



# **Kitchen Sink Realisms: Domestic Labor, Dining, and Drama in American Theatre (Studies Theatre Hist & Culture)**

*Dorothy Chansky*

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From 1918's *Tickless Time* through *Waiting for Lefty*, *Death of a Salesman*, *A Streetcar Named Desire*, *A Raisin in the Sun*, and *The Prisoner of Second Avenue* to 2005's *The Clean House*, domestic labor has figured largely on American stages. No dramatic genre has done more than the one often dismissively dubbed "kitchen sink realism" to both support and contest the idea that the home is naturally women's sphere. But there is more to the genre than even its supporters suggest.

In analyzing kitchen sink realisms, Dorothy Chansky reveals the ways that food preparation, domestic labor, dining, serving, entertaining, and cleanup saturate the lives of dramatic characters and situations even when they do not take center stage. Offering resistant readings that rely on close attention to the particular cultural and semiotic environments in which plays and their audiences operated, she sheds compelling light on the changing debates about women's roles and the importance of their household labor across lines of class and race in the twentieth century.

The story begins just after World War I, as more households were electrified and fewer middle-class housewives could afford to hire maids. In the 1920s, popular mainstream plays staged the plight of women seeking escape from the daily grind; African American playwrights, meanwhile, argued that housework was the least of women's worries. Plays of the 1930s recognized housework as work to a greater degree than ever before, while during the war years domestic labor was predictably recruited to the war effort—sometimes with gender-bending results. In the famously quiescent and anxious 1950s, critiques of domestic normalcy became common, and African American maids gained a complexity previously reserved for white leading ladies. These critiques proliferated with the re-emergence of feminism as a political movement from the 1960s on. After the turn of the century, the problems and comforts of domestic labor in black and white took center stage. In highlighting these shifts, Chansky brings the real home.

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