



## Bentley, Eric (b. 1916)

by Bud Coleman

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Kenneth Tynan called Eric Bentley "the most adventurous drama critic in America," but Bentley is more than a drama critic. At various times in his life, he has also been a college professor, translator, director, theorist, historian, and playwright. Even when he was deeply closeted, he consistently supported the representation of same-sex desire in the theater.

Eric Russell Bentley was born on September 14, 1916, in Bolton, Lancashire, England, and educated at Bolton School and Oxford University, where he received a B.A. in 1938.

Bentley came to the United States in order to pursue a Ph.D. in drama at Yale University. After receiving his degree in 1941, he stayed on in the United States, becoming an American citizen in 1948.

Bentley taught at a number of universities, including Harvard, State University of New York-Buffalo, University of Minnesota, and University of Maryland, but was primarily associated with Columbia University, where he taught from 1953 until 1969 and was the Brander Matthews Professor of Dramatic Literature for almost twenty years.

During his career, Bentley published numerous books of criticism and established himself as a respected theater critic. His *What Is Theater?* (1956) and *Life of the Drama* (1964) are often cited as his most influential theoretical works. His stint as theater critic at *The New Republic* (1952-56), gave him an opportunity to criticize contemporary plays. His blunt assessments of works by Arthur Miller and Tennessee Williams created controversy and gained him a reputation as a demanding and meticulous reviewer.

In addition to writing nine plays of his own, Bentley translated into English such important playwrights as Bertolt Brecht, Luigi Pirandello, Carl Sternheim, Frank Wedekind, and Nikolai Gogol. He is widely regarded as the leading expert on the works of Brecht, as well as their best translator into English.

In the preface to his play *The Fall of the Amazons* (1982), Bentley notes that his feelings for another male student at Yale were so strong that they attracted the notice of a dean who cautioned the young Bentley against lavishing so much affection on another male. It being 1940, Bentley felt he had no alternative other than to mask his true nature and construct a closet, a closet from which he operated for the next thirty years.

During this time he married twice and fathered two sons, but biographer Daniel-Raymond Nadon describes Bentley as a gay man in heterosexual marriages, rather than a bisexual, since he never identified as bisexual.

In a 1991 interview with *The Advocate*, Bentley defended his two marriages--and similar ones entered into by his contemporaries--by reminding readers of the homophobic climate of the 1950s and 1960s: "It's not that you went into a marriage knowing for certain you are gay and deceiving your wife. You went into a marriage, typically, not being certain and thinking that because you like or love a woman, you will very

likely end up totally straight. And you had every reason to be straight in those days."

While Bentley the playwright did not write a play featuring gay characters until *Lord Alfred's Lover* (1981), Bentley the theater critic queered his commentary as early as 1944. In *A Century of Hero Worship*, he analyzed the work of the nineteenth-century poet Stefan George. In so doing, he defended George's masked homosexuality, arguing that the most significant aspect of George's work is its queer sensibility, in part shaped by the author's position as an outsider.

Nadon argues that in two of Bentley's most famous books--*The Dramatic Event* (1954) and *What Is Theatre?*--the closeted author "is defending the gay cause, defining the gay aesthetic, and identifying authors and critics as gay."

Bentley's public emergence from the closet was gradual. He began speaking openly as a homosexual in contributions to *Liberation* magazine in the late 1960s. One of his letters to that magazine was elaborated into a chapter on "Men's Liberation" in his book *Theatre of War* (1972). Bentley also taught one of the first university courses dealing with homosexuality in culture at Queen's College, CUNY, in 1972. As host of a radio program for Pacifica-WBAL, he frequently discussed homosexuality with such activists as Dr. Howard Brown and Martin Duberman.

In a landmark 1974 publication, a special issue of *College English* devoted to "The Homosexual Imagination," edited by Louie Crew and Rictor Norton, Bentley openly discussed such topics as gay literature, the effects of sexual repression on the creative imagination, and gay writers such as E. M. Forster, Marcel Proust, and Tennessee Williams.

He described his personal coming out (as opposed to simply having sexual experiences with other men) and its effect on radicalizing him: "The big moment came when I was willing to commit myself to someone of my own sex who was quite capable of responding in kind. 'Coming out,' if I'm to accept the phrase, means to me: giving up the effort to keep in ignorance anyone who might like to know. Yes, even those who only want this information in order to be hostile. When you're 'out,' this hostility is, well, not exactly welcome but acceptable, *almost* welcome. You need a bit of fighting spirit in you to accept the new situation. It helps if you are a radical. The situation helps--it can help--to make you radical."

Bentley's most produced play, *Are You Now or Have You Ever Been: The Investigations of Show-Business by the Un-American Activities Committee 1947-1958* (1972), is a fictionalized account using transcripts from Congressional hearings that sought to uncover Communists in America. Using pivotal characters such as Lillian Hellman and Paul Robeson, the play clearly advocates for privacy (including the maintenance of closets), but it also supports honesty and self-preservation.

Bentley's *The Recantation of Galileo Galilei: Scenes From History Perhaps* (1977) is a very different enactment of Galileo's life than Brecht's play, with some readers / viewers discerning a relationship more romantic than professional between Galileo and a young priest. In a 1997 interview, Bentley denied this was the intention when he wrote the play.

*Lord Alfred's Lover* is about the tumultuous relationship between Oscar Wilde and Alfred Douglas. In this play, Bentley's most autobiographical work, the climax occurs when Wilde says, "'Posing as a sodomite'--the fateful phrase *is* libel now. I do not *pose* as a sodomite. I *am* a sodomite."

*Round 2* (1986, 1990) was attacked by many gay critics for reinforcing negative gay stereotypes. Fashioned after Arthur Schnitzler's *La Ronde*, the play, which features ten gay characters, presents a series of same-sex sexual encounters. In part to answer criticism that the play was inappropriate in an era when the AIDS epidemic was raging, Bentley later expanded the title to include: *New York in the '70s*.

In a 1991 interview in *The Drama Review*, Bentley hypothesized that *Round 2* was not well received because "What the straight public doesn't seem to be ready for yet is ordinary gay people."

Bentley won the George Jean Nathan Award in 1965, a Special Citation at the 1977-78 Obie Awards, and was inducted into the Theatre Hall of Fame in 1998.

In Bentley's honor, Buffalo's New Phoenix Theater conducts an annual Eric Bentley New Play Competition and mounts a production of the winner. Appropriately, submissions are urged to explore gay themes or to redefine the boundaries of theatricality.

Whether writing from the position of in or out of the closet, Bentley has consistently pushed for more plays to be written about homosexuality, and has insisted that playwrights need to "go further," and say something about same-sex desire without "snatch[ing] it back out of our hands in the last scene with a speech or two about the wickedness of false accusations."

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