

The Story of Eugene O'Neill's Hughie

Eugene O'Neill moved into Tao House with visions of creating a grand cycle of plays telling the story of America entitled *A Tale of Possessors Self-Dispossessed*. But the enormous scope of the project and increasing health concerns stymied the endeavor. Of the cycle, only the play *A Touch of the Poet* and several drafts of *More Stately Mansions* were completed. Sensing he was running out of time to write, O'Neill turned inward and started to reflect on his past and the people that had shaped him. The Tao House Plays, also known as the late autobiographical plays, were an effort to make peace with the ghosts of his past. During this period of reflection, O'Neill wrote the plays *Long Day's Journey into Night*, *A Moon for the Misbegotten*, *The Iceman Cometh* and *Hughie*.

Hughie was the first of a series of eight one-act plays O'Neill planned to write under the title *By Way of Obit*. The concept of the collection of one-acts was to have each play have a character tell their life story while another listened. The eight storytellers were modeled after people O'Neill had known during his lifetime. It is speculated that Erie Smith, the storyteller in *Hughie*, was inspired by Eugene's older brother Jamie. Trying to reconcile his feeling about his older brother was a major focus and perhaps obsession for Eugene O'Neill. Besides being the model for *Hughie*'s Erie Smith, Jamie appears in *Long Day's Journey into Night* and is the central figure in *A Moon for the Misbegotten*. Of the eight planned plays, only *Hughie* was completed. Interestingly, the last of the planned series was to be an extended monologue from the perspective of the O'Neills' beloved dog Blemie. It could be said that O'Neill's poem *The Last Will and Testament of Silverdene Emblem*, which O'Neill wrote from the perspective of his beloved dog, is one of O'Neill's lost plays hiding in plain sight.

In the play *Hughie*, Erie Smith, a desperate, "down on his luck" gambler finds himself in his hour of existential crisis. The world has closed in on him and he is trapped in a purgatory-like lobby of a dingy hotel late on a summer night in 1928. The only other individual in the tightening noose that is Erie's life is Charlie Hughes, the Night Clerk. Charlie, in his own way, is lost and isolated in the world of his escapist imagination. The play is the story of two lost souls fumbling in the "dark" of their own lives brought together and forced to confront their own loneliness and their responsibility to each other.

Eugene O'Neill's one-act play *Hughie* has mostly been known by the productions featuring master O'Neill interpreter Jason Robards and Jack Dodson of The Andy Griffith Show fame. Locally, special benefit performances of *Hughie* featuring Robards and Dodson were instrumental in raising the money that saved Tao House in 1975. Other notable productions have featured Al Pacino, Ben Gazzara, Brian Dennehy and recently Forest Whitaker in 2016.

Although *Hughie* is traditionally seen as a tour-de-force star vehicle for such actors as Robards, Pacino and Whitaker, the Tao House production will be taking a different approach. As the play's director, I see *Hughie* as an ensemble piece, and our production will seek to shed light on aspects of the play that normally get overlooked. I am particularly interested in bringing O'Neill's stage directions into the performance of the play. Normally, the stage directions are read by the director, designers and actors, but lost to the audience. The stage directions are rich in humor and insight and their inclusion will help the audience understand the inner workings of the "listener" (Charlie) as well as the "storyteller" (Erie). At the time he wrote *Hughie*, Eugene O'Neill was thinking of his work as literature as much as drama. The goal of this new interpretation of *Hughie* is to make an argument for a third voice in the traditionally two-character play. With the introduction of a third actor with omniscient knowledge, we hope to bring the literary aspects of the play to the audience for a richer theatrical experience.

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