are all going to have a darker texture then I thought would have been possible fifteen, even ten years ago. Much darker" (138).

As I write, Neil Simon’s London Suite, a play a local reviewer described in the Sunday newspaper as having "some of the funniest, most incongruous moments in theatredom"...which provoke "laughter that leaves you gasping for breath and half-wishing he'd stop" (Rosen), is opening at the Seattle Repertory Theatre, just ninety miles down the interstate. In the
same newspaper Simon states in an interview that he is fed up with Broadway and will not be opening his plays there in the future (Klass). It is too expensive and too stressful, Simon says. If this is the case for Simon, it is hardly surprising that Stavis’ plays get no hearing there. It is more troubling that they do not get produced in America’s regional theatres. Since Stavis’ success at the Guthrie theatre in the late sixties (due, of course, to the interest taken in his work by the great Irish director, Tyrone Guthrie), no one has moved to produce his work. The reasons are many and varied. The first is cost. *The House of Shadows*, the smallest of Stavis’ plays, has a single box set and 17 characters. *Lamp at Midnight* (which sets the model for the others) does not require an elaborate set. It needs an open, flexible stage with spaces controlled by lights. In Tyrone Guthrie’s doubling scheme, it can be done by 16 actors (the way Stavis likes it) playing 33 roles, but the props, furniture and costumes can be formidable. *The Raw Edge of Victory*, still waiting for its first professional production, has a huge cast (in addition to officers, both French and American, officials, members of the French court and diplomats, there must be a semblance of an army, enough soldiers to stage a close-order drill at the end of the first act), and heavy requirements for uniforms and other period costumes and props.

But there are other reasons. Some simply love the plays (or say they do) but believe their audience will not. One consulting editor of a prominent theatre magazine, writing to Stavis in 1993, found the play to be vivid and believable, but too big both for most theatres and for his magazine. He found the subject of the play too remote for most producers, but at the same time lamented that this country’s theatre could not support work with this scope and historical resonance—work, he contends, we sorely need.

Thus cost is the ultimate villain, as that editor
sees it, preventing the American theatre from fulfilling some of its most vital needs. Another editor writing in 1992, explained to Stavis that he could not publish his plays because the profits from the sale of books must help support a magazine, and therefore only big name plays could be published. Without a major American production to support it, a publication of a play, he contended, could not succeed. So it is a vicious circle: no production, no fame, no publication, no recognition, which leads to no production, etc. All this, of course, discounts the fact that most major regional theatres produce one or more new plays, some by unknown authors, every year.

A play development associate for a regional theatre, also writing in 1992, was effusive in his admiration for *Harpers Ferry* and *Lamp at Midnight*, but said times were tight and the money for more large-scale productions was not available.

This message has become a litany echoing from the past. Through the politeness of a generation of letters from American theatres, it is not easy to tell if the admiration for the plays expressed is used to help soften the rejection, or whether it is genuine in the face of the fact that the plays will be too expensive, and, therefore, too risky, to produce. In 1972, in the wake of Stavis' considerable success at the Guthrie Theatre, he sent his work to the eminent director of another major regional theatre. This director found *Harpers Ferry* full of feeling, of unbearable pain and irony, but was not enamored of its form, which she found too realistic for its subject and too abstract for the stage, more suited to an oratorio or a cantata. She would have produced the play, even considering its size, if she felt she had to, but it did not interest her enough. She concluded by saying that she assumed the work would get many productions and deserved to be heard. Thus she implied that while cost would not hold her back if she was determined, in this case it had.
In a number of letters, Stavis continued promoting his work, sending her articles that had been written about his work, reviews and news of productions, enthusiastic audiences, and publications. But she simply did not like the plays enough. In 1980, after trying more forceful tactics, Stavis urged upon her the responsibility the American theatre bears to produce work of the magnitude and internationally acknowledged merit of his plays, she politely but finally rejected the plays and thanked him once again for submitting his work. Yet Stavis recovered his usual avuncular composure, and continued to write warmly to her, and to give her lots of news, even into the nineties. And after the retirement of this director, he started writing to her replacement, again supplying quantities of information. The new director responded without the large intellect and evident care for the uniqueness of Stavis' work which was shown by his predecessor. He simply avered that *Harpers Ferry* was a good read and a fine play, but did not meet his theatre's needs at the present time.

Undeterred, as always, Stavis wrote at the same time to the artistic director of yet another major regional theatre. This director showed some sensitivity, but the answer was still no. He looked at three plays (*Harpers Ferry, Lamp at Midnight*, and *The Man Who Never Died*) and in September of 1992 his response was another version of an old story. He expressed his admiration for Stavis' imagination and passionate liberalism, while noting that his theatre had no way to revive epic pieces of such large soul, large mind, and large cast.

And so it goes. Stavis continues his writing, his traveling, and his voluminous correspondence. He firmly believes that even *The Raw Edge of Victory*, with its huge theatrical demands, will finally get its premiere professional production. According to Stavis, Robert Sturua, at last contact, was determined
to find an opportunity to resume work on his production at the Rustaveli Theatre in Tbilisi, Georgia. And Stavis feels that when that happens, productions in Russia and America will not be far behind. With theatres in the US newly strapped for funds, and European theatre budgets somewhere between reduced and devastated, the wait for a production may go on for some time—a wait which Stavis, at age 88, views with jaundiced impatience.

At the same time, new opportunities to stage a play about an American idol, even one without a sentimental ending, may soon arise. This is particularly possible on television, where recent documentaries on events in American history, like Ken Burns’ *The Civil War*, have been unexpectedly popular, and where new technology will vastly increase the demand for programming on large numbers of new channels. And in the world of the movies, the news magazines have gossiped recently (October 1994) about momentum gathering for a film on Thomas Jefferson.

Barrie Stavis is astonishingly vigorous. He works long hours, walks briskly down the street, and climbs stairs, when he wants to show off, two or three at a time. His thinking is rapid and sharp, and his memory keen. So is his persistence. While he continues to push hard for the acceptance of his work on every front, in many countries, the study of his work is also advancing. Beginning in the fifties, Stavis’ work began to be studied in college courses, and in the eighties and nineties it finally began to receive some concentrated scholarly attention. The all-Stavis issue of *Religion and Theatre* (August 1981), the 1991 issue of *Studies in American Drama, 1945-Present* (Vol. 6, No. 1), the Fall-Winter, 1991 all-Stavis issue of *Cardozo Studies in Law and Literature*, and this issue of *American Drama* are notable examples. If this is not mere academic interest (studying the work because it is odd, and because it is there), it may suggest that the experience
of Stavis' work is becoming resonant again in America, and the infection may spread from the scholarly journals to the regional stages.

Whether we approach the prospect of his work being performed in America with the optimism of his earlier years or the darkness of his later thoughts, we can at least hope that American stages, or American screens, will give us the opportunity to see what a generation of new theatregoers in Europe has experienced before we have—vital new productions of the Stavis repertory, staged by first-rate companies, ploughing into their efforts all the excitement and anguish of these difficult and uncertain times.

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NOTES

2. This discussion is taken up by Lamer and others in Cardozo Studies in Law and Literature, 2.2 (Fall-Winter 1990). See works cited. I owe a debt to the editor, Richard H. Weisberg, and to the work of others published in this all-Stavis issue. It contains a new revision of Lamp at Midnight and devotes the rest of its 300-plus pages to an international outpouring of articles about Stavis' work.
4. This account, together with all of what follows in the life of Barrie Stavis, is drawn from interviews with him in New York, March 21-25, 1994. An abridged version of those interviews accompanies this article. All citations making reference to page numbers in the
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interview are to the original transcript and not to the abridgement.
5. Erika Munk ("When the Shark Bites") among others, has found Fuegi's work contradictory, and full of "cold war attitudinizing" (501).
6. The characterization of subjective and objective character comes from a draft of Stavis' unpublished article on this subject, received by this author just after it was completed in October, 1994.

Works Cited

THE LIFE AND WORK OF BARRIE STAVIS


Weimann, Robert. “Authority and the Discourse of Modernity in Lamp at Midnight.” Cardozo Studies in Law and Literature 2.2 (1990), 127-44.