



DRAMA OF DISCOVERY

Quiet Corner,
Greenwich, Connecticut,
The Alice Cooper House

By Leonard Jacobs

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Clyde Fitch, it turns out, was America's most successful playwright-director before Eugene O'Neill. The only playwright to have five plays running at once on Broadway. And Clyde Fitch, blessed with prodigious dramatic gifts, wrested the theatre, virtually by himself, from its melodramatic roots and into the modern world.

Critical acclaim and calumny came to Fitch. Plus scandal: In 1900, Fitch's play *Sapho* stood at the center of a First Amendment case when Olga Nethersole, a press-loving actress, was tried for indecent exposure over a scene in which she was carried offstage in a diaphanous gown. There's the sad story of Fitch's favorite actress, Clara Bloodgood, who committed suicide right before curtain time. Even posthumously, Fitch's fame ruled Broadway. Why else would a mysterious "relative," "Vera Fitch," shoot herself in the Astor Hotel just as his sizable estate was being settled, wailing over a "dear Uncle Clyde" who, in reality, had no siblings or children.

Maude Adams (the first Peter Pan), William Dean Howells, and Elsie De Wolfe, the future *grande dame* of American interior design, were all clacks in the Fitch clique. Besides being the partner of Elisabeth Marbury, the great theatrical literary agent who brought Shaw and Wilde to these shores, De Wolfe was a Fitch amanuensis: In 1903's *The Way of the World*, Fitch, noting that De Wolfe liked to wave to her friends in the audience, put her character in an onstage car and made her drive across the stage, thus being able to wave without sacrificing character. No wonder Fitch was the second person roasted by the Friars.



Memorial for Fitch's agent,
Elisabeth Marbury,
Prospect Plot

And who can resist all the Fitch lore? Stuff like producer Charles Frohman hoodwinking Edith Wharton and Clyde Fitch into creating the original stage version of *The House of Mirth*. Or how critic William Winter—the day's John Simon—said that Fitch didn't write *Beau Brummell*, the play that ignited his career. Plus there are stories about Fitch's flamboyant life, collecting art, homes, and enjoying celebrity in Europe and America, and stories about him after his death, such as when one of his lavish mansions burned to the ground while owned by rock star Alice Cooper.

I've loved this "drama of discovery," and not just about Clyde Fitch, but about the Gilded Age in which he lived. That so many of his contemporaries are here at Woodlawn makes working on the Entertainer's Campaign, for example, hugely rewarding. It's my second association with Woodlawn: In 1998, my company, The Clyde Fitch Group, performed an adaptation of "The Truth," Fitch's best play, in the Woolworth Chapel, with not a single empty seat in the house.

And that is why this amazing restoration of the Fitch memorial means so much to me personally. Before Fitch, the idea of "American playwright" was oxymoronic—no dramatist had ever made a living at it. It was the era of the stock company, of the actor-manager hiring tired hacks to crank out star vehicles. Fitch changed all that, making the dawn of the last century one of the most optimistic times the theatre has known. Which in turn gives me my still-ongoing mission: To restore this neglected figure back to his rightful position as a pivotal American theatrical icon.

About the Author

Leonard Jacobs, is the Associate News Editor of Back Stage, the Performing Arts Weekly. He has written reviews for *The Village Voice*, *Theater Week*, and *Marie Claire* magazine. In addition to writing about theatre, he is a director, playwright and founder of the theater ensemble the Clyde Fitch Group.