1 Beginnings

John Howard Lawson's father, Simeon Levy, was the son of Jewish immigrants who arrived in the United States in the 1840s from Poland, driven by an outburst of anti-Semitism. The family settled in Springfield, Massachusetts, where Levy was born in 1852. Lawson's grandfather profited handsomely during the U.S. Civil War and was able to pass a good deal of this wealth on to his son. By 1880, Lawson's father was in Mexico City, where he started a newspaper, the *Mexican Financier*. He sold the paper after he met Belle Hart, Lawson's mother—who was from a well-to-do family—and moved to New York City, where he was an executive with Reuters. To escape the ravages of anti-Semitism, he changed his name to S. Levy Lawson. John Howard Lawson was born in New York City in 1894, the youngest of three children, named after a famed prison reformer (his brother, Wendell Holmes—named after the well-known jurist—committed suicide when Lawson was a young man, and his sister, Adelaide, was a habitué of the art world). His mother died when he was five years old—of breast cancer, just before Christmas—and given his father's lack of warmth, Lawson grew to maturity without the comfort of a parent's affection. This death, said Lawson, had a "devastating effect on my father," but the same could be said of Belle's younger son. Schooling began for him at a "progressive 'play school' financed by his father"; later his family moved to Yonkers, where Lawson and his sister "boarded at Halstead School," then to Seventy-second Street and Riverside Drive in one of Manhattan's most fashionable neighborhoods.[1]

Lawson's early educational experiences made a permanent impression on his consciousness. Later he recalled fondly his "nursery school," which was "dedicated to the principle that a child learns through self-expression

and imaginative play." His teacher, on the other hand, recalled Lawson as "quite self-centered and self-employed."[2]

"My father was a complex man," says John Howard Lawson's son Jeffrey. "I believe his mother's death [also] had a deep effect on him and was part of his anger. But I think what also helped to make him so angry and radical was having a family that tried so hard to gain approval and yet was not totally accepted."[3] Anti-Jewish bias contributed to this lack of acceptance.

Still, the son's words must be read cautiously, since it is evident that he is resentful of his father and mother. Jeffrey Lawson "began to resent his parents for indulging in their Utopian views. 'I kind of broke down under it,'" he admits. "'I sort of fell apart psychologically.'"[4]

One of the son's "earliest memories is of his father blushing whenever Jeff tried to kiss him goodnight. 'My father was pretty aloof, he didn't know how to relate to children . . . he never touched me or held me.'" As Jeffrey Lawson recounted as an adult, still pained by the memory, "He was emotionally blocked. But he would talk to me for hours about movies and theater.'" Was there a connection between John Howard Lawson's difficulty in expressing emotions to his son and his powerful imaginative ability to manufacture emotion on a blank sheet of paper?[5]

John Howard Lawson was single-minded. "In our house there were thousands of books," his son recalled. "My father devoured books. Yet many were read only partly through," as he had gleaned whatever it is he wanted and had no need to see it through to the end. When Jeffrey Lawson was twelve, he and his father went to see *The Count of Monte Cristo,* but "after 20 minutes, my father informed me that it was obvious from [what] had already appeared on the screen how the plot would turn out and therefore [there was] no point in staying for the rest of the film. I ranted and raged, but he insisted we leave." The younger Lawson "couldn't understand how all he wanted from that film was an intellectual grasp and as soon as he had that he wished to go on to something else." His father "never knew the baseball scores or who was in the World Series. . . . I'm not sure he really knew there was a World Series."[6]

Jeffrey Lawson describes his father in terms akin to how John Howard Lawson describes his own. The expressive screenwriter asserts that his father "maintained an angry silence about everything connected with his childhood," a period evidently replete with angst. Just as Jeffrey Lawson describes his father in less than complimentary terms, John Howard Lawson says of his grandfather that he was "dissipated and irresponsible," not least since he "deserted his wife and children, leaving them in straitened

circumstances." Just as Jeffrey Lawson felt a kind of abandonment, John Howard Lawson's father felt "unwanted" and "ran away at the age of fifteen. He went to the Far West where he spent more than a decade of hungry wandering." He encountered his father again in the late 1890s, "destitute and in rags, dying in a Bowery lodging house." By that time Lawson's father, rather affluent, "had become the main support of his mother and sisters and brothers."

Lawson's father had become "comparatively wealthy"—which meant that Lawson grew up with few unfulfilled desires, at least materially. This was accomplished in the face of formidable anti-Jewish barriers. For example, Halstead, the school Lawson attended in Yonkers, "had never had a Jewish pupil"; Lawson's "father found that [his daughter] was snubbed by her class-mates and he reacted in the only way that was open to him." He bought a carriage to further impress, or perhaps intimidate, the bigots; it was a "stupendous vehicle," and the "fairy coach wrought its magic. Every child in the school wanted to ride in it."

In their eye-catching carriage, Lawson and his family would travel from their huge apartment. "The whole ground floor, running through from Seventy-second to Seventy-first Street, was a big foyer, with Oriental rugs and massive furniture, never used by anyone and empty except for the uniformed attendants. . . . [O]ur apartment on the eleventh floor had a wonderful view of the New York Central railroad yards and the river." There was a governess, of course, and "dinner was a Victorian ritual." Lawson's abstemious father "never smoked or drank" but "insisted on strict observance of the [Jewish] dietary laws."

Lawson did well in school, particularly "in elocution," though his "failure to make close friends may have been due to" his "Jewish background," though he "was hardly aware" of this explanation at the time. He was consumed, however, with a round-robin of attendance at "concerts, art exhibitions, operas and theatres."

In 1906, the eleven-year-old Lawson made the grand tour of Europe, visiting London, The Hague, Amsterdam, Berlin, Dresden, and other metropolises. A visit to Shakespeare's grave seemed to have left a deep impression, for upon returning home he began to read plays and "see productions." At the age of thirteen—he gives the date precisely as 22 January 1908—he began writing his first play, though he later claimed that his career as a playwright had begun at the age of six. Whatever the case, there is little question that Lawson was precocious in his taking up the pen, keeping an extensive diary of his European tour, maintaining detailed notes on drama

and dramatic construction at the age of thirteen, sending evocative letters to his governess at the age of ten.[7]

By the age of fourteen he had also written a thoughtful play, *Savitri*.[8] He continued to pursue this fascination with India in *A Hindoo Love Drama*, written a few years later,[9] though he conceded the plot was derivative.[10] Even early in his teen years, John Howard Lawson was determined to become a successful writer.

. . .

Nestled comfortably in the picturesque Berkshire Mountains of western Massachusetts, Williams College provides an outstanding balance of natural splendor and cultural vitality. Lawson enrolled in this posh school at the age of sixteen. However, Williams was a rather homogeneous environment: there was "one Negro student." "Jews were not admitted to fraternities," in addition to being subjected to quotidian indignities. Most of Lawson's friends were "not Jewish," though this did not spare him from the lash of discrimination. At the first meeting of the leading student publication, "the editor in charge of the competition remarked that Jews were not wanted on the paper." Lawson was furious—he was "seized with icy fear." "It forced me to admit my Jewish identity," something that theretofore had not been foremost in his consciousness. This also was a boost to his budding political-mindedness, for it was then, in 1912, that he "joined a campus group supporting Teddy Roosevelt and his Bull Moose Party." Shortly thereafter he joined the Socialist Club.

He also was developing other interests. In 1913 he began to pay attention to a rapidly developing art form: cinema. The "time will come," the teenager announced portentously, "when the Nickelodeon will have its classics, no less prominent than their theatrical rivals." His discoveries also included romance. At the age of eighteen he dated a French-Canadian girl—a new experience in more ways than one, since to that point he "had never been in a working class household." Later he was engaged to a young woman who eventually joined the Ziegfeld Follies, but this romance did not end well. The woman rejected him, creating a "lasting effect" on his "character, creating an ambivalent attitude toward sex."[11]

That year, 1913, was also pivotal in another way. A prelude to his joining the Socialist Club occurred that fall when his brother, Wendell, just back from a voyage to Germany, brought him a copy of Karl Kautsky's *The Class Struggle*. According to one account, "This book gave Lawson his first

knowledge of Marx and Marxism, with which he first disagreed, though he brought Kautsky's book to Socialist Club meetings and, to the faculty sponsor's annoyance, quoted from it as a basis for discussion."[12]

But Lawson was not just attending political meetings and citing daring literature. He was a prolific and ambitious writer, penning poems, plays, and papers, often writing under the assumed name "Vox Literatuae," shrouding his identity, just as years later he shrouded certain controversial political affiliations.[13] After leaving college, graduating at the age of nineteen in 1914, he was "employed for several months in the New York branch of Reuters"—his father was helpful here, of course—while he "employed his free time in writing plays."[14] His play *Standards* (1914) "presented the first condemnation in the American theatre of the cult of efficiency, of the anti-human aspects of the of rigid old-time religionists and a critique of the harmful influence of advertising in American life."[15]

As a budding writer, Lawson learned early on how to deal with rejection. Though Budd Schulberg and others were to spear him for his often acidic evaluations of their work, a tendency that was ascribed to his Leninism, the fact is that the literary culture from which he emerged was dripping with tartness. The American Academy of Dramatic Arts was not happy with his "three act play called 'Souls,'" rebuking not only the play but the playwright as well.[16]

By 1916 he was in Los Angeles complaining sourly about the "criticisms" of his latest play, which were "merciless." But, unlike some who were later subjected to his barbs, he was "far from being discouraged" but was convinced of something else. "I am a good playwright," he said with confidence. "I'm wide awake to my difficulties"; the problem was "the leading parts are acted badly." Lacerating actors for misinterpreting and misunderstanding his work was to become a staple for Lawson—and other writers, for that matter.[17]

Around the same time he had finished his first full-fledged play. Appropriately given his later trajectory, it concerned a "dramatist about to be evicted." He was "not yet twenty-one" and was attracting attention from producers. That same year, 1915, he finished another play, *The Spice of Life*, whose action occurs on a "wealthy woman's wedding day: the first act is drawing room comedy." Another drama, *Servant-Drama-Love*, about an "Irish Cinderella" of the slums, brought him face-to-face with the political economy of the theater. "A few minutes before the curtain rose," a bemused Lawson recounted, "[the director] asked me for a percentage of my royalties, as payment for his help on the script. We argued as if millions were involved. I have often regretted that I refused to give him anything. Two hours later, I offered him half my royalties and he accepted without enthusiasm."

On another occasion a director of one of his early plays "gave me a tumbler of whiskey and said he would give me any amount of money if I would withdraw and sign over all my rights in the play to him. . . . I told him he could have it for one hundred thousand dollars. We bargained gravely and finished several bottles of whiskey." Then the two agreed on "eighty thousand dollars." Lawson knew "of course" that his interlocutor "did not have eighty cents." Still, Lawson's "lifelong concern with the function of the author, with his rights and responsibilities," stems from these experiences; these experiences compelled him to stray from having "accepted other people's values" for "it turned out that they had no values."[18]

Getting this play off the ground also led Lawson into intriguing places. Producers took one look at the work and asked him to rewrite it. Rapidly becoming inured to criticism, Lawson was still "hurt" but in search of enlightenment nonetheless. He took the bus to Santa Barbara. Once there, he recalled, "I climbed a steep hill to a country club where [his producer] and [actor] John Barrymore were spending a few weeks. They were surprised but courteous. They gave me dinner [and] a great deal of whiskey." A bit tipsy, Lawson was determined to share his manuscript, although his voice "was fuzzy after dinner." The producer listened while Barrymore "snored." The producer then stated the play needed revision, as Lawson "tried to persuade him" otherwise. "His voice became cold," and this may have jolted Barrymore out of his snoozing, because he then "began his own soliloquy on the unspeakable state of the theatre."[19]

Writing plays may have been intellectually, creatively, and alcoholically stimulating, but at his level, it was far from being exceedingly profitable. Barely twenty, Lawson signed a contract in 1915 that called for a flat payment of $500 for production of his play *The Butterfly Lady* in the United States and Canada; in addition, he was to receive 5 percent of the weekly gross of the first $5,000, 7.5 percent of the next $3,000, and 10 percent of anything over $8,000—not too shabby given the times, but it definitely helped that Lawson had a father who could subsidize his muse.[20] This lack of income was surpassed by the attention that Lawson the wunderkind was beginning to attract from the press.[21]

He was consorting with the brightest lights of Broadway, a golden route laid out before him. But, barely twenty-one, he gave it all up for the adventure of going to Europe to aid his nation's war effort, as an ambulance driver.[22] Taking out a passport, the five foot seven Lawson, a man with large eyes and square chin, repaired to Italy, then France, working on behalf of the Red Cross.[23] He joined the ambulance corps, he argued later, to "avoid the draft." He was, he said, "opposed to the war," though "public refusal to serve would have jeopardized [his] father's position with Reuter's." When he ar-

rived in France, "the smell of death changed to the bitter-sweet smell of mustard gas." As for many other intellectuals, the war—supposedly fought to make the world "safe for democracy"—had a transforming impact on his consciousness, accelerating his rapid movement to the left, just as it provided a larger storehouse of ideas for his dramas. Lawson, in fact, was a charter member of the fabled "Lost Generation." In western Europe he met John Dos Passos, who for a while was his boon companion, before he went on to fame as a leading novelist, then conservative. They had "become close friends," not least because of "similarities in our backgrounds," though at that juncture "in politics as well as art, Dos was far beyond me."[24]

The critic Alfred Kazin described Dos Passos, a prolific writer of Portuguese descent, as "diffident, shy, elaborately hesitant, an elusively upper-class man who had passed through Choate and Harvard"; he was the "illegitimate child" of a man who "became one of the favorite lawyers of the rich" and a "Republican stalwart" besides. He was made to order for rebellion, but unlike Lawson's, his did not last.[25]

"Like all the men and women of my generation, the first World War was the matrix of my creative life. I remember," Lawson noted later, "sitting on a haystack behind the lines of Northern France in the golden fall of 1917. The thunder of the front was a distant rumbling. Three young men had just bought three clean notebooks. And each of us opened his book at a blank page. John Dos Passos wrote the words, 'one man's imitation.' Robert [Hillyer] began a poem. I wrote the words 'Roger Bloomer' the imagined name of a young man coming out of the American Middle West in search of life." At that juncture, Ernest Hemingway was "already in Italy," and e. e. cummings "was imprisoned." They "were to follow different roads but for all of us," he observed, "the experience of war brought us face to face with the breakdown of the values which [we] had been taught to regard as the stable and permanent foundations of our society."[26]

Lawson also entered into a passionate relationship during his sojourn abroad. Kate Drain was a scant year older than he and from a similarly privileged background. She was from a prominent Spokane family—her father was a lawyer and banker—and she too had traveled widely abroad. They married in November 1918 and divorced in 1924, producing one son, Alan Drain Lawson, a sculptor and stage technician. Her relationship to the "blacklisted" Lawson did not prevent her from attaining heights of her own in Hollywood, appearing as an actress as late as 1951 in *How to Marry a Millionaire* and serving as a costume designer for the notorious right-winger Bob Hope for his 1950s television show. In fact, she spent more than two profitable decades with Hope.

When Lawson and Kate Drain met in Europe, she was a "volunteer nurse's aide," a move facilitated by her powerful father, the "adjutant general" of the state of Washington. "Dos" was a "very dear friend" of hers, as well as a friend of her soon-to-be spouse. She had a "little apartment in Paris, a little sort of a room and a cuby [*sic*] corner, and [for] some reason," she was "allowed in the gang" led by Dos Passos and Lawson. She met Lawson in Rome. "He was the head of a little magazine that they were doing. We were very much in love," she recalled wistfully.

Their marriage was rather surreptitious; Lawson still under his thumb, "didn't want his father to know me at all." The Lawsons' son was born in 1919 and it seemed that they were well on their way to marital bliss. But the youthful Lawson rapidly lost interest in his new bride. "He didn't care much for me," she confided later. Lawson, she said, "was restless and he didn't like being married after he got home." He was "quite definite about it and wanted to be free. He said I stultified his creative urge, which is a pretty fancy line," [so] he just one day came in and said, 'I don't like being married and I'm leaving. . . . I want a divorce. I want to be free.' And I had such confidence in him at that time, such faith in him, that I thought, 'well, if I'm blocking anything, I better get out quickly because it's too good a man to miss, to lose in the shuffle.'"

Then there was Sue Edmonds. She often found Sue "sitting on the door[step] of the apartment we had in New York"—"quite a lot before he threw me out." Still saddened by it all decades later, Kate Drain conceded that "it broke my heart, incidentally. I've never gotten over it." Despite the peremptory manner in which Lawson treated her, she admitted candidly months before his passing—when they were both well into their ninth decade—"I'm still in love with the man, which is kind of ridiculous but charming."

She was also with him when his life was indelibly marked. They were working on a play, collaborating with Augustin Duncan, "brother of Isadora." "[W]e were living—we lived in the summertime," recalled Kate Drain Lawson, "up near Haverstraw. . . . [W]e were all driving in an automobile one night and the car went off the road . . . and threw us all out into a field and broke Jack's leg very badly. . . . [H]e spent that summer in the hospital with a very badly broken upper leg or something or other. And I kept house and took care of the baby which had arrived a short time before."[27]

From that point forward, John Howard Lawson—Jewish, left-handed, short, big-nosed—had another distinguishing characteristic: he walked with a noticeable limp. These distinctive characteristics, like the defective

eye of the novelist Alice Walker,[28] or the halting speech of the writer Budd Schulberg, helped to provide Lawson with a sense of being different and with it a sensitivity to humanity that often shone through in his fictional creations. But Kate Lawson's recollections of her former husband also capture another critical element of his life, for he did go on to marry Sue Edmonds, and they remained together—despite numerous travails—until he took his last breath.

A Texan who attended Baylor University, Sue Edmonds then had a "beautiful mop of red-gold curls" that sat as a crown on an "expression of a certain rebellious and innocent deviltry."[29] She was from a rough-and-tumble frontier family, her grandfather in the mid–nineteenth century was part of a wagon train west—that came into sharp conflict with Native Americans.[30]

His own conflicted love life aside, these few years spent in Europe had left a lasting imprint on Lawson, not only because of the birth of his son Alan and early friendship with a man, Dos Passos, who turned out to be one of the major U.S. writers of the century. It was in January 1920, shortly after his return from Europe, that he sold his play *The Spice of Life* to Paramount for $5,000—a sum that convinced him, if there had ever been any doubt, that he could survive as a creative writer.[31] Even if he had not been so blessed, Lawson retained other options. He had "no money problem" at that time, since his "father was . . . glad to advance whatever was needed." Hence, when he returned from his European jaunt he rented temporarily from painter Rockwell Kent an "apartment on the parlor floor of a brownstone on Fifteenth Street near Seventh Avenue" in Manhattan. His plan was to make his "permanent home in Paris." Lawson was "not unhappy" in the City of Light. He "wandered about the city. [I] danced in small taverns and in the streets. [I] dined well and picturesquely." He made friendships, two of which—with Edna St. Vincent Millay and Ezra Pound—"had a memorable effect" on his thinking, though he found the future fascist "difficult to understand," whereas Pound found Lawson's questions "stupid," as he felt literature was the "answer to all problems."[32]

Lawson's recollections encapsulate another aspect of his persona: his restlessness, especially in his early years, which contrasted with—and may have perversely generated—the deep sense of commitment he developed as a mature adult. He was trying to ride simultaneously two different horses going in different directions. Thus, in the summer of 1918 he and Kate Drain "were together constantly," not least since he desired a "rich emotional life"—yet he "feared marriage as a loss of 'freedom'" and "felt constricted by domesticity." At times he left her, as when he decamped to Le

Havre "and found a room in a house on a cliff above the sea a few miles north of the town" to work on a play. When he was away from her, which was often, his "marriage . . . began to go to pieces."

Lawson gave all appearances of being a self-indulgent and confused scion of a prominent family; certainly, he gave little indication of becoming what some viewed as a dogmatic, doctrinaire Marxist. He was in Paris at the same time that W. E. B. Du Bois was there on behalf of his Pan African Congress, but Lawson, an intellectual dabbler, a man who hailed from cosmopolitan Manhattan and considered France a second home, had "never heard of Du Bois or of the meetings he organized."[33]

Thus his wife may not have been surprised by Lawson's subsequent choice to flit around Europe in the aftermath of the war, soaking up both ideas and atmosphere. Groucho Marx once quipped that "every American who has gone Communist or anti–United States should and would be cured by spending a few years in Europe. I have met ever so many expatriates over here, who would give years of their life could they go back home again."[34] It was unlikely that Lawson was on Marx's mind when he crafted these words, since Lawson's transatlantic journey was far from enervating. Just before his twenty-sixth birthday, in 1921, he was in Antwerp—en route to Liverpool—and enjoying himself immensely.[35]

Lawson spent "three desolate weeks in Vienna," desperately seeking a meeting with Sigmund Freud, but "he was away." He walked "mile after mile through working class districts" in an Austria not far from being on the cusp of the Holocaust. At that point in his life "the only entertainment that interested" him there was "presented in a small theatre," where he was shaken by his encounters with "the Futurists."[36] The theatrical innovation for which he became notorious—with the debut of *Processional* particularly—was influenced profoundly by his jaunts around Europe.

While Lawson's relationship with his first wife seemed to be troubled from its inception, it seemed that his ties to Dos Passos were of a radically different character. A shy man well on his way to baldness, Dos Passos "had a long puffy face that made him look like an 'elongated squirrel'"; he also suffered from a speech impediment that caused him to lisp slightly. He was straitlaced and bookish and took himself quite seriously.[37] It "wasn't long," said Dos Passos, "before Jack and I were telling each other how, when we got home from the war, we would turn the New York theater inside out." Like literary roustabouts, they caroused around Europe together. Dos Passos, whose Portuguese origins paralleled the outsider status of his friend's Jewishness, recalled that Lawson was so taken by the "Neapolitan ladies," found them so fascinating, "we had to leave him behind when we started

out on foot to Pompeii." They were departing "when a horse cab drove up at a gallop. There he was, chipper and shaved and bursting with a whole Arabian Night's entertainment . . . of Neapolitan adventures." The peripatetic Lawson migrated from the ambulance corps to a "Red Cross publicity job that kept him in Rome in some splendor during the rest of the war." While in France, Lawson had a room on the Quai de la Tournelle. "I don't remember what his putative occupation was," said Dos Passos, "but most of his energy was going into writing a play. Before and after dinner I'd read him parts of *Three Soldiers* and he'd read scenes from what was to turn into *Roger Bloomer*." At that juncture, Kate Drain, a "handsome strapping girl" with the "finest brown eyes and level brows you ever saw," was part of this threesome. At this point, Dos Passos was "absolutely intoxicated with Lawson's dramatic style and swore he would turn out the greatest playwright ever." Confident of the future, they "ate well and drank well and loaned each other money when we ran out." They "led a fine life," as "Paris was full of music that spring." They "listened to the chansonniers at the *boites de nuit*." They "raved over Charpentier's opera *Louise* and suffered at the Comedie Francaise." Yes, said Dos Passos, still savoring the experience years later, "we led a fine life."

The revel was hardly interrupted when they all decamped across the Atlantic to Manhattan. Lawson "with his plays and his lady friends"—of which there seemed to be a profusion, both before and after his marriage—"and his enthusiasms and outré convictions and his willingness in those days to argue any topic on any side at the drop of the hat, was a three-ring circus. His sister, Adelaide, roamed in and out in her Gypsy way, paying no attention to all the pretentious nonsense talked around her, interested only in putting how things looked to her on canvas." Dawn Powell, the underrated writer who was to become Lawson's loving muse—and vice versa—was part of this enchanting circle. According to Dos Passos, she was "one of the wittiest and most dashingly courageous women I ever knew." There was a time when "Whittaker Chambers, . . . then a spooky little guy on hush-hush missions as a Communist Party courier, flitted in and out." Ernest Hemingway, F. Scott Fitzgerald, and other founding members of the Lost Generation were hovering about. It was almost as if they were all consciously seeking to provide each other with material for their various novels and plays. They sat around dinner tables and in taverns engaging in witty banter, since "conversation in the early twenties had to be one wisecrack after another. Cracks had to fly back and forth continually like the birds in badminton."[38]

Such an ambience seemed to be tailored with Lawson in mind, as his plays, then screenplays, came to be known for their scintillating dialogue.

Such was the case with the play that helped to cement his early celebrity. *Roger Bloomer* hit Manhattan in 1923 like a thunderclap. Lawson had returned to the United States from a trip abroad in the late summer of 1923, and, as he observed later, "it seemed as if a door closed behind me on Europe and another door opened on the universe. . . . I was ignorant of history and I was ill-informed about time and space." He spent most of his "time on the ship returning to the United States reading *The Waste Land* and *Ulysses*" and found that "both books offered me technical lessons for drama"—many of which found their way into *Roger Bloomer*.[39]

The eponymous lead character of this play runs away from his prosperous Iowa home to New York after failing his college examinations. He falls in love with a woman accused of theft at a place where she works—and she commits suicide. He is arrested for murder, and his father hurries to the big city to rescue him.[40] The parallels to Lawson's own life—moving to New York, suicide, the protective father—are evident.

Lawson had written of what he knew, but reviews were mixed[41]—though one critic implicitly compared him to theatrical giants: "Every healthy movement in creative literature begins with 'storm and stress . . . its wildness and overwrought passion and excess.' So the young Marlowe began, so the young Goethe."[42] And so the young Lawson. Similarly aroused were Edna St. Vincent Millay and John Dos Passos, who rallied to his side.[43]

Slightly autobiographical, the play depicts a well-raised country boy whose father owns the one big apartment store in an Iowa town of thirty-five thousand inhabitants, who finds his surroundings too provincial, too uniform, too conventional, and thus departs for Manhattan. Once engulfed in this metropolis, which is pictured as more forbidding than it actually is, he goes to pieces and has visions of witches, biers, and goblins.[44] The play offers presentiments of Lawson's future. Bloomer's father remarks, "Anybody who's a little different from everybody else gets it in the neck. That boy is fixing up to get it in the neck." Another character notes that there were "not too many Socialists at these State colleges." A Yale student blares, "Look at me! Senior year, I'm sure of the best club. Simple rule: I always kept away from Jews, highbrows and guys that eat with their knives." Later he flashed his class credentials, chirping, "This year I'm traveling with a society girl, a sort of society girl." Capitalist society is portrayed as robotic, soulless. Says one character, "There are only two things in New York, Sex and Money—if you get one, you get the other." A judge asks Roger Bloomer, "Are you a socialist?" He replies no and is hit with the rejoinder "Lucky for you . . . [for] a man of your age. . . . It's anarchical: where is our young manhood going?"[45] The blunt airing of ideological laundry hit Broadway like a bazooka. The play consisted of "thirty or forty

short scenes. Some of these are acted in front of drops painted in distorted fashion, some against black velvet."[46]

Almost instantaneously, Lawson's drama was associated with the nascent school of expressionism, then gaining popularity in Europe.[47] It was the "first American expressionist drama," says the analyst Bernard Dick; it "might even be called modified expressionism: it has the basic features—short scenes that flow into each other, sometimes giving the impression of concurrent action; aphoristic dialogue that barely avoids being apocalyptic; fragmented plot; half-formed thoughts and unfinished sentences of a phantasmagoric ending." Lawson's deep knowledge of the arts was revealed here, as in this work "the ghosts of Wedekind, Kaiser, Stravinsky's 'Rites of Spring' and Aeschylus hover in the background." *Roger Bloomer* was cinematic in its sparkling dialogue and its quick cuts from scene to scene—virtually a movie on stage and a signal to the movie industry that would soon require such talent. It also displayed a theme that was to mark much of Lawson's later work and support an "indefinite variety of plots: boy/girl, rendered not so much in romantic as in social terms," a theme that would emerge in his movies, for example, "heiress/miner *(Dynamite)*, adventuress/peasant *(Blockade)* and femme fatale/thief *(Algiers)*." Lawson the theorist would describe this as a "root idea," which could "branch out in enough directions to create a varied system."[48] Decades after this play's production, Lawson continued to insist that "the thing that always concerns me deeply" was the "form or structure" of a work.[49]

Lawson was steaming ahead. Having tasted the best that Europe had to offer and having savored the sweet success of Broadway, he was brimming with confidence, writing with a "consciousness of my class, as one who was in it and not outside it." He was drawing lines, too, feeling a "kinship" with the future Communist poet Walter Lowenfels that he "could not feel with [e. e.] cummings because cummings seemed to offer a false picture of himself—the I in lower case concealing the colossal ego."

Before *Roger Bloomer,* Lawson was a "cipher," but "now it was taken for granted that sooner or later [he] would become an important person in the theatre establishment." He was being seen in all the "right" places, socializing on the Upper East Side of Manhattan, not far from where he had been raised. Greenwich Village, south of these environs, and a bastion of avant-garde artists living amid winding streets, had become his habitat. There a "continuous party that was either in progress or about to be started again" was the norm. Lawson "drank immoderately," also the norm. He was still a buddy of Dos Passos, though he "came and went relentlessly," but "when he was in New York, he spent a great deal of time" with his old friend. "Ab-

stractly," the novelist with a growing reputation "hated money people, but he got along better with them" than Lawson did. "He was also ready to escape whenever he faced complications which threatened to become onerous. He was likely to hurry away on a moment's notice. On one occasion, he announced as Sue and he and I were riding in a taxi that he had to take a ship leaving in an hour. He had an appointment he explained 'to take tea with some old ladies in London.'" Lawson and his companion waited while Dos Passos "packed his bags and rushed . . . to the boat. He did not have enough money for the ticket, so Sue loaned him a hundred dollars."

But Lawson seemed as odd as Dos Passos, at least to some. Success had not brought him peace of mind. He confessed to having "plagued Sue with my frantic instability. . . . [A friend] consulted William Carlos Williams about me, asking him if he could suggest any medical or psychological clues to my ambivalent conduct."[50]

He was grappling with James Joyce's *Ulysses*, attracted in part—seemingly—because studying it "seemed like a gesture of rebellion. It was banned in the United States and the book had to be hidden when I passed the customs." But traipsing through Joyce's word puzzles seemed to leave him even more unsettled. He fled for Pittsburgh, simply "because" he "wanted to encounter an American reality that was not visible in New York." Yet he found no key to his ennui there, returning to Manhattan in late 1924 to be a "member of an Honorary Committee at the laying of the cornerstone of the new Guild Theatre on 52nd Street." This recognition signified his growing importance as a playwright, though neither that nor rubbing shoulders with Governor Al Smith, who gave the main address, brought him a settled state of mind. He and Sue Edmonds were having their ups and downs; dumping Kate Drain had brought no particular happiness either, since the new "relationship was not free from emotional tensions." By his own admission, Lawson was "moody and somewhat cruel," continuing to "feel 'threatened' by a love that gave promise of lasting a lifetime." Kate Drain, now the "other" woman, was living near him in the Village with Alan; she "had no objections and no demands," which was fortunate, since Lawson probably would not have been capable of meeting either.[51] He was now smitten with Sue Edmonds, just as a few years earlier he had been taken with Kate Drain. Sue Edmonds had her own problems. Her parents "emigrated from Scotland, lived in Virginia and then moved" to Texas. Her son, Jeffrey Lawson, recalls his mother as being "very sensitive"; she "had problems accepting the rough-hewn macho world dominated by Texas males. At about twenty she went to New York City, attended Columbia University," and, like, her future husband, "became friends with e. e. cummings."[52]

Lawson was restless, roaming socially (marrying one woman, then dropping her for another) and otherwise (traveling almost aimlessly to Pittsburgh, then back to Manhattan). But through it all, he remained anchored—committed—to his desk and typewriter, continuing to tap his creative muse. While waiting for his next play, *Processional*, to debut, he "wrote six or eight hours of every day in Patchin Place," his residence in southern Manhattan. It was then that he "developed the plan of *The Pure in Heart*." He was ransacking his experiences and his mind for other play ideas; as he listened to Governor Smith ramble on at the laying of the cornerstone of the Guild Theatre, he "wondered" about Otto Kahn, soon to be his benefactor, "running for governor, and a play came to mind fully formed and titled; it was a glib idea for a play" concerning a millionaire seeking this high office. This turned out to be *Loudspeaker*. This fertile imagination was bringing Lawson no settled mind, however. He "thought of the play as a mad tea party," but "the question to which there was no answer was—what was I doing there?" (i.e., listening to Smith). "I would ask the same question in Hollywood several years later," he added. "Everything I had written had been a protest against authority," befitting an artist deemed to be the epitome of the avant-garde. Yet "here I was in the lap of the establishment," on Broadway, hailed in the bourgeois press, rubbing elbows with Governor Smith and Otto Kahn. He was consorting with those against whom he was supposedly rebelling—and doing it inconsistently at that. He "had voted in the presidential election of 1916 to celebrate" coming "of age"—but "never again until 1932." What manner of rebellion was this?[53]

Wrestling more definitely with this knotty problem would come later. For now it was enough that *Processional* was debuting. Again, by his own admission, Lawson was expanding the bounds of dramatic form, seeking to "lay the foundations of some sort of native technique, to reflect to some extent the color and movement of the American processional, as it streams about us. The rhythm is staccato, burlesque, carried out by a formalized arrangement of jazz music." Originally presented in January 1925 with George Abbott, Lee Strasberg, and Alvah Bessie in the cast, it also contained elements that would cause Lawson some discomfort later. Revealing an underdeveloped political mind, there was an offensively stereotypical Negro character, Rastus Jolly ("one lonesome nigger Boss, wid a heart full a' care an' desecration") and another ethnically questionable figure named "Dago Joe". A Ku Klux Klan character, not portrayed favorably, nonetheless wails provocatively, "Clean up the dirty foreigners, make 'em kiss the flag! Skin the Jews, lynch the niggers, make 'em kiss the flag!" But Lawson

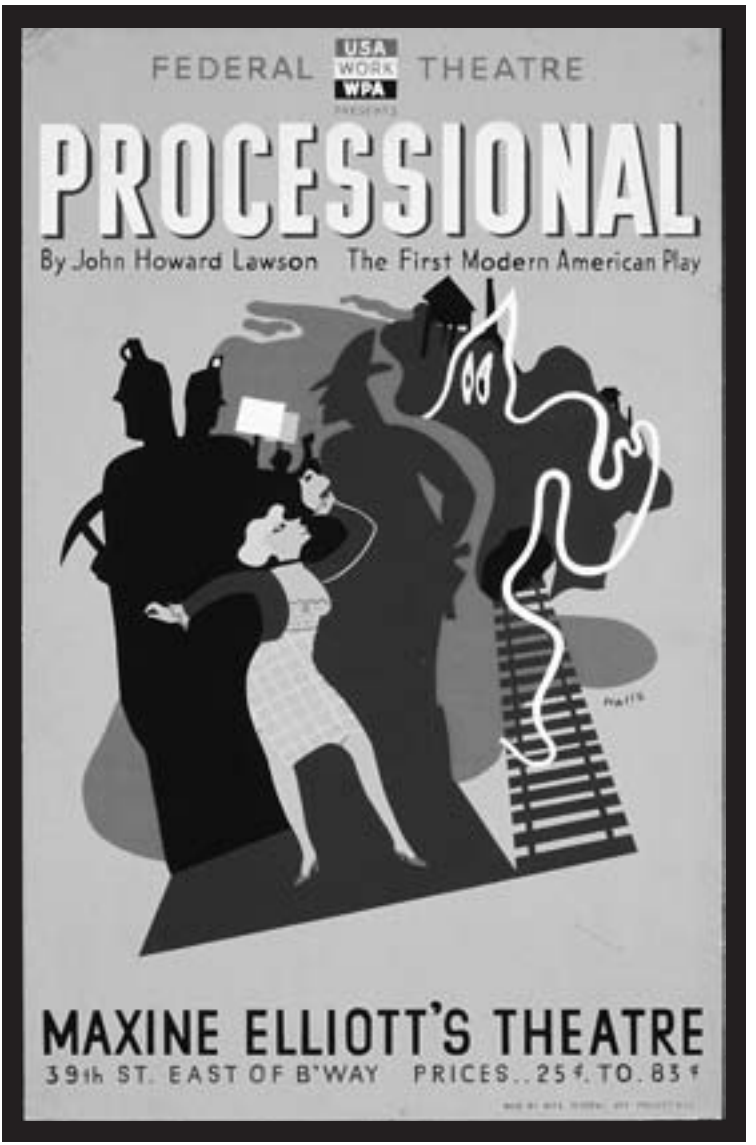

FIGURE 1. At one time, Lawson—who had been one of the closest friends of the novelist John Dos Passos—was considered the "hope" of the theater and an avant-garde dramatist. After he began writing screenplays, however, he correspondingly wrote fewer plays. (Courtesy of Library of Congress)

was groping for something else, with references in this play to an "Armenian Bolsheviki" and a "new sun risin.'" "What's that?" was the question posed by one of his characters. "The proletariat," was the quick reply.[54] Lawson admitted that "a writer often creates himself or part of himself in his characters," and this work was exemplary of this tendency, reflecting as it did Lawson's divided heart.[55]

It was a "jazz" play in its free form, and it was also radical in its blunt invocation of class conflict as a theme. It "created an enormous sensation and had an enormous impact on the theatre," Lawson conceded decades later. It "marked a break with the conventional theatre. I set to 'push out the walls of the theatre.' In a way there's some resemblance to the work that Bertolt Brecht has done. . . . the use of music, the use of jazz is very striking." Then there was the subject matter, "the labor movement," "material [that] had never before been brought into the theatre in that way, especially with the violence and crudity with which the strike situation and the struggle around it is treated." *Processional* included the "use of almost a film technique in the chase [which] was also very striking in the play." Opening night for this extravaganza was "an absolute uproar. The audience was literally swept off its feet," though it played "only 14 weeks."[56]

While visiting Vienna, Lawson had sought vainly to meet Freud. Here Freud appeared as if by magic on stage, represented by the "many elements of Freudian symbolism" in this work.[57]

Lawson's own personal drama continued as the play opened. He had been allocated "six seats in the balcony, and six or eight in the orchestra." He "gave the upstairs seats to people who were closest to me, including Sue [Edmonds] and Dos [Passos] and my sister; the orchestra tickets were given to influential or wealthy friends." Sue Edmonds was "deeply hurt and told me so." Lawson was "upset by the argument, because it exposed weaknesses in me which went far deeper than the foolish disposal of first-night tickets. " Lawson, the rebel, the avant-garde writer, wanted something quite conventional: "I wanted success; I wanted prestige; and the uproar over *Processional* fed my vanity and at the same time posed my creative problem." Lawson was trapped within a contradiction, and it was only less squishiness about commitment that would lead to his being released. "I proclaimed my opposition to people who held power, including those who controlled the theatre. Yet I was dependent on them and in my personal contacts I liked them and tried to conciliate them. . . . Sue saw that I deceived myself and she was angry at the deception." Lawson "could not resolve the conflict between my ambitions and my ideals and so I deceived myself about both." His idealism was empty, simply "pretension and ro-

mantic." Flagellating himself, Lawson cried, "I pretended that I could fulfill my ambition without paying the price. . . . my creative problem was related to the concrete question of money." He was now thirty, yet "there had only been brief periods when I had supported myself and my family." The roaring rebel was "dependent on my father," while "Sue earned a good income in department store advertising." He was "shamed" by it all, particularly the "generosity" of his father. "I could find no way to talk to him about my writing or its future course. . . . we could never bring ourselves to speak of it, or of anything else that was close to our hearts." His angst caused him to strike out at the person he loved: "Sue was the storm-center of my miseries. I made life intolerable for her. Since I held that the intensity of my feeling for her interfered with my writing, she decided that a separation would be good for both of us," so "she left for Europe."

The night of her departure was filled with gloom for him that a "wildly intemperate party on the forward deck of the 'Homeric'" could not hide. "Yos Kuniyoshi and his wife, Katinka, were on the same ship and my sister and Dos and everyone we knew were there to celebrate," but symbolizing his unsteady state, Lawson "almost fell off the boat." "I woke up in Jack Cowles' apartment," he recalled, still embarrassed, "with a devastating hangover and a feeling that I had made a fool of myself."

His life resembled a chaotic "processional"—"eight hours of work, dissipation in the evenings, week-ends at rich houses." It was this state of disordered bewilderment that was reflected in his play *Nirvana,* which he then began writing. The play concerned in part "an American intellectual facing the total collapse of moral values," the dilemma of the Lost Generation, though he was "less manic than [F. Scott] Fitzgerald." Yet he "was caught in the same maze of money and the imminence of hysteria" as was e. e. cummings. One evening the two "knocked on the wall that separated our room in Patchin Place" in Manhattan, "and we proceeded to spend a wild night together." Finally, like a man reaching out for a life raft, Lawson made a stab at commitment, marrying Sue Edmonds after her return from Europe; "for me it was a refuge and a hope," though he "made the first years difficult." His father handed him a hefty $12,000, "telling me it was mine and I could buy any property I wanted," and a similar amount to his sister. These gestures made Lawson think his father "had an inexhaustible supply of money," but "actually his only income came from the house he owned on Fortieth Street near Sixth Avenue," prime real estate to be sure. "He also [owned] the ten lots near the ocean at Belle Harbor." Lawson "used the money for a down-payment on a house on Waverly Place near Washington Square. The total price was $60,000."[58]

Patchin Place had been no prize. Peaceful and picturesque with iron-gated mews nestled just off Tenth Street and Sixth Avenue in the bawdy, rowdy Greenwich Village, it was variously the home of Djuana Barnes and Theodore Dreiser, among others. There were ten narrow row houses in a tiny, gloomy court snuggled beside a central shopping district. The neat oyster gray row houses were guarded by gaslight lampposts and ailanthus trees, serenely removed from the cacophony of the streets. They were built in 1848 as cheap boardinghouses for local workers before becoming residences for the chic. Though Lawson was only a sojourner there, cummings was to reside there until his death in 1962.[59] The buildings lacked utilities, with metered gas flares for light and heat, pumps for running water, and outhouses, "but the life there was shared and furniture emblazoned in fauve colors." There was a massive courthouse near Patchin Place, where like sentries gaudy prostitutes provided a nightly spectacle. The creative artists who flocked to Patchin Place could easily surmise—even though they were a short subway ride from munificence—that they were enduring the suffering that animated their fictional creations.[60]

Stumbling, bumbling, Lawson's inchoate life was reflected in an inchoate play. Despite its conspicuous weaknesses, *Processional* understandably excited audiences accustomed to much tamer fare. Sited in a West Virginia mining town in the throes of a strike and writhing under martial law, it features Rosie Cohen, daughter of a local merchant who succumbs to the lure of jazz and screeching horns. Still, the conservative writer, Kenneth Lloyd Billingsley was singularly unimpressed with this work, recalling sourly how it "featured children in overalls and masks ranting about the 'monster of capitalism' and screaming lines such as 'Dynamo! Dynamo!' and 'kill Henry Ford!'"[61]

Such carping was not accepted universally. One critic, after terming Lawson a "theatrical iconoclast," predicted boldly that "he may some day be a theatrical god."[62] Another felt the "awe of genius" after watching this play.[63] Robert Benchley may have gone too far in comparing him to Shakespeare.[64] Upton Sinclair was enthusiastic,[65] which Lawson found heartening.[66]

Lawson's friends Edna St. Vincent Millay, Donald Ogden Stewart, and John Dos Passos took out an advertisement as they sought to "urge everybody to see" this work. "We consider it one of the most thrilling plays ever written," they concluded unabashedly.[67] Sherwood Anderson told the world that this play "had inspired him to write for the theatre."[68] Another eminent critic called *Processional* "a Rhapsody in Red. . . . I had been present at the first performance of 'Rhapsody in Blue' in 1924 and I found it im-

pressive as the personal statement of a serious art."High praise from such literary luminaries was thrilling—and an antidote to the pointed shafts of criticism about this innovative work.[70] Walter Winchell, the increasingly influential journalist, was aghast: "I have never seen anything so bad," adding that he was "being kind."[71] George Jean Nathan with derision called Lawson "the latest young playwright to parade the Rialto in his underwears with his Hemschweif hanging out." The *New York Times* was less hostile,[72] though Lawson felt compelled to register a "protest vote of one against your (to say the least) extravagant estimate."[73]

Overall, reviews were mixed, though the impact was large.[74] When the Theatre Guild staged a "public discussion" of the play in February 1925, "every seat was taken thirty minutes before the program began and many of the [Guild's] own subscribers had to be turned away." Reflective of the high esteem in which Lawson was held, Elmer Rice, Dorothy Parker, and Fanny Hurst spoke "most favorably as its champions"—but the "debate ranged strongly" as "there were violent speeches from the balcony [with] volleys of applause for both sides."[75]

Lawson, who was profoundly influenced by the theatrical experiments then coursing throughout Europe, sought to explain to the U.S. audience what was on his mind. Readers of the *New York Times* were instructed that "in the theatre more than in any other field, the experiment must be a living entity, move and quiver in the calcium glare. . . . I have endeavored to create a method which shall express the American scene in native idiom, a method as far removed from the older realism as from the facile mood of expressionism." This was not an "abstract theory"; it was driven by his perception that "the legitimate theatre seems without warmth or richness of method." It "has become the fashion," he lamented "to forget that the history of theatrical entertainment is a tradition of crowded movement, violent physical vitality." Already a close student of theatrical history, he reminded his readers that "if this outer movement ceases to exist a play might just as well be phrased in terms of sonnet sequence or a grammar of Esperanto. And, indeed, the average drawing room play"—then all the rage—"has about reached this point of absolute nullity—three walls with footlights on the fourth side, lifeless dialogue and improbable enunciation—these have become a fixed standard." Lawson had a different vision. "The blood and bones of a living stage," he thundered, "must be the blood and bones of the actuality stirring around us." The status quo meant a withering theater: "The floundering method of production," said Lawson, "makes the producer a lucky man if one out of five productions brings a reasonable profit. This gigantic game of chance can hardly be called a legitimate busi-

ness. On the other hand we have the art theatre existing in a feeble trance totally removed from the rush and roar of things as they are, a sanctuary with doors barred against the world." But this "avant-garde" was no remedy, since "art as an escape from life is no better than morphine, rotary clubs, murder, speech-making, or any of the methods used by hundred-per-cent Americans to escape from actuality." Now his *Processional* was seeking to be the advanced guard of an accessible avant-garde: "The rhythm is staccato, burlesque, carried out by a formalized arrangement of jazz music." In this work Lawson sought to "lay the foundations of some sort of native technique, to reflect to some extent the color and movement of the American procession as it streams about us."[76]

Years later and despite its abject weaknesses, Lawson refused to repudiate *Processional* altogether. It was, he said in 1968, "still an important play, related to Brechtian drama and all the complex developments since that time—including 'happenings' and all the rest of it."[77] He was largely correct—and he could have added that his recognition of "jazz" was quite significant and important for this art form, which at that juncture was hardly given a respectful hearing and had yet to shake altogether its origins in brothels. Lawson had not been able to shake altogether, however, prevailing biases of the time, as he too conceded later, noting correctly that "the characters are stereotypes . . . the Negro playing his banjo, the Jewish storekeeper and his dancing daughter, the Polish radical talking about Marx." And, yes, the fact that there was "not a plot in the usual sense" was quite daring, liberating, and all that,[78] but this nonlinear approach could also leave theatergoers lost in a sea of confusion. This may shed light on why in 1966 Lawson concluded that it was "better not to include" this work in a published collection. "I have thought about it a great deal because it is a play of great and neglected significance," he said, "but the vaudeville or cartoon method I use includes caricature of Negro and Jewish personalities: this is presented as part of the raw crudity and violence of American life in the middle twenties, but it is so exaggerated that it has a very different and possibly unfortunate meaning in our world of the middle sixties." "I feel," he concluded, "I cannot publish a work which suggests racist stereotypes."[79]

But this Sargasso Sea of confusion that *Processional* represented was symptomatic of the floundering of Lawson himself—a man of no small material means who was becoming ever more critical of the system that had produced this wealth, a man with a felt desire for emotional engagement but who found it difficult to maintain a loving relationship with a woman. Yet his marriage to Sue Edmonds, a union that lasted for almost half a century, was a gigantic step toward a commitment that was to encompass all realms.