

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- COME BACK, LITTLE SHEBA – 1950
PICNIC – 1953
BUS STOP – 1955
"Glory in the Flower," in 24 FAVORITE ONE-ACT PLAYS – 1958
THE DARK AT THE TOP OF THE STAIRS – 1958
4 PLAYS BY WILLIAM INGE (includes the four Broadway hits above) – 1958
LOSS OF ROSES – 1960
SPLENDOR IN THE GRASS – 1961
SUMMER BRAVE AND ELEVEN SHORT PLAYS ("Summer Brave" is a reworking of "Picnic") – 1962
NATURAL AFFECTION – 1963
WHERE'S DADDY – 1966
TWO SHORT PLAYS: THE CALL; A MURDER – 1968
"The Disposal," in BEST SHORT PLAYS OF THE WORLD THEATER, 1958–1967–1968
GOOD LUCK, MISS WYCKOFF – 1970
MY SON IS A SPLENDID DRIVER – 1971

WILLIAM INGE • EDYTHE SQUIER DRAPER • HELEN RHODA HOOPES
Six Kansas Writers – In Place
JOSEPH STANLEY PENNELL • PAUL T. WEILMAN • JULIA FERGUSON SIEBEL
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William Motter Inge

**William Inge Theater
Independence Community College**

Tuesday, February 26, 1980

7:30 p.m.

But he was an artist, and I believe that in the future people will read or see Inge plays and know the truth, the absolute truth, about mid-Americans in the mid-twentieth century. Yes, I believe that.

*—Robert Alan Aurthur
in ESQUIRE, Nov. 1973*

I've always been glad that I grew up in Independence, because I feel it gave me a knowledge of people and a love of people. I've often wondered how people raised in our great cities ever develop any knowledge of humankind. People who grow up in small towns get to know each other so much more closely than they do in cities. Independence I'll always remember as a beautiful little town with enormous shady trees and lots of fine spacious homes. I'll always remember the celebrations of Halloween and the city park there with its winding drive around the sad old Verdigris River. And the old wives' tale that the Indians had left a curse on the river, that it would take one life a year in vengeance on the white man for having usurped the land. I always remember the fine tennis courts and the swimming pool and the ball park where night games first were played anywhere in the nation. Independence lies in the very heart of our country, and so maybe its people have more heart in human affairs. Big people come out of small towns.

-- William Inge, for the Independence Centennial, 1970

William Motter Inge spoke for the big people who come from the small towns. His literary agent, Audrey Wood, wrote that "his was the first writing from anyone coming from (the Midwest) that captured the quality and speech patterns of that area." Inge himself wrote:

It is easier for me to write about Mid-westerners because people out here talk so freely—talk about themselves so easily. Dialogue comes about so easily when you're dealing with these people.

Like most writers, Inge had a feel for and a definite relationship with the place he grew up:

(The Midwest) is where my roots happen to be
It's as though I were giving something of the life I know.

We give ourselves in our writing, you know. My roots here are part of me. I feel I can write more individually by holding to this background.

William Inge gave a great deal of the life he knew, and his plays though they spoke to a national audience, were greatly influenced by his individual life. Inge had a strength that is the paradox of writing: the more personal and specific the writer gets, the more apt the writer is to strike deep into the universal experience of human beings.

When Inge writes of alcoholism in *COME BACK, LITTLE SHEBA*, he is tackling a personal problem. When the characters in that play face their lives and learn that they must try to leave the past behind, they are learning a lesson that Inge himself had to learn. Yet the action is happening for all of us, and to all of us.

When Inge writes in *PICNIC* of the frustrations of being ambitious and lonely in the small town, and the difficulty there is in loving, he is again tapping his own problems. These are things that he understood well. Yet he transfers them to simpler people and simpler situations. At the end of the play young Madge turns to her mother and asks, "Oh, Mom, what can you do with the love you feel? Where is there you can take it?" Thus she speaks poignantly for everyone, not just herself, or Inge.

THE DARK AT THE TOP OF THE STAIRS confronts the difficulty of growing up, but also of growing older. It is the most autobiographical of all of Inge's plays, and the one closest to his own heart. It is also one of his most hopeful, in that the characters learn to give something of themselves to each other, to communicate fears as well as strengths. They learn to dissolve, through love and concern, the dark which is the future.

These plays—along with *BUS STOP*, in which people learn that love involves more giving than taking—represent Inge's best work. They are also his most personal. His ability, as Inge himself said, to give "something of the life I know," to "write more individually by holding to this background," was Inge's strength all through the 1950s.

Since Inge kept his writing close to home—to himself and southeast Kansas—his work is representative, too, of all of Kansas literature. In the 19th century, Kansas literature

quite literally took as its theme the state motto: *To the stars through difficulties*. The difficulties were simple and elemental: the weather, learning to live with a harsh land, becoming materially successful without losing the soul. In the 20th century, after the land was settled and material survival was not so pressing, the concerns of Kansans in literature changed. The theme is the same, but the difficulties are different. Instead of fighting a harsh land, characters are fighting the harsh environment of a culturally repressive small town. Instead of worrying about material success, characters are worried about spiritual success, their ability to love and to grow into their true selves. Instead of adjusting to the land, characters are adjusting to a fast paced world full of new inventions. Rubin Flood, the father in *THE DARK*, expresses his bewilderment to his wife:

Times are changin', Cora, and I dunno where they're goin'. When I was a boy, there wasn't much more to this town than a post office. I on'y had six years a schoolin' cause that's all the Old Man thought I'd ever need. Now look at things. School buildin's, churches, fine stores; movie theatres, a country club. Men becomin' millionaires overnight, drivin' down the street in big limousines, goin' out to the country club and gettin' drunk, acting like they was the lords of creation, I dunno what to think now, Cora. I'm a stranger in the very land I was born in.

Because of his widespread popularity, Inge defined Kansas for 20th century Americans. They saw in his plays the kind of person Inge describes in his novel, *GOOD LUCK, MISS WYCKOFF*:

She was a Midwesterner, and the Midwest was the only part of the country she could ever feel herself a part of. She loved Midwestern people with all their faults, their isolationism, their flat speech, their indifference to social and political conflicts. With all these faults, there was a sweetness she found in most of the people, and a quick friendliness, more sincere than the genteel cordiality of the South, more warm and outgoing than the sociability of New Englanders.

This was the Midwest and the Kansas and the part of himself about which he wrote most successfully. After 1957, with the exception of his film script, *SPLENDOUR IN THE GRASS*, things began to change. Inge had made himself and all that was dearest to him the real subject of his plays. He had made himself publicly vulnerable — his alcoholism, his difficulty in loving, his fears of the future, the torments of his past. He had been a great success. But in 1958, Inge was devastated by a critical article which appeared in *HARPER'S*. In it, Robert Brustein viciously attacked Inge's four Broadway successes. Inge's friend, playwright William Gibson, points out how this criticism affected Inge's career:

It marked a turn in taste — whether critical, public, or Bill's own; he never had another hit. His work did change, over the next three flops the real and simple folk of his Midwest settings turned into big-city neurotics, modern, super sexy, violent — thin fantasies. . . . Still writing plays, he couldn't get them produced now, they went begging; one of our top three playwrights had simply been liquidated.

Late in his life, Inge returned again to southeast Kansas settings for his two novels. They are fine books, which explore again the themes in his first plays.

Historian J. Frank Dobie wrote that though "great literature transcends its native land . . . none . . . ignores its own soil." Inge's work was best when it reflected that maxim, and is some of the finest ever written by a Kansan.

CHRONOLOGY

- Monteal student*
- 1913—William Motter Inge, son of Luther Clay Inge and Maude Sarah Gibson Inge is born, May 3.
 - 1930—Inge is graduated from Independence High School
 - 1930-35—Inge attends Kansas University, then Independence Community College, then KU again, with some time out for acting in a traveling tent show.
 - 1935—Inge graduates from the University of Kansas with a B.A. in Speech and Drama.
 - 1936—Inge attends, on scholarship, the George Peabody Teacher's College in Nashville, Tennessee, working toward a master's degree.
 - 1937—Extremely confused about his future, Inge drops out of Peabody two weeks before completion of his degree and returns to Kansas, first working on a highway gang, then as a newscaster on Station KFH, Wichita.
 - 1937—By fall, Inge has a job teaching high school English and drama at Columbus.
 - 1938—Inge returns to Peabody and completes his M.A.
 - 1938-43—Inge teaches at Stephens College, Columbia, Missouri.
 - 1943-46—Inge takes a job as drama and music critic for the ST. LOUIS STAR-TIMES.
 - 1946—Inge takes a teaching post at Washington College, St. Louis, Missouri.
 - 1947—After a 1945 meeting with Tennessee Williams inspired him to shape some of his writing into play form, Inge writes his first full-length play, FARTHER OFF FROM HEAVEN, which is eventually produced by Margo Jones' repertory company in Dallas, Texas.
 - 1950—COME BACK, LITTLE SHEBA opens at the Booth Theater in New York to great critical acclaim.
 - 1953—PICNIC opens at the Music Box Theater in New York. This play later wins the Pulitzer Prize, the Drama Critic's Circle Award as the best play of the year, the Outer Circle Award, and the Theater Club Award, thus becoming the first play to win all four major awards. Inge sells the movie rights to PICNIC for \$350,000.
 - 1954—Inge's father, Luther Clay Inge, for 30 years a salesman for the Wheeler and Motter Drygoods Company, dies at age 80 in Independence.

- 1955—BUS STOP opens at the Music Box Theater and becomes Inge's third hit in a row. Inge receives the University of Kansas Alumni Distinguished Service Citation.
- 1957—THE DARK AT THE TOP OF THE STAIRS, a reworking of Inge's first play, FARTHER OFF FROM HEAVEN, opens at the Music Box Theater in New York. It is heralded as still another smash hit.
- 1958—Inge's mother, Maude Sarah Gibson Inge, dies at age 86 in Independence.
- 1959—A LOSS OF ROSES opens at the Eugene O'Neill Theater to very poor reviews. It closes in three weeks.
- 1960—Inge announces plans to teach at the University of Kansas. These plans, and all subsequent plans to return to his native state, fall through, even though in 1962 he purchases property in Lawrence.
- 1961—Inge's first screenplay, SPLENDOR IN THE GRASS, is made into a successful film.
- 1962—Inge wins the Academy Award for best screenplay with SPENDOUR IN THE GRASS. NATURAL AFFECTION opens in New York and has poor critical success.
- 1966—WHERE'S DADDY opens in New York and becomes his third straight theater failure.
- 1966-69—Inge is silent, living in "exile" and writing in Hollywood, with an occasional teaching stint at the University of California at Irvine and the Actors and Directors Laboratory.
- 1970—Inge publishes his first novel, GOOD LUCK, MISS WYCKOFF. Though it is reviewed favorably, the novel does not sell well.
- 1971—Inge published a second novel, MY SON IS A SPLENDID DRIVER. Its reception disappoints him.
- 1973—Inge commits suicide, June 10.
- 1974—The University of Kansas honors Inge's memory with a summer theater festival and a ceremony which renames the little theater in his honor.
- 1975—Independence Community College dedicates its William Inge Theater. During the ceremony, Helene Inge Connell, Inge's sister who lived with him his last two and a half years, announces the gift of Inge's 2,000-plus volume library to the college.