

Glenn Hughes (1894–1964): A Bio-bibliographical Portrait

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Hughes was a dramatist, poet, theater historian, producer, and administrator. He was the founder of the School of Drama at the University of Washington and its first director.

Education and Career

Glenn Arthur Hughes was born in Cozad, Nebraska on 7 December 1894 and moved to Los Angeles at the age of 16. He received his bachelor's degree from Stanford University in 1916. He then worked as an instructor in English at Bellingham State Normal School, now Western Washington University, from 1916 to 1918, before entering the masters program at the University of Washington in 1918.

One of his first dramatic works was *The Long Beach Pageant*, written for his home town in California in 1915, while Hughes was a senior at Stanford, and performed often over the years, even as late as 1937 („New Honors“). In 1937, 1,200 high-school students from Polytechnic High had costumed roles in the production. The historical narrative about the history of Long Beach was performed in Bixby Park and included historical scenes ranging from 1542 to 1882. The last element of the performance was the song „I Love You, California.“ Sensational aspects like a live horse race and real-time sheep-shearing made the pageant interesting to many (Case, 14 July 1937).

Hughes first came to the University of Washington in 1919, having been awarded a fellowship for graduate work under Frederick Morgan Padelford, a widely-published scholar. Padelford was head of the English Department and Hughes's mentor over several years. He allowed his student to submit poetry instead of criticism as a master's thesis. Hughes received the degree in 1920 and then worked as an instructor and assistant professor at the University of Washington's Department of English and Dramatic Art from 1920 to 1928 („Faculty Changes“).

The young poet, dramatist, critic, and teacher was awarded a Guggenheim in 1928 („Nine Californians Awarded“). In 1928/1929, while studying Imagist poets, he sought out and interviewed major writers, among them William Butler Yeats, Ezra Pound, D. H. Lawrence, Sinclair Lewis, T. S. Eliot, and Richard Aldington („Glenn Hughes Wins“). The resulting book, titled *Imagism and the Imagists: A Study in Modern Poetry*, was first published in 1930 and saw a second edition in 1961. The book contained introductions to the work of imagist poets like H.D. and Ezra Pound, as well as photographs by Man Ray. Zabel reviewed it critically in 1931, but the Imagist scholar Thacker, writing more than eighty years later, cites Hughes's 1930 publication as a landmark in the critical tradition of Imagism (xii).

He was recruited to teach and direct at Scripps College, Claremont but stayed there for only a year (1929–1930) before returning to the University of Washington in 1930 with a larger salary and a full professorship (Tate). He set about laying the foundations for a major theatrical there.

Revenues from ticket sales to Hughes's productions soon allowed the professors and students in his group to renovate performance spaces and then build two theaters on campus: The Showboat (1938) and The Penthouse (1940); Hughes acquired The Playhouse Theatre for experimental purposes in 1950. Income continued to flow, and the theaters remained busy all year round, so that the university's Drama Department was soon similar to a professional production company. The highly successful venture continued throughout the 1950s (Bennett). Hughes also initiated screenings of foreign films in Seattle; no movie theater in the city had shown foreign films before (Tate).

The amateur performance spaces in Seattle, operating at the same time and often presenting daily performances, made the Seattle campus the only university in the nation with three theaters and such frequent shows. Hughes's work supervising the year-round theaters on one campus for thirty-five years was a singular accomplishment in the history of American university theater („UW Drama Leader Hughes Dies“). The Penthouse has since been renamed „The Glenn Hughes Penthouse Theatre.“

His writing and editing were prolific for decades, sometimes resulting in the publication of several plays a year. In all, he published dozens of plays and six volumes of poetry, as well as books of literary criticism and theater history. At the University of Washington, Hughes launched the series called „Chapbooks.“ These pamphlet-length publications were considered unconventional and addressed stimulating new topics („Glenn Hughes Wins“). A chapbook is a genre of inexpensive booklet, sold on the street in the sixteenth-century Europe; the Washington series was praised in American and European literary circles as a valuable contribution to international letters in the 1920s–1930s. They were published by the University of Washington Book Store, as were many of Hughes's books. One of the more prominent chapbooks was authored by Vernon Parrington and appeared in 1927; Parrington later received a Pulitzer Prize for his influential handbook on *Main Currents in American Thought* (Rochester). Another chapbook, called „delightfully printed“ by a reviewer in 1929, was about indigenous Australian literature; it was written by C. Hartley Grattan („Pamphlets“).

Over the course of the next 35 years, until he retired from some of his duties in 1961, Hughes was considered „the guiding spirit behind the development of drama“ at the university („Glenn Hughes“); there had been little theatrical activity at the university before Hughes's creative efforts in the 1930s and 1940s. Because of the focus on practical experience and a commercially successful repertoire, talent scouts from Hollywood and elsewhere sought contact to Hughes and hired University of Washington students (Tate).

During Hughes's tenure, more than 11,000 performances of more than 600 productions took place. Hughes's many awards included the Award of Merit of the American Educational Theater Association, the highest award given by the group. He received honors from groups in Italy (1955), France (1955) and West Germany (1957) for his work at the School of Drama and its international relevance („Glenn Hughes“).

He died on 21 March 1964.

Verse

He published five volumes of poetry: *Souls and Others Poems* (1917); *Broken Lights* (1920); *Academe* (1952); *Notion Counter* (1953); and *Trivia: Poetic Footnotes for an Unwritten Autobiography* (1956).

Plays

His plays were often, but not always, written for non-professional productions. Hughes's experience as a teacher often informed his writing, as the catalogue description of *Happy-Go-Lucky* (1936) describes: „This three-act farce is [...] good-natured, amusing, well built. It is not difficult to cast nor is it too much of a problem to stage and direct“ (Coleman 118).

Although interested in avant-garde writing as a young man; Hughes's taste as a producer was decidedly popular, favoring light entertainment and comedies. His play *Guess Again* is an example. Called by one writer „a perfectly tailored garment for the actor,“ it was performed by school groups or at colleges, e.g. in 1938 in Nashville, Tennessee and 1939 in Park City, Utah. The love story takes place in the lobby of a small hotel at a Southern California seaside resort, in the course of one summer day (Spadafora).

Theater History

Hughes's two major historical books are *The Story of the Theatre*, a single-volume survey of theater history which focussed on performance, not texts. The second was *A History of the American Theatre, 1700–1950*, which has been called „the first complete historical work on the American Theatre“ („Glenn Hughes“).

Translations

Working with his wife, Babette Plechner, Hughes translated French plays and monologues (Tate). Together with Yozan T. Iwasaki, he translated and published *Three Women Poets of Modern Japan*.

The Penthouse Theatre

The Penthouse Theatre was his major achievement. Specially designed as an „arena theater“ with 160 seats, it was built in the style of ancient Greek theaters and opened in 1940. It was the first theatre-in-the-round venue built in the United States and became „a significant part of Seattle's cultural life“ (Tate). There had been a forerunner Penthouse Theater, indeed the namesake for the university building, in a downtown, private penthouse Hughes was allowed to use starting in 1932. For several years, he had been successful in staging modern comedies and farces in with a group of students and professionals (Hughes 16).

The Penthouse Theatre became a leading venue in Seattle's cultural scene; it required no subsidy from the university and could fund itself with box-office revenues. It became, in Hughes's own estimation, „without doubt one of the most popular amateur theatres in the United States“ (22). It presented mainly comedies, with the occasional problem play by George Bernard Shaw or Luigi Pirandello. Even more rarely, the Penthouse staged a comedy by William Shakespeare.

The 1952 production of *The Comedy of Errors* is a good example. It was directed by Donal Harrington, who taught at the University of Washington from 1938 to 1973. He became a full professor of drama and his papers, kept at the University of Washington Library's Special Collections, contain scrapbooks and programs from his decades at the Penthouse. *The Comedy of Errors* opened in February of 1952 and had a run of thirty-three performances in six weeks, remarkably long for a university theater. Some of the actors (Robert Lindquist and John Collard, for instance) went on to professional acting careers (Kilfoil). Harrington was a close collaborator for Hughes; he even served as the master of ceremonies during Hughes's memorial service („Glenn Hughes“).

Private Life

Glenn Hughes's mother died soon after his birth; his father and stepmother were school teachers. He had a younger brother named John B. Hughes who was also an actor and worked as a radio news commentator in San Francisco in the late 1930s (Case, 13 July 1937). He married Babette Plechner (1905–1982) on 20 March 1924; they later divorced. Hughes later married his student Cleta Fay Rogers in 1950; she was more than 30 years his junior. Their marriage also ended in divorce. Hughes had struggled for years with alcohol (Tate).

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