

AMERICAN CONSERVATORY THEATER  
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PRESENTS

# WORDS <sup>on</sup> PLAYS

INSIGHT INTO THE PLAY, THE PLAYWRIGHT, AND THE PRODUCTION

## *The Rainmaker*

BY N. RICHARD NASH

DIRECTED BY MARK RUCKER

AMERICAN CONSERVATORY THEATER

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## ABOUT THE PLAYWRIGHT

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**N**. Richard Nash was born in 1913, as Nathaniel Richard Nussbaum, on the rough south side of Philadelphia, the son of Sael L. Nussbaum, a bookbinder, and Jenny Singer Nussbaum. Nash grew up on the streets and first worked as a ten-dollar-a-match boxer. He was also a good student, however, and, after graduating from South Philadelphia High School in 1930, he attended the University of Pennsylvania, where he studied English and philosophy. He published two books on philosophy after graduating in 1934: *The Athenian Spirit* and *The Wounds of Sparta*.

Nash soon switched to teaching and writing plays. His first, *Parting at Imsdorf* (1940), brought him some immediate success, earning him the Maxwell Anderson Verse Drama Award. His Broadway debut, *The Second Best Bed* (a comedy about Shakespeare and Anne Hathaway, which he also directed), opened at the Ethel Barrymore Theatre in 1946, followed by *The Young and Fair* in 1948. His next play, *See the Jaguar* (James Dean's Broadway debut, 1952), won the International Drama Award in Cannes and the Prague Award.

Nash's greatest success and lasting fame were made with *The Rainmaker*, which opened on Broadway on October 28, 1954, starring Geraldine Page in the role of Lizzie Curry and Darren McGavin as Starbuck. Nash originally wrote the play as a television drama for the Philco Playhouse in tribute to his older sister, Mae, whom Nash described as "one of the left-out people." He credited Mae with curing him of a childhood stutter. "Mae got me into a corner and would say to me, 'Talk,'" Nash remembered. "She would say, 'I'm here, I'll stay here, I won't rush you, and I won't leave you. Now talk.' Her willingness to listen is what saved my life. And this is what this play is about."

Writing in the *New York Times*, Brooks Atkinson described the play as "warm, simple, and friendly; the humor is captivating, and the characters are lovable and original." Two years later, the London production, also starring Miss Page (who received nine curtain calls on opening night), charmed British audiences as well as critics; *The Times* of London described the play as "a humorous, tender, and wise little American comedy," while the *Daily Mail* began its review: "Here is a beautiful little American comedy with a catch in its throat." *The Rainmaker* became Nash's signature piece, ensuring his place in American popular culture. Eva Marie Saint, Nancy Marchand, Tuesday Weld, Sally Field, and Jayne Atkinson are among the actors who have played Lizzie in subsequent productions. The script has been translated into 40 languages and was adapted (by Nash) in 1956 into a film starring Katharine Hepburn and Burt Lancaster, as well as a musical, *110 in the Shade*, which ran on Broadway for ten months in 1963 and was revived to acclaim in 2005 with

Audra McDonald singing Lizzie's role. (Hepburn received an Academy Award nomination for best actress for her performance in the film).

Although Nash could have lived comfortably on the income from *The Rainmaker* for the rest of his life, he continued to work consistently. His subsequent writing for the stage includes *Girls of Summer* (1956), *Handful of Fire* (1958), *Wildcat* (starring Lucille Ball, 1960), *The Happy Time* (with music by John Kander and Fred Ebb; nominated for the Tony Award for best musical in 1968), and *Saravà* (1979). He also wrote extensively for television anthologies, including the U.S. Steel Hour, General Electric Theater, Philco Playhouse, Goodyear Playhouse, and Theater Guild of the Air, as well as 12 episodes of the series *Here Come the Brides* (1968–69). His screenplays for Hollywood include *Welcome Stranger* (a 1947 hit starring Bing Crosby and Barry Fitzgerald), the noir *Nora Prentiss* (one of Warner's top four money makers of 1947), *The Sainted Sisters* (1948), *Dear Wife* (1949), *Mara Maru* (1952), *Helen of Troy* (1956), *Porgy and Bess* (1959), and *Between the Darkness and the Dawn* (1985). He also published a novel, *East Wind, Rain* (about the bombing of Pearl Harbor, 1977), and taught in several academic theater departments over the course of his career, including those of Bryn Mawr, Haverford, Yale, Princeton, and Brandeis. Under the pseudonym of John Roc, he wrote a play, *Fire!* (1969), and a novel, *Winter Blood* (1971).

Nash died in Manhattan on December 11, 2000, at the age of 87. Of *The Rainmaker*, ultimately his most memorable achievement, he said, "I tried to tell a simple story about droughts that happen to people, and about faith."