

Struggles, small triumph fill his life as a writer

By Jackie Klein
staff writer

"The theatre is a very cruel institution which has no use at all for anyone except a success. To reach that status is something that can't be analyzed by me or anyone else. The only course is to write and hold on as long as your belief in yourself exists."

— Playwright Arthur Miller

Working as a play writer in New York's old Federal Popular Price Theatre, Herschel Steinhardt of Southfield rubbed elbows with famed playwright Arthur Miller.

That was many years ago and fame and fortune still have eluded Steinhardt. Miller's letter to the struggling playwright was prophetic.

Seated at his desk — where he has spent as many as 36 uninterrupted hours pounding out a play on his 1938, \$38 typewriter — Steinhardt reminisced and talked about his lonely struggle.

"Opera stars go to Italy to become famous," he said. "Playwrights go to New York. If you don't have a Broadway production under your belt, hardly anyone is willing to give you a chance."

STEINHARDT, who's listed in the National Playwrights Directory and Contemporary Authors of America, recently achieved a small success when his one-act play, "God's in His Heaven," was produced at the Paul Robeson Theatre in Detroit.

His "Sons of Men" was broadcast by NBC-TV and "A Star in Heaven" was produced at the Concept East in Detroit. His shorter plays — many about the Nazi Holocaust — were produced in Europe. But a number of Steinhardt's works remain unpublished.

The playwright interrupted his story to talk about the hundreds of books which fill his home from the basement to the living room. Steinhardt from 1975 to 1977 ran the Little Bookstore in a largely black-Hispanic neighborhood in Detroit.

When he closed up shop, he brought the secondhand books to his Southfield home where he does a small mail order business with book dealers, artists and collectors.

Steinhardt sent many books to his two daughters, one a psychiatrist in Syracuse and the other a schoolteacher and artist in Connecticut. He considers his offspring his finest productions.

"I've given boxes and boxes of books to the Salvation Army, Brandeis University, and ORT," he said. "I still buy books because it's a fever in my blood. I'd keep them all if I were younger, but I can't take them with me."

"The mail order business is bad because the name of the game is getting something for nothing. Most buyers don't want to spend more than \$2 for a book which might be worth \$250."

GETTING BACK to his career as a playwright, Steinhardt said he studied at Wayne State University and later at the New School for Social Research, Hunter College, N.Y.

"When I should have been writing themes, I was writing plays," he recalled. "It's a means of expression. Some people think dialogue makes a play. But a play without meaning and depth is like a body without a soul."

"Writing is a lonesome game but you can't create a work in isolation. You have to observe interactions of people.

Other parts of your life suffer and you get a different perspective."

Since Steinhardt's ambition was to be a playwright, he dropped out of college and hitchhiked to Florida where he worked as a cook on a dredging boat.

That's where Steinhardt got material for his play about adolescence, "Before the Morning." A New York agent read the play and offered the young writer a collaborator. But Steinhardt said he could do it alone and he turned down the opportunity.

BY THE TIME he was 15, Steinhardt said he had seen the grimy side of life selling newspapers on John R and Alfred in downtown Detroit. From that experience, he later wrote, "Song of the Street," a still unproduced play.

On weekends and holidays, he lived in the make-believe world of Ibsen, Strindberg and O'Neill which led him to express himself in one-act plays.

But in order to see professional theater, Steinhardt took jobs as an usher in the Bonstelle and Shubert playhouses in Detroit.

Since Steinhardt maintains he doesn't approve of "racy" material, he once walked out on Mae West delivering her "Why don't you come up and see me sometime?" line at a Detroit theater.

For 15 years, "in order to make a living," Steinhardt worked for a local real estate agency. From that experience, he wrote "Man On Earth" which deals with the competitive business world.

"God's in His Heaven" is about child abuse with the underlying theme that all's right with the world. It has to be because God's in his heaven, Steinhardt believes.

Many of Steinhardt's works have religious overtones. His plays are about relationships, the search for self-realization and morality. Most have traces of the playwright's autobiography.

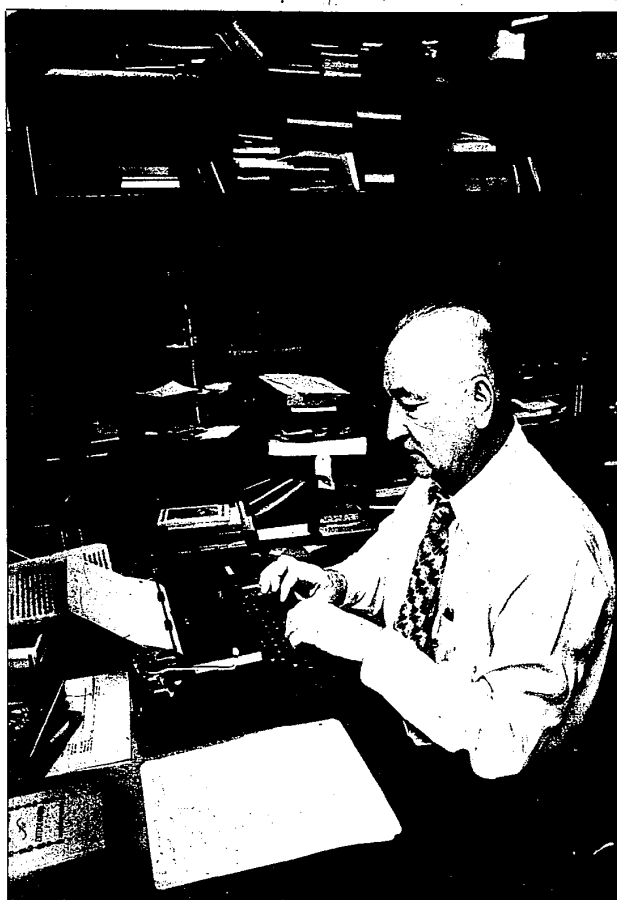
His "Sons of Men," and "A Star in Heaven" are available at the Southfield Public Library. He recently completed "The Power of the Dog," a modern comedy.

"A STAR in Heaven" received good reviews in the Detroit Free Press. And actor Peter Ustinov called "Sons of Men" a "turbulent slice of life which is both photographically authentic and yet aspires successfully to be artistic." But the going is still rough, Steinhardt laments.

"Writers of poetry and prose at least get rejection slips to indicate that somebody read them," Steinhardt said. "But playwrights send their works to producers and theaters where many are never read."

"Ustinov praised my play. But when a local theater group read it, I was told there too many characters in it. Unless you're world famous and got rave reviews in New York, you're treated like a leper."

Steinhardt, who now has a New York agent, tried to sell a play in Canada. He was told the play is powerful and deserves recognition, but the discouraging fact is "You can't arouse interest in a play written by an unknown playwright."

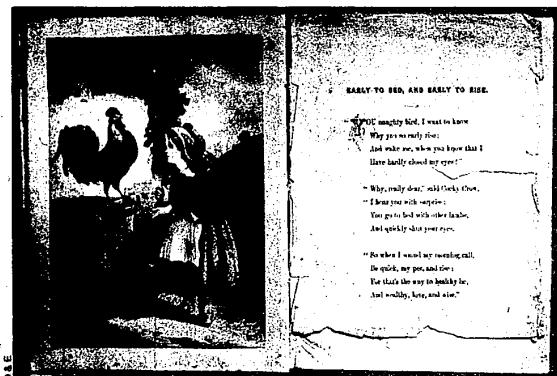


Herschel Steinhardt transcribes his shorthand notes with the use of his old but trusted typewriter in his basement office. "If you don't have a Broadway pro-

duction under your belt, hardly anyone is willing to give you a chance," he said. But he keeps trying.



Success has sometimes eluded Steinhardt, but he's never lost the ability to smile or to continue with his quest. Below, a page from "Picture Book for the Nursery," published in 1871. "I still buy books because it's a fever in my blood. I'd keep them all if I were younger," he said.



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