

Viewing the World from the Wings

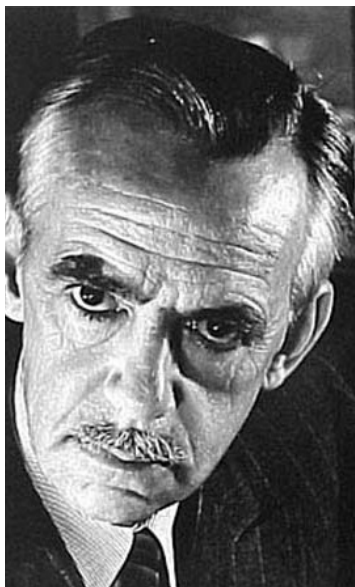
By Heather Helinsky

Eugene O'Neill always had a backstage view of the world. As a child, he grew up in the wings as his father, James O'Neill, Sr., achieved matinee idol status as the Count of Monte Cristo. Unlike the romantic Victorian audiences who saw James through the haze of the footlights, Eugene recalled: "I can still see my father dripping with salt and sawdust, climbing on a stool behind the swinging profile of dashing waves. It was then that the calcium lights in the gallery played on his long beard and tattered clothes, as with arms outstretched he declared: 'The world was his.' This was the signal for the house to burst into deafening applause...Virtue always triumphed and vice always got its just deserts. A man was either a hero or a villain, and a woman was either virtuous or vile."

In 1895, at age seven, Eugene was ripped away from this world of make-believe to attend a rigid Catholic boarding school. Cowed by nuns who knuckled their charges and boys who pushed and shoved on the playground, Eugene withdrew. Homesick, he wrote letters constantly to his father, mother, and older brother Jamie. He also wrote to Annie Black, an older girl who had mothered him back to health from an illness while in San Francisco. A classmate at St. Aloysius remembered Eugene as a "lone wolf" who disengaged from the world to read and write. For Eugene, friends were people that he wrote to, while the world around him was a cold, unhappy place.

Although Eugene was a good student, he was unhappy and began to blame his father. Jamie, his brother 10 years his senior, was also rebelling against their father's desires. Jamie's teenage antics, such as bringing a prostitute to a school function and introducing her to the priests as his sister, gained infamy amongst his classmates and brought shame to his father. Jamie's letters contained worldly wisdom that Eugene mistook for truth. As the secret of his mother's morphine addiction began to destroy the O'Neill family, older brother Jamie appeared to Eugene as the only sane member.

As he matured, O'Neill wrote plays that transformed popular theater. His profound stories about the American experience reached audiences and changed their taste for Victorian melodrama. O'Neill also turned to his writing to help deal with the loss of his family. In 1920, the year he won a Pulitzer Prize for *Beyond the Horizon*, his father died. Two years later, when O'Neill's mother died in Los Angeles, his brother Jamie accompanied her body home on the train and arrived in New York on opening night of *The Hairy*



Playwright Eugene O'Neill

Ape. In the same year, O'Neill won his second Pulitzer Prize for *Anna Christie*. The following year, as he received the gold medal for drama from the National Institute of Arts and Letters, Jamie died in a New Jersey sanatorium from complications caused by alcoholism.

Yet it would be many years before O'Neill could truly mourn. Grief, as psychologists

tell us, is a long process beginning with shock and denial, and can be delayed over many years before one recovers. In *A Moon for the Misbegotten*, O'Neill's older brother Jamie is resurrected in the character of Jim Tyrone. The play contrasts Jamie's tragedy with laughter, as the Irish tenant Phil Hogan schemes to marry off his daughter Josie. In rehearsal, O'Neill complained to the cast that they were "playing the tragedy of the work too early."

O'Neill first began to write *A Moon for the Misbegotten* on October 28, 1941. The following day he noted in his work diary, "This can be a strange combination comic-tragic, am enthused about it." However, like many things in O'Neill's life, his initial joy was dampened. As he began to write the third act on December 7, he heard the news of Pearl Harbor: "Now the whole world goes into the tunnel! – but this has to be – we should have beaten the bastards to the punch! Glued to the radio."

A Moon for the Misbegotten is not simply O'Neill exorcising his ghosts. Jim Tyrone is neither a hero nor a villain, and Josie Hogan is both virtuous and vile. As O'Neill once confided to a nurse: "I see life as a gorgeously-ironical, beautifully-indifferent, splendidly-suffering bit of chaos the tragedy of which gives Man a tremendous significance...Fate can never conquer his – or her – spirit."

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