Two hundred years ago, the United States was on the verge of becoming a nation. Many men were turning their eyes in that direction. What he is referring to is the California Gold Rush, which took place between 1848 and 1855. During this time, gold was discovered in California and over 300,000 people rushed to California to find gold and strike it rich.

In the play Dr. Sloper tells Morris Townsend... the West is opening up. In the neighborhood of Washington Square, Catherine Sloper is an heiress in her 20s, who has lived under the disagreeing, resentful gaze of her father, Dr. Sloper. Catherine’s mother died years before, and, in her father’s eyes, Catherine has never measured up to her mother’s beauty and accomplishments.

Catherine has a life full of dresses, jewels and privilege, but little love. She is socially awkward and unassuming, and growing old for marriage. Therefore, when an eager Morris Townsend expresses romantic interest in Catherine, Dr. Sloper is convinced that he is only after one thing: her inheritance. Catherine wrestles with her duty to her family and her hope for love. How can she find her voice and claim her future?
MEET THE PLAYWRIGHTS

“A dramatization is imagination made palpable, or visible, or understandable — instantly. It is the imaginer’s highest moment.” — Ruth Goetz

The Heiress was written by the married couple Ruth and Augustus Goetz in 1947. Ruth, a playwright, adaptor and translator, was the daughter of a theater writer and producer and was involved in every aspect of theater from a very early age. She studied scenic design and made a living as a costume designer and story editor before meeting and marrying Augustus in 1932. Shortly after they got married, Augustus quit his job as a stockbroker to pursue a writing career of his own. After they collaborated on several projects together, Ruth suggested that they adapt the classic novel Washington Square for the stage. In 1947 the play opened on Broadway and was a hit! Two years after their success on Broadway, the Goetzes were asked to develop the screenplay of The Heiress. The film starred Olivia de Havilland and Montgomery Clift and received four Academy Awards. Augustus died in 1957. Ruth continued to write plays in both French and English until her death in 2001. To honor her late husband, she wrote the play Sweet Love Remember’d. Through her work with the Dramatists Guild and the Young Playwrights Festival, both of which she is a founding member, Ruth was known and remembered as a mentor and supporter of young playwrights.

Dramatists Guild — a renowned community of professional playwrights, composers, lyricists, and librettists dedicated to protecting, informing and promoting the interests of theater makers.

FROM GOSSIP TO NOVEL

The story of The Heiress began with a juicy piece of gossip. In 1879, actress Fanny Kemble met with her friend Henry James to spill a story. Her brother had proposed to a plain-looking woman, who was extremely rich. Kemble’s brother wasn’t in love with the woman but wanted her inheritance. The unwitting heiress fell head over heels for her suitor even though “her father disapproved strongly (and justly) of the engagement.” James was a famous novelist and he took this piece of gossip and wrote the novel Washington Square. Ruth and Augustus Goetz then adapted this novel into The Heiress.

FROM THE DIRECTOR’S NOTEBOOK

Leading an all-female design team, director Seema Sueko used three words to guide the artists in building the world that we see on stage: reclaim, thriller and revolutionary.

“Reclaiming what’s been stolen is at the heart of The Heiress. Each character at different moments in the play and for different reasons has an epiphany that something has been stolen, snatched or deprived of them. In this play, on different timetables, they attempt to reclaim that thing. Stylistically, the play is a thriller of the heart... We are focused on the micro, on the family, on the domestic sphere and specifically the tender sphere of the heart. But, still, the reclamation at the end is nothing short of revolutionary.”

INHERITANCE LAWS

The general law just before the time of The Heiress was that a woman would lose control over her inheritance (money and property) after she married. However, in the mid-19th century, with the New York Married Women’s Property Act, most states passed legislation giving married women, rather than their husbands, ownership and control over all personal and real estate property they had inherited or been given. Married women’s inheritances became separate property that they could use as they wished. If Catherine was to marry Morris, she would have the power to use her money as she wished, which was a relatively new law during 1850.

MARRIAGE IN THE 1800S

A woman’s quality of life in America during the 1800s was almost entirely dependent on marital status. The ideal woman was submissive; her job was to be a meek, obedient, loving wife and subservient to the man around her. Women were not allowed to vote, own property, or participate in the public sphere of men. As a result, marriage, preferably to a wealthy man of high status, was the central concern for many women. Marriage was a way of improving or cementing a family’s social status. In addition to money, established families like the Slopers, might also consider the man’s reputation, the prestige and history of his family name and how the man made his money. The man’s age, appearance or personality, the daughter’s wishes, and love were not usually considerations.

ACTIVITY

Catherine’s total inheritance equaled $30,000 in 1850. How much would her inheritance be worth today?

PREPARATION OF AN HEIRESS

Upper-class women like Catherine and her cousin, Marian, had the advantage of education that was not offered to working women in the 1850s. However, the education upper-class women received was not meant to be academic. The goal of elite female education was to provide young ladies with the social graces and manners befitting their place in society, and to instill a basic knowledge of literature, classics, arithmetic and geography. Lessons also included instruction in religious and moral principles that would lead to the development of virtuous character. These lessons would all come in handy when a woman became a debutante and, later, a hostess in her married home.

A debutante is an upper-class young woman making her first appearance in fashionable society. The tradition of debuting was formed so that young women, of marriageable age, could be presented to high society for the first time. This usually occurred between the ages of 16 and 18. Parents hoped that their daughter’s beauty and charisma would outshine that of all others in the room and, thus, secure them a suitable husband. Following the ball, the young women were expected to regularly attend high society events and mingle in approved social circles. Fashion in the 1850s was just shy of the southern-belle hoop skirt era. Costume designer Ivania Stack said the 1850s were “all about the ruffles.” Women used their clothing to provide a barrier between themselves and the outside world by wearing several layers of ruffles on their skirts and petticoats. This provided a protective layer around a woman. At the same time, the layers and the rigid, restrictive corsets they wore were also a type of cage. The clothes of upper-class women made them beautiful birds without freedom.