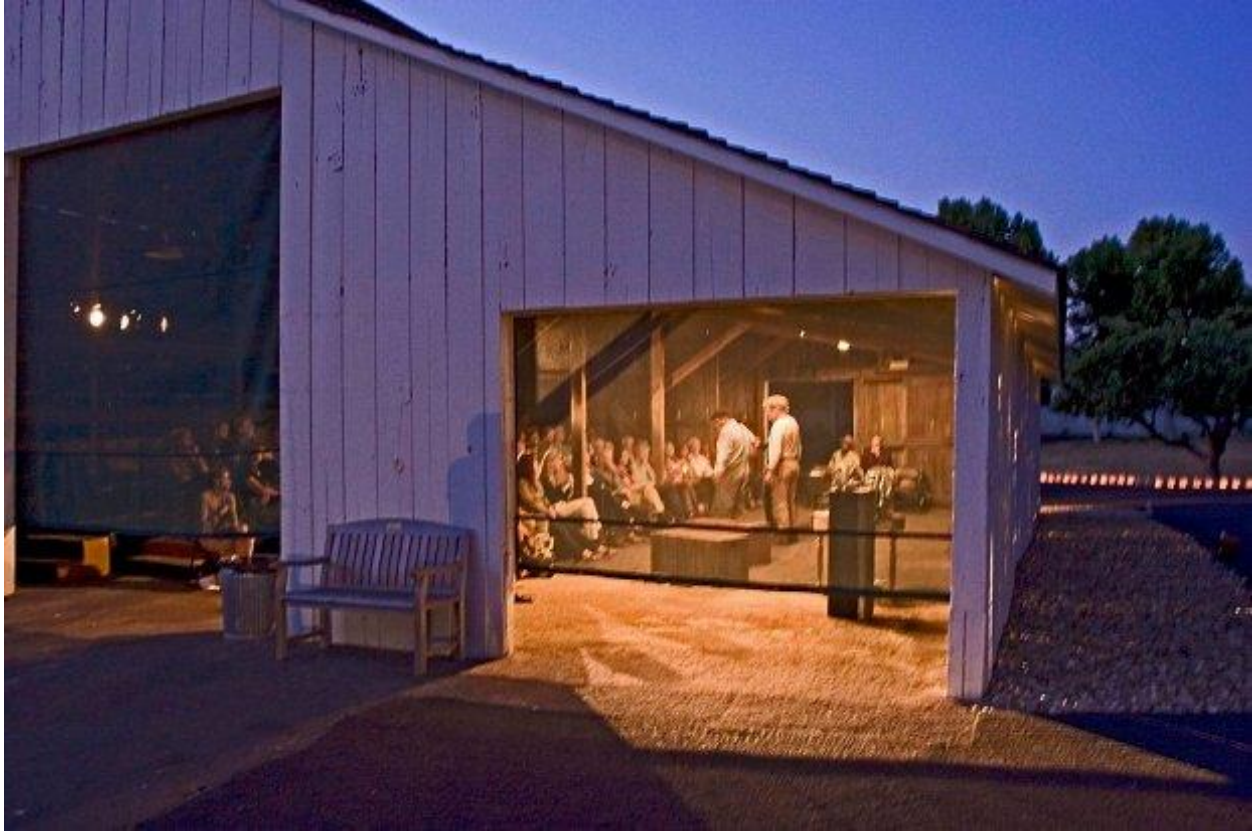


# Danville's Tao House: Eugene O'Neill's 'final harbor' for penning his greatest plays

'Long Day's Journey Into Night' is among the works O'Neill wrote at Tao House









1 of 9

Eugene O'Neill's "Tomorrow" is viewed from outside the Old Barn at Tao House in Danville, Calif. (Playwrights' Theatre)

By **MARTHA ROSS** | [mross@bayareanewsgroup.com](mailto:mross@bayareanewsgroup.com) | Bay Area News Group  
PUBLISHED: May 19, 2019 at 11:00 am | UPDATED: May 19, 2019 at 11:46 am

Winning the Nobel Prize in 1936 thrust Eugene O'Neill back into the spotlight of an already illustrious legacy, with reporters besieging the playwright for interviews at his Seattle hotel after news came of this prestigious honor.

But there were questions about whether O'Neill's best work was behind him. Some thought the once prolific author of 35 plays had become "a spent force," according to one historian, too plagued by ill health, exhaustion and alcoholism to continue writing.

It turned out that O'Neill was not done writing. In fact, his best and most famous works were still ahead of him.

O'Neill, then 48, just needed a quiet place where he could live and work in his characteristically obsessive way – where he could reflect on the painful memories of his past and, as he told his wife, Carlotta Monterey, "confront my dead at last."

O'Neill found his "final harbor" on the slopes above the then-small East Bay town of Danville. Using his \$40,000 Nobel Prize money, the O'Neills purchased 158 acres of land and built Tao House, a 22-room, whitewashed adobe with a graceful courtyard, Asian touches and spectacular views of Mount Diablo to the east and Las Trampas wilderness to the west.

In 1976, 23 years after O'Neill's death, Tao House was designated a National Historic Site to honor his influence on world literature and his introduction of psychological and social realism to the American stage.

Theater fans — and people who like visiting scenic Northern California places — can tour the house and attend programs hosted by the Eugene O'Neill Foundation, such as the O'Neill Festival held each September. This year, the foundation will present the soul-stirring "Long Day's Journey Into Night," one of O'Neill's great Tao House plays. First staged in 1956, the play posthumously brought O'Neill his fourth Pulitzer and is regarded as his most personally revealing work.

"I give you the original script of this play of old sorrow, written in tears and blood," O'Neill wrote in a note to Monterey in 1941. "I mean it as a tribute to your love and tenderness which gave me the faith in love that enabled me to face my dead at last and write this play — write it with deep pity and understanding for all the four haunted Tyrones."

The Tyrone family is modeled after O'Neill's own family, headed by a hard-drinking, traveling actor father and a morphine-addicted mother. James and Mary Tyrone and their two troubled adult sons deal with issues in the 1910s that will nevertheless be familiar to contemporary audiences: family dysfunction, opioid addiction, long-simmering resentments and the burdens of the past.

"O'Neill is brilliant at setting up dramatic situations and conflicts between characters who are battling with guilt, trauma and other conflicts within themselves," said foundation artistic director Eric Hayes.

But as dark as O'Neill could get in his plays, life at Tao House offered him long-sought serenity and a sense of home. A restless nomad, the prize-winning playwright had three tumultuous marriages and difficult relationships with at least two of his children, including daughter Oona, from whom he became estranged after she married the much older actor Charlie Chaplin.

At Tao House, O'Neill could write, swim in his pool, raise chickens, enjoy music from his player piano "Rosie" and share walks with Carlotta and their Dalmatian Blemie on the property's grassy slopes.

A Parkinson's-like illness eventually made it impossible for him to live in such a secluded spot and forced him to give up writing in 1943. The couple left Tao House the following year, and O'Neill died nine years later in a Boston hotel room.

But O'Neill's legacy largely rests on what he wrote at Tao House, and revivals of these plays are always taking place somewhere in the world. Jessica Lange won a Tony for playing Mary Tyrone in "Long Day's Journey" on Broadway in 2015. Denzel Washington starred in a hit revival of "The Iceman Cometh" in 2018. And every production of "A Moon for the Misbegotten" reminds audiences of O'Neill's Danville property; its barn inspired the play's farm setting.

---

### **IF YOU GO**

**Eugene O'Neill National Historic Site:** Free guided tours are available by advance reservation Wednesday-Friday and Sundays at 10 a.m. and 2 p.m. Free self-guided tours are Saturdays from 10 a.m. to 3:30 p.m. Catch the Tao House shuttle at Danville's Museum of the San Ramon Valley at 205 Railroad Avenue; [www.nps.gov/euon](http://www.nps.gov/euon).

**The O'Neill Festival:** This year's production — "Long Day's Journey Into Night" — runs Aug. 30-Sept. 29, in the barn at Tao House. Find details at [www.eugeneoneill.org](http://www.eugeneoneill.org).