

Challenging Traditional Approaches to Eugene O'Neill

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Abstract

O'Neill is the greatest American playwright, but traditional approaches to O'Neill criticism and theatrical production require reappraisal in the 21st century. Traditional attitudes limit understanding of the range of O'Neill's plays and the possibilities for their productions. There is much more to the understanding of O'Neill's plays than reading them as the dramatist's personal psychoanalysis or autobiographical expiation. So too must directors look beyond performance traditions mired in mid-20th century psychological realism. They must see beyond the legacy of the famous productions of the late masterpieces. O'Neill's plays must not only be revered by audiences; they must ensoul them.

Keywords: Eugene O'Neill, 20th century American theatre, James O'Neill, George Pierce Baker, American drama criticism, Jose Quintero, Jason Robards, Al Pacino, Jonathan Miller, Kevin Spacey, Long Day's Journey Into Night, The Iceman Cometh, "Hughie" George Jean Nathan

It is generally understood that serious American drama begins with Eugene O'Neill. Nonetheless, more than a century after his birth, and more than half a century after his death, America is still not ready for Eugene O'Neill. Admittedly, this is a broad-based accusation. Certainly historians of the American theatre no longer universally accept that O'Neill single-handedly created modern American drama, yet it is still the conventional wisdom that before O'Neill there was no serious American drama. So my accusation is a response to decades of criticism and commentary whose emphasis is on making connections between O'Neill's life and his plays. The outstanding text in this regard, a *summa* of this school, is Stephen A. Black's *Eugene O'Neill: Beyond Mourning and Tragedy*.¹ To counter the assertion that O'Neill is primarily, if not exclusively, an autobiographical playwright it is necessary not only to question the putative autobiography in his plays, but to also stop

relying on the productions presented during O'Neill's lifetime (and overseen by him) as the benchmark for all subsequent ones.

Historically, we see that O'Neill emerges during the first quarter of the 20th century, during a time of artistic and social ferment. The theatre of his father that O'Neill grew up with—and in—was a mass medium; James O'Neill was one of the leading romantic actors of his day and was also a great matinee idol. James O'Neill was even more popular though than a conventional leading man in that both men and women flocked to his performances. Thus though he was part of a soon-to-be-moribund style, the way that he managed his career was much closer to that of a contemporary star. James O'Neill carefully manipulated his public image and always had a press agent on his payroll. The tall tales and “good copy” that O'Neill's press agents provided were part of what kept the Monte Cristo production a going concern for three decades. (Not to mention a source of frustration for O'Neill's early biographers who were frequently misled by the stories planted in late-19th century newspapers by these press agents.)

Indeed, James O'Neill's theatre was something like television and cinema today; the theatre of the late-19th and early 20th century featured dramatic spectacles to thrill, excite and entertain audiences by appealing to basic instincts and emotions. Sympathy was evoked by situations such as an honest woodsman toiling in loneliness until one blessed day in the forest a basket is discovered with an infant. The babe grows up to rose-cheeked, heaving-bosomed womanhood and falls in love with a convenient handsome stranger who turns out to be the son of a logging tycoon who can settle papa into a soft job, but just before the wedding the sweet innocent girl is abducted by the treacherous dancing master. She resists his advances and is (here you must take your choice) either tied to the railroad tracks to await an onrushing locomotive or tied down in a sawmill to bide a while until a buzz saw cuts her in two. Needless to say, the Handsome Hero arrives in the nick of time to save her and the play ends with a suitable wedding march. Nevertheless, in spite of such scenarios, most plays featured activist heroines (Booth 2). This important conventional characterization is exemplified by the first successful use of the rescuing-the-victim-tied-to-the-railroad-tracks. It occurs in the play *Under the Gaslight* in which a woman saves a man tied to the tracks. O'Neill would draw on this convention and amplify it by creating numerous strong-willed female protagonists: Nina Leeds in *Strange Interlude* and Lavinia Mannon in *Mourning Becomes Electra*, are but two of these. O'Neill's amplification of a staid melodramatic convention complicates his relationship with the “Broadway showshop” style of industrialized theatre that O'Neill despised. Indeed though, the entire dramaturgy of the popular American theatre is more complicated than the simple plot outlines detailed above would have one believe. The range of both plays performed and performance styles was far more complex than conventional wisdom presumes. These heavily plotted and usually spectacular plays are the foundation of conventional wisdom about the “Broadway showshop” style of industrialized theatre that O'Neill despised. Even if one considers only James O'Neill's *Count of Monte Cristo*, one learns that he performed in productions of this play ranging from first class Broadway extravaganzas with huge casts and spectacular sets to vaudeville “tab” versions that cut the play down to minimal length, relied on almost no scenery, and used as few actors as possible.

The career of James O'Neill had a tremendous impact on the playwright. Those who take his son's word for it believe that O'Neill's father had “sold out” by exchanging the

struggle of artistic striving for the security of guaranteed financial success via the perennially popular “Monte Cristo.” The elder O’Neill is estimated to have performed this role over 4,000 times. “That God-damned play,” says the father in O’Neill’s putatively autobiographical masterpiece *Long Day’s Journey Into Night*, “I bought for a song... it ruined me with its promise of an easy fortune” (809). Most accept as simple fact that because he was able to earn a minimum of \$45,000, tax-free, pre-inflation dollars a year, he “sold out”, and by the end of his life was so embittered by the loss of his great gift through mind-numbing repetition, that his last words to his son were “Glad to go boy—a better sort of life—another sort—somewhere. This sort of life—froth rotten! – all of it—no good!” (*Letters of Eugene O’Neill* 132).

One must note that this is Eugene O’Neill’s projection of his father’s perspective. None of James O’Neill’s contemporaries notes any such bitterness on James O’Neill’s part. Benjamin McArthur’s *Actors and American Culture, 1880-1920* is typical in that it cites James Tyrone in *Long Day’s Journey Into Night* as the authority for James O’Neill’s assessment of his own career (47). In spite of these seeming contradictions between the father and son’s approach to the theatre, one can extrapolate that Eugene was even better at manipulating the media than his father ever dreamed of being, and he did so without resorting to press agents.

In a letter of application to George Pierce Baker’s famous workshop at Harvard, O’Neill declared that he was determined to be an “artist or nothing” (*O’Neill Letters* 26). This is a frequently quoted statement, but what is not so often cited is O’Neill’s dropping the name of then famous drama critic Clayton Hamilton as a reference (in the same letter). It may seem odd that O’Neill who ultimately recoiled from George Pierce Baker’s embrace of the commercial theatre, is not shy about mentioning his famous father and drawing on other connections of his own from the commercial theater in order to secure a place in Baker’s “47 Workshop” at Harvard. As we know, his gambit worked and Baker accepted him. Be that as it may, this was probably the last time O’Neill put himself out in such a way.

In contrast to the aspiring student who readily traded on his Broadway connections, O’Neill the playwright, would become one of the most intransigently uncompromising artists in the history of the theatre. During rehearsals for *The Iceman Cometh*, director Eddie Dowling despaired: “Mr. O’Neill, you repeat the word pipe-dream in one scene 18 times!” O’Neill slowly considered Dowling’s plaint, for he was as taciturn as he was committed to his artistic vision. He replied, “Mr. Dowling, that’s right, ‘pipe-dream’ is in that scene 18 times.” Later Dowling, backed by the Theatre Guild, the play’s producers, would demand that O’Neill cut 45 minutes out of the play. O’Neill agreed to cut two minutes (Vena 4). Thus I would argue that O’Neill is more in harmony with late 19th/early 20th century dramaturgy than not. What is most “Wagnerian” about O’Neill’s approach to the production of his plays is his insistence on total control over their production. Even more significant than the grandiosity of his spectacle plays: *Marco Millions* and *Lazarus Laughed* is O’Neill’s determination from the outset of his career to oversee the casting, design, and staging of each of his plays. No matter who was ostensibly in charge of a given production, O’Neill himself attended every rehearsal and was the final authority on any production decision as long as he lived. Each of his plays was indeed a *Gesamtkunstwerk*.

Thus, it is important to link O’Neill to the conventions of his time—there is far too much myth-making about O’Neill representing a *complete* break with his predecessors.

Not to mention how and what he learned in Baker's course at Harvard. Paul Voelker and Travis Bogard have decidedly different views on O'Neill's relationship with Baker. Going over the chronology and reviewing the now available correspondence between O'Neill and his then inamorata, Beatrice Ashe, it is clear that O'Neill bore no animosity towards Professor Baker, and indeed had respect for him, perhaps even affection. Voelker's research reveals a more complex understanding of O'Neill as a playwright struggling with his craft—one who is in fact not absolutely clear about being "an artist or nothing." Voelker determines that O'Neill was uncertain as to the direction his playwriting ought to take and that in the beginning he even considered comedy (211). This is not the O'Neill most readers imagine. I would argue that the atmosphere of Baker's class encouraged O'Neill to stop trying to be a conventional playwright—or to even be a topical one like Baker's star pupil Edward Sheldon (whose great hit *Salvation Nell* had become a Broadway sensation starring Minnie Maddern Fiske when he was barely more than an undergraduate). What is more, the contrarian in O'Neill would have been inspired by the classmates who, no doubt, sought the same kind of fame and fortune as Sheldon. O'Neill's appreciative letter to Sheldon is frequently quoted, if only to verify that he was dazzled by the touring Abbey Theatre and Mrs. Fiske's Hedda Gabler—the fact that he wrote the admiring letter to *Sheldon* is overlooked.

Part of O'Neill's supreme confidence about his work came from his lifetime in the theatre. O'Neill boasted that he was born into the theatre, and as he put it: he knew the theater from the back wall to the box office. He saw the Broadway show shop product, such as that described above, but he read the great modernist dramas of Shaw, Wilde, Ibsen, Brieux and especially Strindberg. The Swedish playwright's grim and tortured husbands and wives had a lasting impact on O'Neill, and O'Neill would always credit Strindberg with exerting the greatest influence on him. But another explanation proffered by O'Neill was that if one wanted to understand his plays one only needed to know that he was born Irish and raised a Catholic. This sense of otherness, this self-conscious Irishness is a telling factor in O'Neill's dramatic oeuvre. It is a sensibility that contrasts with the ideology behind the popular plays of his day, and even the serious plays that were written during his first years as a dramatist. For there were playwrights struggling to free the American stage from the shackles of formula melodrama and cheap farces—such as *Edna*, *The Pretty Typewriter*, from 1907, (at that time "typewriter" was a term for a professional typist, usually a woman) or *Up in Mabel's Room* from 1919. As we have seen, in the 'teens and 'twenties, Edward Sheldon created dramas of political and social relevance, yet even his "relevance" in treating racial and even sexual issues is tempered by a reliance on happy endings. As noted, Sheldon's most famous play *Salvation Nell* ends with joy all around as the title character, whom we have observed transform herself from innocent to almost-prostitute to Salvation Army soldier to contented helpmate of a reformed wastrel. O'Neill's dramas are about the impossibility of such integration into society. Once he determines his artistic vision, with few exceptions, O'Neill writes about alienation, the despair of existential tragedy and the "hopeless hope." His characters thrive on pipe-dreams.

In a comment on his last project, a great cycle of plays about the development of the United States, to which he gave the title: "A tale of possessors self-dispossessed," O'Neill said: "We are the greatest failure in history—no other country was given so much—and look at what we have done with ourselves. I can't help but think of the words what profit it a man if he gain the whole world, but loses his own soul? We've lost our soul" (qtd. in

Connolly 20). O'Neill refers to the drive for material possessions that had become the "American dream." And he does not ignore the consequences of occupying territories in the Caribbean and Pacific, which transformed the United States into an imperial power.

As noted above, America is still not ready for Eugene O'Neill. The country of his birth still cannot fully comprehend his monumental genius. Productions of O'Neill plays are still "events" somehow—revivals seem to be undertaken almost from a sense of duty.² While it is true that the Colossus O'Neillensis would seem to be the tallest statue in the lobby of America's metaphorical national theater, in fact O'Neill is still backstage waiting to go on. How can this be? The literature anthology boiler-plate statements: "America's greatest playwright," "America's only Nobel-prize winning playwright," "only American playwright of world stature," confirm his presumed status. Until most recently productions of O'Neill have not been nearly frequent enough to satisfy O'Neill specialists who contrast the relative lack of O'Neill with the abundance of Shakespeare. It must be admitted though that at least on the East Coast of the United States, the theatrical season of 2011-2012 was something of an antidote to this theatrical malaise. In New York there were two revivals: The Irish Repertory presented *Beyond the Horizon* and The Pearl Theatre Company offered *A Moon for the Misbegotten* (not to mention the parody production "The Complete & Condensed Stage Directions of Eugene O'Neill Volume 1: Early Plays/Lost Plays"). In Washington D.C. the Arena Stage produced *Ah, Wilderness!* and *Long Day's Journey Into Night*; The Shakespeare Theatre company presented *Strange Interlude*. Even this flurry of new productions of O'Neill does not dispel a legacy that haunts O'Neill studies almost as deeply as his biography: the living legacy of the landmark productions of *The Iceman Cometh* in 1956, *Long Day's Journey Into Night* in 1956 and *A Moon for the Misbegotten* in 1973. The first two productions put on three years after O'Neill's death, resuscitated his reputation, largely due to the self-described mystical bond achieved by the director José Quintero and the actor Jason Robards with the playwright. The productions that these artists made returned O'Neill to the first rank of American dramatists.

No doubt, these productions will always live in the memories of those who saw them, but a playwright sustained only by memories of past productions is a playwright without a future. Unfortunately, O'Neill sometimes seems to be in danger of having his work bear out the truth of Mary Tyrone's fateful pronouncement "the past is the present and it is the future too" (*Long Day's Journey* 761). It is hard to shake off the burden of the past, especially for O'Neillians who have made such visceral connections to the playwright himself, the plays, and their performers. Nevertheless, if we do not shake off the past we risk revering O'Neill to death. Of course, O'Neill never intended that we accept Mary Tyrone's line about the past as a way of living life or making art. Nonetheless, there are those who insist that all productions of O'Neill conform to standards set in the middle of the 20th century. Such O'Neillians would dismiss any production of *Long Day's Journey Into Night* whose staging exceeds the limits of the actual parlor of Monte Cristo Cottage in New London, Connecticut.³ No one disputes that O'Neill was an intensely autobiographical playwright, but it is time to move beyond O'Neill's life as the primary lens through which to gain perspective on his plays.

What is more, the life and times of O'Neill are now fully explicated in a soon to be published three-volume biography by Arthur and Barbara Gelb. It is an historic event; never before have biographers so thoroughly revised their own work. With the third volume's

publication, we will surely have all the pertinent facts needed to inspire coming generations to ponder the exigencies of the playwright's life. Therefore, it is time to let the plays live as works of art independent of their creator. O'Neill's biographers have guaranteed that his life will always excite interest in its own right.

The current state of O'Neill in the U.S.A. is a dichotomy between those who hold him dear and those who begrudge him his preeminence with a shrug, à la Victor Hugo's reluctant French admirers ("O'Neill, *hélas!*").⁴ Rather than dwell upon the difficulties that O'Neill continues to contend with, I should like to discuss an interesting phenomenon of recent years: the advent of a "non-classical" approach to staging O'Neill that has only recently been possible in the United States. By "non-classical" I mean a production style that deviates from O'Neill's original stage directions and presumed intentions. As we have seen, this development has not always been met with approval by American O'Neill scholars and those O'Neill enthusiasts who can still recall the original productions of O'Neill's plays. Not a small point since we are really only talking about one or two generations—at least in terms of memory—since those original productions.

The traditionalists *are* being to true to the spirit of O'Neill. O'Neill hated the slightest deviation from his lines or stage directions. Perhaps it is stating the obvious to say that unless new approaches are "allowed," O'Neill's plays will ossify. This can happen. The D'Oyly Carte Company played the Gilbert and Sullivan operettas exactly the same way for over a century in London and on tour. Eventually audiences grew bored and the company of performers so stale that the enterprise withered away. But other serious modernist dramatists in the United States face similar problems: Shaw and Brecht for instance, not to mention Ibsen. Reconsidering production styles is relevant to the study of American drama because it offers us insight into the ways in which O'Neill's plays are being viewed with fresh perspectives. The production details presented for discussion here are not meant to detail stage history, per se, but rather as an exploration of O'Neill's larger theatrical "text". We must consider the discourse that theatrical productions have entered into if we are to place O'Neill in the critical context of the present. In terms of production, only since the late 20th century have productions of O'Neill in America moved beyond the paradigm of the "classical" canonical approach, and it is most significant that the influence of an English production of *Strange Interlude* has been paramount. This production came to New York in 1985. Glenda Jackson's star turn as Nina Leeds punctuated an unabashedly flamboyant production, which played out the raw emotions of the play in all their overwrought Freudian mania. Even the dry wit of Edward Petherbridge's moving characterization of Charles Marsden could not keep the play down to earth. Of particular note were the howls of laughter that greeted the three attempts of Nina's lover, Ned Darrell (played by Brian Cox), to leave on the line "Got to go! Can't go! Got to go!" The "can't go" being of course an internal "thought" vocalized. (A perfect example Roman Ingarden's *Nebentext*.) It was a remarkably successful production—flirting with an irreverent approach that displeased many O'Neill stalwarts. And even though the *New York Times* was displeased by the production's irreverence, it printed so many stories about the production that the show was one of the most talked about dramatic productions of the season and this combined with good business at the box office generated enough attention to warrant a television production—a rare occurrence indeed (See Kerr, Anderson, Gussow and Rich, February and March 1985 *New York Times* articles).

A year later in 1986, Jonathan Miller's abridged production of *Long Day's Journey into Night*, featuring Jack Lemmon in a rare foray from Hollywood, as Tyrone and Kate Reid, the noted Arthur Miller actress, as Mary, was greeted with pleasure only by avowed anti-O'Neillians. Miller cut an hour from the running time by trimming speeches; particularly the poetry quotations in the fourth act, and by having the actors speak rapidly and "at" each other so that their dialogue frequently overlapped one another's. Miller elaborately defended his choices on medical as well as dramaturgical grounds. Miller the physician maintained that the alcoholic father, sons, and morphine-addicted mother would actually have rattled away in such a way, oblivious to one another. And, Miller insisted, these characterizations showed both the closeness and the isolation of the Tyrones ("Jonathan Miller" 29). They take each other so much for granted that that they neither have to listen, nor do they expect to be listened to. It sounds good on paper perhaps, but it was such a glaring directorial intrusion that the play suffered. Moreover Lemmon's performance was at best a recreation of Fredric March's original with its resort to an Irish brogue when Tyrone was in despair.

To introduce such controversies is not to diminish Quintero's accomplishments. He directed three of the greatest productions in the history of the American theatre. In 1956 he staged the revival of *The Iceman Cometh* (which virtually started the off-Broadway movement at the Circle-in-the-Square-Theatre) and the first New York production of *Long Day's Journey Into Night*. In 1973 he directed the first successful production of *A Moon for the Misbegotten*, which was a triumph winning many awards and was filmed for television in 1975 with the original cast. In 1996, one of his final efforts was a well-received staging of two early O'Neill one-acts, "Ile" and "The Long Voyage Home" in Provincetown eighty years after their original performances there. Quintero successfully evoked the subtleties and extremities of both plays using a cast of unknown actors.

Yet Quintero's productions with great actors have not always been unqualified successes, as seen with the relative failure of the centennial year productions of *The Iceman Cometh*, which Quintero directed and starred Robards. The proscenium staging and large theater have been blamed (interestingly, the large playhouse used for the 1947 production premiere was blamed at the time for that production's failure). The first time Quintero directed it was in an intimate theater-in-the-round, but nothing about the 1985 production caught fire, perhaps expectations were too high. Robards' recreation of his role as Hickey was a disappointment for some. Many who saw it believed he was only walking through the part, that he was somehow too tired for its rigors.⁵

So the close of the 20th century brought American O'Neillians a dilemma, one that Europeans would never have to face, since O'Neill is not the problematic dramatist for Europeans that he is in his homeland: is O'Neill in danger of being "revered" away from the playhouse and on to a library shelf? A New York production from 1996 production indicated otherwise, the "Hughie" directed by Al Pacino and starring Pacino as "Erie" Smith and Paul Benedict as the Night Clerk proved to be an outstanding critical and box office success. The casting was interesting on the superficially physical level. Pacino was quite close to O'Neill's description, a bantam rooster—as the stage directions indicate; Benedict was a very large and imposing figure. This instantly created a unique chemistry between the two on stage. It also pitched the dynamic in an interesting way for this play. Erie Smith is constantly trying to impress the Clerk and there are moments when Pacino

and Benedict take on a resonance from Steinbeck's *Of Mice and Men* (of the two drifters Lenny and George). I stress that O'Neill's lines call for the gestures Pacino used. His "hey, look at me, why don't you look at me" attitude was effective at achieving a down-in-the-mouth pathos (See Jacobson and Johnson; both are representative reviews).⁶

As with the *Strange Interlude* referenced above, laughs were found where none had been perceived before. This production inspired comparisons in the popular press between Smith and the Night Clerk to the Vladimir and Estragon of Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*—a point apparent to some O'Neill scholars eager to unite the playwright to the theatre of the absurd, even if it was not a particularly fresh observation.⁷ Samuel Beckett has set the standard for critics of the drama since the 1960s—when Jan Kott applied Beckett's *Weltanschauung* to Shakespeare. Undoubtedly the play has much humor—Erie's regaling the Night Clerk with his visit to Hughie's Brooklyn bower of domestic bliss for instance. But in this production almost everything that Pacino did could be perceived as comic because of the lumbering reactions of Benedict's Night Clerk.

The raucous laughter that this production inspired demonstrated that audiences could easily respond to O'Neill as a comic playwright. It was not only the night clerk that inspired mirth. Pacino played Erie Smith as a sort of song-and-dance man—which given O'Neill's identification of Erie as a "teller of tales" is not altogether off the mark. Pacino's Erie Smith was a most self-conscious yarn-spinner. He was compelled *to* entertain; nevertheless this was not so much a radical departure from O'Neill as it was a challenging re-interpretation. This was a marked contrast to Jason Robards' Erie. Robards inspired forty years of Eries who were almost ghoulishly desperate for companionship, clearly one stop away from the final terminus. So powerful was the memory of Robards' performance (especially if one recalls that the one-act play was originally intended to be part of a cycle entitled "By Way of Obit") that it caused some critical contortions. Describing the Pacino/Benedict partnership, the writer in the *Eugene O'Neill Review* contradicted her previous descriptions by concluding her essay with the assertion that Pacino and Benedict are "headed together down a road toward impending doom" (Garvey 178). This comment negates the essay's earlier paragraphs describing the lighthearted atmosphere of the production; granted that the reviewer was attempting to convey her impression of the entire production. Any suggestion of lightheartedness was in sharp contrast to Robards' performance, which intimated that if his Erie failed to engage the Clerk with his Broadway banter he would have climbed up the stairs and jumped out a window. Pacino's Erie would be more likely to rush upstairs and return with a juggling kit or wearing tap shoes for a dance routine. This is not to diminish one performance in terms of another. Both characterizations reveal O'Neill's complexity.

It is imperative to revisit the roots of the mythology that has grown around O'Neill's dramaturgy, thus we must look back at the original production of *Long Day's Journey Into Night*. Though more than half a century has passed since the Broadway premiere of *Long Day's Journey Into Night*, November 7, 1956 remains a signal date in American theatre history. By the time the production closed, 390 performances later, it had already passed into theatrical legend. Eugene O'Neill's reputation was not only salvaged; it was forever secured. For as long as he lived José Quintero would be identified as *the* O'Neill director, and the cast, in particular Fredric March, and Jason Robards would be celebrated for the roles they created. It is not only because of the performance per se that this is one of the

most important Broadway productions of an American play in the 20th century. In addition to being widely regarded as the greatest production of O'Neill's greatest play, it cemented the idea that O'Neill is primarily an autobiographical playwright, and this has become central to both the study of O'Neill and the performance of his plays. The American premiere also anointed José Quintero and Jason Robards as O'Neill's foremost interpreters. (As discussed earlier, both had established themselves in the landmark off-Broadway staging of *The Iceman Cometh* in the previous season). Thus the influence of this production is profound in two ways; it irrevocably connected O'Neill's work to his life and limited the production style of his plays to the psychological realism that prevailed in the middle of the 20th century. This has also affected the way almost all other American plays are studied in English classes and performed on Broadway.

Ever since O'Neill turned his back on Broadway in 1934 there had been rumors that he was working on his greatest play ever. No less a source than magisterial drama critic and O'Neill confidant George Jean Nathan intimated that the playwright was holding back a masterpiece from publication and performance because it was dangerously controversial (Connolly, *George Jean Nathan* 43). Nevertheless, the failed first production of *The Iceman Cometh* in the 1946-1947 season stanchd Broadway's interest in O'Neill, even as Nathan continued to suggest that O'Neill had written his greatest play, but would never allow it to be sullied by Broadway producers. Nevertheless, by the time of his death in 1953, O'Neill was almost forgotten. Depending upon one's sympathies, O'Neill's widow was either desperate to revive her husband's reputation or provide for her old age when she decided to assert her authority as literary executrix and offer *Long Day's Journey* to the public. Carlotta Monterey O'Neill countermanded both Saxe Commins, O'Neill's editor and close friend, and O'Neill's publisher, Bennett Cerf, the head of Random House, who both insisted on sticking to their original agreement with O'Neill. This would have held up publication of the play until 1978, and would have forever prohibited any performance. Mrs. O'Neill had total control over all aspects of her late husband's work so she was able to make all decisions about publication and production. Cerf removed the manuscript from his vault and handed it over. The Broadway failure of *The Iceman Cometh* still stung, so Mrs. O'Neill charily decided that the play should first be performed abroad. Noting O'Neill's affinity for Strindberg and the regard the Swedes had for him, Mrs. O'Neill opted for a Stockholm try-out. The triumphant February 1956 world premiere at the Royal Dramaten sent transatlantic flashes of the play's magnificence. When the play was published by Yale University Press within days of the Stockholm opening, Broadway was doubly overwhelmed with yearning. Relentless speculation about the inevitable Broadway production began.

Fresh from the acclaim from his off-Broadway revival of *The Iceman Cometh*, the previous season, José Quintero was determined to direct *Long Day's Journey*, so he began a deft campaign of wooing the widow, abetted by an equally intent Jason Robards, who had starred in that revival. Over numerous cocktails, dinners and late night conversations—sometimes with O'Neill's ghost in attendance—according to the enraptured widow—Quintero and Robards successfully courted her. Doubts about Quintero's relative inexperience were assuaged by the casting of Hollywood star and respected actor Fredric March as James Tyrone and his wife and frequent co-star Florence Eldridge as Mary. Each of the performers received superlative reviews. Indeed, the finale provoked one of the most

poignant curtain calls in American theatre history. Testimony from the actors and first-nighters attests to the silence that descended after the play's final words. Backstage, an eternity went by as the cast waited in heart-stopped silence. Then suddenly, torrentially, applause shook the walls, floor and ceiling, it seemed to push the curtain open with its force. Overwhelming ovations, countless bows—the audience crowded the front of the house trying to touch the actors, because, as Quintero recalled, they would not be parted from the Tyrones (Gelbs 3-23).

Thus a legend was born and O'Neill transfigured. Never again would anyone dare question his reputation—he *is* the colossus of the American theatre. Henceforth, O'Neill's late-blooming genius would eclipse all his other work, just as the Tyrones would the O'Neills. Appropriately, since he was playing an actor, March's performance attracted the most description. Most frequently commented on was his choice to give Tyrone a brogue as he slipped into abyssal despair in the later scenes. Less frequently commented on was the costume he wore which defied O'Neill's stage directions. March wore an ascot quite different from the knotted handkerchief that O'Neill gives Tyrone. March transformed the unassuming gardener in a threadbare suit "who doesn't give a damn how he looks" (as O'Neill describes him in the stage directions) to a bespoke-kitted-out gentleman of leisure.⁸ Theatre historians familiar with the diary of the Monte Cristo company actress Elizabeth Robins are aware that Mr. and Mrs. O'Neill were quite different from Mr. and Mrs. Tyrone (Matlaw 177 ff). What is more James O'Neill always had defenders among his surviving contemporaries. Old troupers spoke out against *Long Day's Journey* in 1956, but their voices were overwhelmed. The crushing burden of biography has not only limited academic discussion of the play. As we have seen, it has virtually proscribed the play's performance unless its set conforms to the dimensions of that parlor in New London, Connecticut in the original "Monte Cristo Cottage" where the O'Neills summered.

The bellwether for this was Brooks Atkinson who declared that the play was "as personal and as literal as drama can be." (Atkinson 47). And productions since have been judged according to a bizarre standard of being true to the life of the O'Neills rather than the Tyrones. Conversely, since the Tyrones of the original Broadway cast were the embodiment of the O'Neills it is best to follow their example.

Note though that a central article of faith in our understanding of Ella O'Neill/Mary Tyrone probably never existed: the glorious wedding gown provided by a munificent parent. Ella's father did not contribute anything to her wedding; he had died three years earlier. O'Neill could not possibly have known the things about his parents that he seems to be revealing in *Long Day's Journey*. Nonetheless these issues cannot detract from the play's essential greatness. The final scene *is* the most harrowing in American drama. The conclusion of Walter Kerr's opening night review sums up the place of O'Neill's masterpiece in American drama: "For anyone who cares about the American theater, *Long Day's Journey* is, of course, an obligation. But it is more than that. It is a stunning theatrical experience" (Kerr 125).

More important than individual performances in particular plays are entire productions that capture the public's attention. Significantly, as we have seen, in the final decade of the 20th century important stagings of "*Hughie*" and *The Iceman Cometh* extended O'Neill's reach toward the millennium. The productions were third and fourth Broadway revivals, respectively, of these plays, and demonstrated that O'Neill is by no means a

dated modernist cast adrift by postmodernist trends. They have shown that like Ibsen and Chekhov, O'Neill ought not to be a playwright limited to the psychological realism that prevailed in the first decades of the 20th century. As Otamar Krejča has said, no single production of a play can reveal everything about it (qtd. by Burian). To keep O'Neill alive, great productions from the past must be regarded as part of history not as theatrical exegesis. Directors, critics, and scholars must find ways of staging, analyzing and studying O'Neill irrespective of what are now stage conventions that are more than a century old.

Notes

¹ Dr. Black became a psychoanalyst in his pursuit of O'Neill's family tragedy. The book argues that all of O'Neill's plays are a response to the deaths of his parents and brother and are a form of O'Neill's personal psychoanalysis.

² A sign of changing times may be "The Complete & Condensed Stage Directions of Eugene O'Neill Volume 1: Early Plays/Lost Plays" presented by the New York Neo-Futurists in September and October of 2011. The Neo-Futurists cut all the dialogue and performed only O'Neill's detailed stage directions. Poking fun at O'Neill is all too rare, and this parodic tilt at O'Neill's grandiosity represents a new turn in O'Neill performance. Even the *New York Times* enjoyed the joke (See Isherwood, "Long Day's Journey Into Laughter").

³ The Gogol Theatre of Moscow's production of *Long Day's Journey Into Night* at the 1995 "O'Neill's People" conference at Suffolk University in Boston was criticized by several O'Neillians in attendance not only because the chrome and glass parlor furnishings were anachronistic but much too big for the original Monte Cristo Cottage (O'Neill's People).

⁴ David Savran cogently articulates this bifurcated attitude in his chapter "The Canonization of Eugene O'Neill."

⁵ Frederick C. Wilkins, the founder of both "The Eugene O'Neill Newsletter" and *The Eugene O'Neill Review* averred as much in an interview with the author. In retrospect Wilkins was less enthusiastic than he had been in his original review (See "Family Reunion at the Bottom of the Sea"). Wilkins had also seen Robards in the earlier Quintero production.

⁶ It is also possible to watch Pacino discuss his performance and give a reading of the role on the Youtube website.

⁷ Steven F. Bloom wrote about Beckettian elements in "Hughie" in 1988.

⁸ Doris Alexander exhaustively details the flawed "autobiography" presented in *Long Day's Journey* (67–156). One telling fact is that Mrs. O'Neill's father died three years before her wedding, making it impossible for him to have paid for her lavish nuptial accoutrements.

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