Introduction to American drama

- **How far has the historical, social and cultural development of America shaped the plays of major American playwrights of the 20th century?**
- **What are the particular and personal viewpoints of individual playwrights?**
- **What makes a play an example of major drama of the 20th century?**

In the last decades of the 19th century American theatre had been largely given over to melodramas and lavish spectacle. Towards the end of the 19th century and in the first two decades of the 20th, America became a 'melting pot' of nationalities and cultures. Between 1900 and 1915, 14.5 million immigrants from southern and central Europe poured into the United States. These immigrants, anxious to hold onto their national culture and language, were entertained at neighbourhood theatres in big cities such as New York and Chicago. Audiences enjoyed sentimental dramas about the 'old country', or about the problems of holding onto traditional mores and lifestyles in this new society of America. In the film The Godfather Part II, there is a scene set in just such a theatre, an Italian-American neighbourhood theatre in the Little Italy area of New York. The audience are watching a melodrama representing the problems of different generations of Italian-Americans adapting to the new society.

In European drama, in the latter part of the 19th century, there had emerged major playwrights such as Henrik Ibsen, August Strinberg, Anton Chekhov and Bernard Shaw, who were intent on representing life in their plays in a more realistic style. **Realism** in the theatre emerged from a desire to reject excessive theatrical artificiality. It represented everyday reality in a style that would seem familiar to the audiences that came to see these new plays. The dramatic language was meant to be close to everyday speech, the situations and settings akin to the kind of social problems and