Presenting the Lost Plays in a Lost Year of Theatre

As the reality of the pandemic began to dawn on me, I started to brainstorm ways to continue to bring the plays of Eugene O’Neill to our audiences. I knew performing in front of patrons was very unlikely and most of my virtual theatre or “Zoom theatre” experiences have not been satisfying. I longed for the spark created when actors actually share a stage. I began to visualize videotaping O’Neill’s plays in a safe and responsible manner.

O’Neill’s drafty open-air Old Barn played a key role in my planning. Besides offering the magic of Tao House, the Old Barn was a covered yet safe space to work. Additionally, the remnants of the set from last fall’s production of Long Day’s Journey Into Night gave us a theatrical backdrop for our stories. I am no stranger to editing O’Neill’s plays, but this time I needed to edit the plays so actors could maintain a safe social distance while also allowing the characters and their stories to be represented truthfully. As directors and actors, we need to justify character actions on stage if we are going to tell a story honestly and touch on universal human truths. I told the ensemble of nine actors that I had removed all “fighting, kissing, and sitting” in the three scripts while still pursuing the spirit of O’Neill’s work. We were going to keep our distance, keep it moving, and still build dramatic tension.

This meant that, as a director, I not only had to block out the movements of the play, as I normally would, but I had to justify the additional space between actors and create emotionally connected moments while keeping actors 6 feet apart. The actors adapted quickly to this strategy. A key ingredient to the magic of live theatre comes from the dynamic energy exchanged when actors look into each other’s eyes and hear each other speak from the heart. I wanted these plays, despite being recorded, to capture that magic.

Over a two-week period in late July and early August, we rehearsed and then, page by page, videotaped our three early O’Neill plays: The Web, Abortion, and Recklessness. As a director, and now cameraman, I tried to vary the shots to add visual variety. I told the actors we are creating recorded stage performances, not a film. I wanted them to concentrate on each other and forget the camera.

We completed the crucial step of coming together to create, and now it is my responsibility to see that all the footage recorded in the Old Barn is edited and shaped into compelling theatre. All three plays touch on the limitations placed on women in the early 20th century—issues of class, economic power (who has it and who does not), access to medical care, the right to an abortion, and police bias. O’Neill wrote these plays more than 100 years ago, but he chose challenging subjects that our society still struggles with today. We look forward to sharing these stories with our audiences this fall.

Eric Fraisher Hayes, Artistic Director

For weekly rolling premieres of the three plays beginning October 3, please check www.eugeneoneill.org.

“Virtual Gene”

In early March we were excited about the planned spring performance of O’Neill’s Lost Plays, three early one-acts. Then came the shelter-in-place order, and we canceled live performances, including the Annual Eugene O’Neill Festival and A Moon for the Misbegotten.

Realizing we would be missing all of you, we found a way to stay in touch, and Virtual Gene was born. Each month we are releasing—via Eblast and our website—short videos created by board members, friends, our artistic director, and the National Park Service on a variety of topics (including What is your favorite O’Neill play and why?). We hope you will find them both informative and fun. If you have an idea for a Virtual Gene, let us know!

Tao House Welcomes Bay Area Artists

Our Travis Bogard Day-Use Fellowship, launched this year, has brought to Tao House Deanne California from Pleasanton. She will be using her talents in song writing, visual design, education, ecology, and storytelling to create a musical for community theatre. Kathleen Moore of Danville will also benefit from working on her poetry memoir on the site of O’Neill’s home, where she has taught high school poetry classes during Student Days.

This first session will host three artists in all, with another two in the second session. Application deadlines for next year: first session, January 31, 2021; second session, June 30, 2021. For guidelines and application: www.eugeneoneill.org/artist-in-residence-program/
Dan Venning Studies O'Neills and the Pulitzer Prize

Originally from Oakland, Dan Venning is an assistant professor of English and Theatre at Union College in Schenectady, NY. He did his undergraduate at Yale; got his Master's at St. Andrews, in Scotland; and earned his Ph.D. at the City University of New York. Prof. Venning is the first Artist in Residence at the Eugene O'Neill Foundation in 2020. He was interviewed recently by Eugene O'Neill Foundation board member John Barry.

John Barry: What prompted you to apply for this fellowship?

Dan Venning: I learned about it on an academic list serve from a previous winner. When I was young, I visited Tao House and I remember what an extraordinary place it was. What excited me was the ability to have access to this archive and time to do research and writing. We were nearing the centennial of O'Neill's first two Pulitzer Prizes, so I thought: that's a fortuitous thing for me to research. It was an opportunity to do a reevaluation of O'Neill—to learn a great deal and, hopefully, produce something that would contribute to scholarly conversations about O'Neill's early works.

John: What specifically are you working on during your fellowship?

Dan: The first theatrical production that I remember seeing transformed my life. In 1992, my parents took me to see *The Merchant of Venice* in Orinda. I fell in love with theatre then.

John: How so?

Dan: *Anna Christie* and *Beyond the Horizon* are about outsiders whose lives articulate a diverse, realistic American experience, in stark contrast to the fantasies of vaudeville and melodrama. The Pulitzers still celebrate stories about American outsiders.

Pulitzers from the past several years—works like *A Strange Loop*, *Fairview*, *Cost of Living*, *Sweat*, *Hamilton*—are about racial identity, disability, sexual identity, class identity; immigrants: people who have been marginalized finding their place at the center of American stories. That still persists in these prizes. One thing that's crucially different is who's telling the stories. Until about 1980, most Pulitzer Prizes for Drama were given to straight white men. That's perhaps one way the Pulitzers and American theatre have started to move away from O'Neill. The thing that's crucially different is who's telling the stories. Until about 1980, most Pulitzer Prizes for Drama were given to straight white men. That's perhaps one way the Pulitzers and American theatre have started to move away from O'Neill.

John: So the Pulitzers are moving away from the influence of O'Neill?

Dan: Not away from the sort of stories being told, but who is telling the stories—playwrights such as August Wilson, Marcia Norman, Wendy Wasserstein, Tony Kushner. In fact, within the last decade, the majority of the prizes for drama have gone to plays by nonwhite authors or women.

John: What has been your fellowship experience so far?

Dan: Working so close to where O'Neill worked and having access to all the materials is special. I'm going to be talking about this for a long time, with a lot of people—and encouraging my colleagues in theatre studies to apply.

National Park Service News: Superintendent's Message

As the COVID-19 pandemic continues, and Tao House remains closed to tours, we have taken the opportunity to work on some things at the Eugene O'Neill National Historic Site that we hope will enhance our efforts to share Eugene O'Neill's legacy with you all.

We were fortunate to receive funding to address routine maintenance needs on a number of buildings at the site. The change house and pump house, adjacent to O'Neill's pool, has a new roof, installed in May. The NPS office headquarters has new energy-efficient windows, which will help reduce energy costs. We are also applying a fresh coat of paint to the Old Barn, our event venue at the site, to make the building ready for performances for many years to come. The barn is also serving as the backdrop for some of the Foundation's virtual productions that are now under way, so you will soon get a glimpse of it. The park has been working on a number of projects to enhance our efforts to share Eugene O'Neill's legacy with you all.

We look forward to a time when we can welcome people back to the site to tour Tao House and be inspired by the same setting that inspired Eugene O'Neill so many years ago. Please stay safe and we will see you soon.

Tom Leatherman, Superintendent

Come on Board

The Eugene O'Neill Foundation assists the National Park Service in preserving Tao House and the site, and the Park Service partners with the Foundation in its artistic and educational programs, which focus on the contribution of Eugene O'Neill to American theatre.

Our many volunteers are actively engaged in supporting all our projects, and there are opportunities for your own talents and skills—especially in communications, donor relations, and festival planning. If serving on the Foundation's board interests you, please visit the Eugene O'Neill Foundation website at www.eugenoneill.org/About/Application for more information about our committees and the application form for board membership. Or e-mail us at taohouse.enof@gmail.com for answers to your questions about membership on the board. We look forward to hearing from you!

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We are always grateful for the generosity of our donors, without whom the Foundation's work would not be possible.

Thank you for supporting your local performing arts!

To see a list of our donors, or to make a donation to the Foundation, go to www.eugenoneill.org/join-us/ or send your check to Eugene O'Neill Foundation, Tao House, P.O. Box 402, Danville, CA 94526-0402

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