

**Review of *The Theatre of E. E. Cummings*,
Edited and with an introduction by George
Firmage with an afterword by Norman Fried-
man (New York: Liveright, 2013)**

Sarah Bay-Cheng

Experimental literature and art often follow one of two paths. In many instances, innovative works are derided in their original presentations only to be reclaimed and celebrated later, often after the writer or artist is dead or has stopped presenting new work. So it was for much of Gertrude Stein's life. Even after the success of *Four Saints in Three Acts* and her American lecture tour in 1934, her greatest recognition came in the decades after her death in 1946. For others, the reverse holds true. In the case of E. E. Cummings, for example, his work was often praised during his lifetime—only to have become increasingly marginal over time. Although his success was inconsistent (he had to self-publish at times), by the end of his life Cummings was something of a poetry celebrity, reading to a crowd of more than 7,000 at the Boston Arts Festival. After his death, however, attention to his writing declined. This is especially true for his drama, a fact which may be the result of the critical response at the time. His first and most ambitious play, *Him*, which premiered at the Provincetown Playhouse in 1928, was almost universally hated by the critics, even though it sold out its run. In spite (or perhaps because) of his enduring reputation as a poet, Cummings' innovative play remains a footnote in most histories of the Provincetown Players and is rarely discussed in modernist drama more broadly.

Cummings' drama enjoyed a bit of a resurgence in the context of the post-war drama, particularly amid discussions of Martin Esslin's "theatre of the absurd" in the 1950s and 1960s. Michael Benedikt's anthology *The American Experiment* (1967) included Cummings' *Santa Claus* (1946) alongside works as diverse as Wallace Stevens' poetic meditation "Three Travelers Watch a Sunrise" (1922) and Carolee Schneeman's radical text for her performance "Meat Joy" (1967). Just a year after Benedikt's anthology and Schneeman's performance, Cummings' drama was first published in a collection with an introduction by George Firmage as *Three Plays and a Ballet*. However, after that collection in 1968, the plays were largely out of print. (One exception was my own anthology, *Poets at Play*, edited with Barbara Cole in 2010. However, due to space constraints we were only able

to publish the third act of Cummings' *Him*.) For much of the latter half of the twentieth century, Cummings' plays were rarely, if ever, produced. After its premiere in 1928, *Him* was performed only a handful of times, usually on college campuses. To my knowledge, *Anthropos, or the Future of Art* (1930) has never been performed, and neither has the ballet *Tom* (1935), from Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, though David Diamond's music was performed at Carnegie Hall in 1985 and subsequently recorded (cf. Holland and Naxos). A Google search reveals that *Santa Claus* (1946) was performed in 1990 (at Harvard), 2010, 2013 (Playlab NY), and in 2014, but my quick search found no record of earlier performances of the play.

The publication of *The Theatre of E. E. Cummings* in a new, beautiful hardcover edition from Liveright Publishing is thus a welcome announcement for scholars and students of American drama in general and avant-garde drama in particular. The new edition features the full texts of *Him*, *Anthropos*, *Santa*, and *Tom*, printed with updated fonts that make the reading—especially in *Him*—much easier than in previous versions. In addition to reprinting the original introduction, this new edition adds an essay by Norman Friedman, excerpted and edited from his book, *E. E. Cummings: The Growth of a Writer* (1964). Well-known to most scholars of Cummings, Friedman's essay is a helpful addition to the collection, particularly for non-scholarly and student readers. His introduction to the major ideas in Cummings' work is clear, and he locates the plays in context without delving too deeply into the plays' sources and influences. The plays themselves are often densely referential, offering numerous allusions to literature, history, and popular culture. Friedman very usefully points to the most crucial notations within the text, situating the reader within the text, while also preserving a sense of discovery within the texts.

And there is much to discover. Both formally experimental and linguistically witty, Cummings' plays strike an effective balance between popular consumer culture and high literary forms. He may be best seen as one of what Charlie Chaplin called "the high lowbrows," effectively crossing what Andreas Huyssen much later referred to as the "great divide" of high and low art in modernist culture. *Him*, for instance, samples advertising of the period and mocks the pretensions of wealthy Americans using unspeakably bad French in Paris: says one American, Bill, to a French Headwaiter, "We we, kom voo voo lay" (94). At the same time, his dialogues of "Him" and "Me" confronting themselves in a mirror are occasions for both a brilliant

turn of the meta-theatrical (decades before Jean Genet would do similarly in *The Balcony* [1957]) and offer Cummings' most heartfelt dialogue: "It may take two people to make a really beautiful mistake" (108). That Cummings inserts "freaks" into the climactic romantic scenes of the play speaks to the wonderful weirdness of his drama. The reader will find similar surprises and juxtapositions in all the works here, particularly in *Anthropos* and *Santa Claus*. The former reminds one of David Ives' short plays, and the latter seems ideally suited for an avant-garde Christmas show. One hopes that this publication will make the plays more visible again, not only in print but perhaps on stages as well.

While the edition has much to recommend it, some of the secondary material might have been better updated. Friedman's essay is useful, but it dates to his book from 1964. There has been a range of compelling scholarship since the mid-1960s; and the lack of inclusion of more recent criticism makes the book and its plays feel more like a museum piece, unsuited to Cummings' radical vision and the relevance of Cummings' texts to contemporary theater and performances. I was similarly confused by the bibliography. Included (I presume it is Friedman's work) is a list of citations labeled "Secondary Works." Unfortunately, the most recent of these dates to 1994 and excludes some of the more interesting recent writing on Cummings drama, such as Thomas Fahy's *Staging Modern American Life: Popular Culture in the Experimental Theatre of Millay, Cummings, and Dos Passos* (2011). There also appear to be omissions in the list of performances. For instance, Friedman states that "No direct evidence of [*Santa Claus*] has come my way," indicating in a note only that he has heard "reports" of performances in Iowa City in 1959, and in New York in 1960 and "the early 1960s" (210).¹ A quick Google search reveals that a one-act opera of *Santa Claus*, composed by Edwin London, was performed in 1960 at the University of Iowa and again by the Cleveland Chamber Symphony in 2002 (see Rosenberg, "Not-so-jolly" and "Not Exactly"). The most recent reference to a production of *Him* is a 2005 performance at the Viaduct Theater in Chicago (dir. Whitney Blakemore). Also unclear is the reference in this list to Eric Bentley's anthology with *Him* from 1952. Does this refer to a performance? The notation does not say.

Perhaps the bibliography and list of performances were last revised in 2005, but whatever the reason it is a shame that the secondary materials for this edition could not have been better updated and edited for this new publication. The overrepresentation of criticism from the 1960s and 1970s sug-

gests that the plays' heyday was in the past, when, in fact, Cummings' writing feels right at home among contemporary writers like Mac Wellman and Sarah Ruhl. It is refreshing to see E. E. Cummings' plays again available for reading and, one hopes, production. Perhaps the volume will prompt enough interest such that a subsequent edition can more clearly locate Cummings as not only essential to American modernism, but also rightfully place him among the most exciting American playwrights today.

—Bowdoin College, Brunswick, ME

Note

1. *Editor's Note*: It is likely that the "report" that Friedman heard of a performance of *Santa Claus* in Iowa City was the performance of the opera in 1960. Evidence for the play's staging is found in the *Selected Letters*. For example, on April 12, 1950, Cummings advised a potential director of *Santa Claus* to allow "the play to 'express' itself i.e. to be (re)born. And if every word of Santa Claus is distinctly spoken, by human beings deeply familiar with the American language, my play's 'meaning' won't even slightly matter." To which he added: "what, by the way, does life 'mean'?" (*Letters* 202-203).

Works Cited

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- . "Not Exactly Comfort and Joy, *Santa Claus* Is Opera with an Edge." *Cleveland Plain Dealer* (11 Dec. 2002): E12. Print and Web.