Eugene O’Neill’s Lost Plays
PERFORMED AND FILMED AT TAO HOUSE, DANVILLE, CALIFORNIA
EUGENE O'NEILL FOUNDATION
OCTOBER 2020

CAST LIST

Rose ---------------------------------Emily Keyishian
Steve---------------------------------Charles Woodson Parker
Tim----------------------------------Ryan Hayes
Policeman---------------------------Will Long
Policeman---------------------------John Hale
Policeman---------------------------John Tessmer

DIRECTED BY ERIC FRASHIER HAYES
Eugene Gladstone O’Neill’s life was, like a web, complicated, for his success was constantly contending with his traumatic past. Hence, this won’t be a traditional biography; reading O’Neill’s life chronologically risks demeaning the importance of his chaotic and traumatic past within his work. For O’Neill, the past was always with him. Mary Tyrone tells James that ‘The past is the present, isn’t it?’ (O’Neill 765), a sentiment so powerful that it is inscribed on a plaque at Tao House.

Eugene O’Neill was born in 1888 in the Barrett Hotel in New York City. He was the son of James O’Neill, an accomplished actor who performed the lead role in The Count of Monte Cristo, and Ella Quinlan O’Neill, who had been studying to become a nun but married James, bore three children, and became a morphine addict, following the birth of Eugene. Jamie, his older brother and an actor, was a role model for Eugene. His other older brother, Edmund, perhaps named after the character Edmund Dantes from The Count of Monte Cristo, died at age two from measles, leading to guilt and mental strain on the whole family, especially for Jamie, who inadvertently infected him, and for Ella. As a child, Eugene toured with his father, and, as Henry Joyce notes in his biography, “[a]t the age of seven, partly to protect him from knowledge of his mother’s drug addiction, he was sent to a boarding school outside New York City” (2297).

Unfortunately for Gene, he discovered his mother’s addiction when he was fourteen, and this led to mental anguish for young O’Neill. Being an Irish-American, he was raised Catholic, and the discovery of his mother’s drug abuse made him not only reconsider his faith, but also deny and reject it. Scholar James Robinson notes that due to this trauma, “Eugene O’Neill would never enter a Catholic church—the church of his mother and father and countless generations of Irish ancestors—in order to worship again” (95). Later in his life, O’Neill wrote Long Day’s Journey Into Night (1941), documenting his family’s trauma, which he wrote at Tao House, the site where the Eugene O’Neill Foundation is performing and filming “The Lost Plays.” Three years later, in the fall of 1906, O’Neill went to
Princeton University, eventually dropping out the next semester due to drinking and bad grades. In 1909 Gene became romantically involved with Kathleen Jenkins, but his father “[disapproved] of her Episcopalian background,” and, discovering she was pregnant, “proposed that he accompany mining engineer Fred C. Stevens on gold prospecting trip to Honduras” but finding none (Bogard 1065). O'Neill and Jenkins had secretly married before he departed for Honduras, but it would never be a proper marriage. A month after his return in May of 1910, his first child, Eugene O'Neill Jr., was born, named after Gene by Jenkins. Avoiding responsibility as a husband and father, he set sail for Buenos Aires on a two-month voyage. Not only did O'Neill not witness Eugene Jr.’s birth, but he also did not see his first son until he was eleven. With O'Neill ignoring his family, Jenkins requested a divorce, and Travis Bogard observes that “O'Neill [arranged] to substantiate adultery charges by being discovered in a hotel room with [a] prostitute” (1066), inspiring him to write about prostitutes in his plays such as The Web (1913) and “Anna Christie” (1921). His voyage to Buenos Aires inspired many more of his plays such as Fog (1914), Thirst (1914), Bound East for Cardiff (1916), and “Anna Christie” (1921): all plays that illustrate the life of sailors and the vagabond lifestyle of the sea. When O'Neill returned from Buenos Aires, he lived a derelict lifestyle in saloons like Jimmy-the-Priest’s, which became the setting for the recently discovered Exorcism (1919) and The Iceman Cometh (1946). Exorcism depicts O'Neill’s own life experiences, for in the spring of 1912, Gene had attempted suicide by taking the sleeping drug Veronal. Acting as a moment of revelation in the young writer’s life, the suicide attempt didn’t exorcise his alcoholism, but I would argue it gave him motivation and inspiration as a playwright.

After his suicide attempt, O'Neill developed a persistent cough in October 1912, and in November he was diagnosed with tuberculosis and sent to the Gaylord Farm Sanatorium for treatment (indeed, the original title of The Web was The Cough). While recovering from consumption (another word for TB), O'Neill had ample time to write about tuberculosis in plays such as The Straw (1919) and The Web (1913). During this time, a brief relationship developed between him and a fellow patient named Catherine MacKay (which he characterizes in The Straw). O'Neill was also avidly reading plays by Synge, Brieux, and Strindberg while also scrutinizing Friedrich Nietzsche’s philosophical works and accentuating his disillusionment with the Catholic church. In June 1913, with his tuberculosis dormant, O'Neill returned to New London, Connecticut—the location of his family home and the present day Eugene O'Neill Theater Center—where he had worked for the New London Telegraph. After returning to New London, he wrote four one-acts: The Web, Thirst, Recklessness, and Warnings.

In 1914, he enrolled at Harvard in Professor George Pierce Baker’s playwriting workshop, the first of its kind in America, called English 47. In 1915, his father’s acting career had faltered, for Bogard notes that his father’s “producers had declared bankruptcy” (1067). This led to Gene dropping out of Harvard, and he started living at the Garden Hotel in New York, drinking heavily at the hotel bar, The Golden Swan, called the “Hell Hole” by patrons, where he befriended an Irish-American street gang called the “Hudson Dusters” and Terry Carlin, a fellow alcoholic who loved Nietzsche. In 1916, accompanied by Carlin, O'Neill went to Provincetown, Massachusetts and joined the Provincetown Players, which staged Bound East for Cardiff, Thirst, and Before Breakfast (1916). Around this time, he met his second wife, Agnes Boulton, who had heard of the Provincetown Players and later became part of it. However, he didn’t meet her at Provincetown; rather, he first met her at the Hell Hole in late fall of 1917. On April 12th of 1918, he married Boulton. Yet, he was still avoiding the responsibilities of being a faithful husband, for he was also involved with Louis Bryant, an American journalist who was covering the Russian Revolution and
Bolsheviks and married to John (Jack) Reed. This is a continuing theme of O’Neill’s life, as Arthur and Barbara Gelb note in *By Women Possessed, A Life of Eugene O’Neill*. In a 1928 letter to Kenneth Macgowan, a theater critic, he tells his close friend: “It’s this and that, the this-that desire—more than desire, need!—that slow-poisons the soul with complicated contradictions[…].” (12). As one can see, O’Neill’s life was one of complicated contradictions. He tried repeatedly to have a wife, getting married three times, yet his own family was in pieces; O’Neill didn’t know how to have a healthy relationship.

On October 30th, 1919, Agnes and Eugene had a son whom they named Shane Rudraighe O’Neill, Eugene’s second child. At this time, O’Neill’s plays were doing well, and *Beyond the Horizon* won his first Pulitzer in June of 1920--his second show on Broadway. His father saw the performance and was moved by it. Despite this success, O’Neill faced trauma and intense panic in his personal life. Shortly after his father attended *Beyond the Horizon*, James suffered from a stroke and was diagnosed with intestinal cancer, passing away on August 10th. O’Neill’s work was becoming increasingly nuanced and important to American theatre, for he wrote “*Anna Christie*” (1921) and *The Emperor Jones* (1920) during this time. Yet, Gene’s family turmoil continued as Jenkins requested child support for Eugene Jr., and, most tragically, his mother died February 28th after a series of strokes.

In 1922, O’Neill’s “*Anna Christie*” earned O’Neill his second Pulitzer, a play that documents a prostitute’s tragic, yet perhaps melodramatic, romance with a sailor and her return to her seafaring father. Like *The Web* (1913), which was written nine years earlier, it contends with the lives of prostitutes in a way that hadn’t been seen before on the American stage. Furthermore, O’Neill wrote *All God’s Chillun Got Wings* in 1923 (published and performed in 1924), depicting an interracial marriage and a kiss between a Black actor (Paul Robeson) and white actress (Mary Blair), for the first time on Broadway. Yet, while his plays continued to get better and his success greater, his personal life continued to spiral, for his brother Jamie went into a sanatorium in June after an acute alcoholic episode. On November 8th, 1923, Jamie died, and Bogard notes that O’Neill “[did not] attend [the] service or burial” (1071). Jamie drank himself blind and his hair had turned white, and the severity of the episode, along with recently losing his mother, had traumatized O’Neill to the point of emotional instability. Yet, amongst such trauma, O’Neill continued to succeed.

In the next few years, O’Neill had continued to write consistently and strongly, ever innovating. He finished *Desire Under the Elms* (1924) and *The Great God Brown* (1926), yet his heavy drinking had continued. However, Bogard notes that in 1926 O’Neill sought psychological help, and “[underwent a six week] psychoanalytic treatment” (1072). During this time, he stopped drinking, and Bogard observes “except for intense, short episodes, [abstained] for [the] remainder of [his] life” (1073). While O’Neill overcame his alcoholism for the time being, his personal life remained on a shaky foundation: mostly due to his heavy drinking, depression, extreme nervousness, and adultery. Gene started to have an affair with Carlotta Monterey, who would become his third and last wife, and separated himself from Agnes and their two children: Shane and Oona. Arthur and Barbara Gelb illustrate O’Neill’s ambiguous feelings for the women in his life during early 1928: “[O’Neill] is still waffling between Agnes, the devil he knows, and Carlotta, the bewitching but possibly dangerous rescuing angel” (26). Carlotta had first been introduced to O’Neill when she performed the role of Mildred in *The Hairy Ape* (1922). O’Neill saw his own life through a dramatic gaze, feeling tragedy in his position between Agnes and Carlotta. The Gelbs describe O’Neill’s feelings in a private conversation with Elizabeth Shepley Sergeant, a reporter and a friend, stating that O’Neill felt “aware he’s not the first man ever confronted
with a choice between wife and mistress, [yet] nonetheless [he persuaded] himself the dilemma is uniquely and tragically his own” (28). O’Neill felt dissatisfied with marriage despite constantly pursuing it.

O’Neill had a heart-wrenching life, constantly going through family turmoil, experiencing trauma, struggling with romantic partners, and having poor mental and physical health. This trauma is inextricably part of his work, and while O’Neill had a tragic life, he used that tragedy to innovate and become a founding writer for American theatre. “The Lost Plays” may be called lost, but in order to find the meaning within them, looking at O’Neill’s life allows us to contend with these plays and find meaning beyond the text. Their performance at Tao House allows a glimpse into O’Neill’s past, which is always interconnected in his works. As director Eric Frashier Hayes puts it, “The fact that we are performing these early O’Neill plays (including The Web) at Tao House is very important to me and very meaningful for the actors who perform there. There is a power in performing plays where a playwright wrote.” Thus, Mary Tyrone’s question “The past is the present, isn’t it?” prompts us as an audience to contend with O’Neill’s great legacy in order to look into the future.

Works Cited


"Eugene Gladstone O'Neill’s life was, like a web, complicated, for his success was constantly contending with his traumatic past."
Boob(s): Idiot
Bulls: Cops
Cadet: Pimp
Cooler: Prison
Consumption: Tuberculosis
Dolls: Women
Hitting the pipe: Using opium
Hop: Opium
Mint: A place where money is made or coined.
Paint: Makeup, which was often associated with prostitutes, especially rouge
Pinched: Arrested by police
Salted (As in money salted): stashed away
Simp: Simpleton.
“The Island”: A reference to Blackwell’s Island, also known as ‘the Tombs,” where prostitutes were often sent to prison
Yegg or Yeggman: A thief or a robber
Filmed Theatre and Liveness

By David Sanders

A few weeks ago I attended a socially distanced gathering, listening to Wisconsin’s Democratic Party’s reading of Rob Reiner’s The Princess Bride. I went in with the assumption that there was no way that listening to actors spill out lines without the movie’s visual effects could be as meaningful or entertaining as the movie. Gratefully, I was wrong. I found that the lines flowed with the same gusto, some of the original actors and actresses fell true to their characters, and the dialogue (“Hello. My name is Inigo Montoya. You killed my father. Prepare to die.”) was still impeccable. The reading forced me to consider how we are going to engage in art, particularly theatre, which, when it is not viable to open theatres, is being ideated, tested, and iterated.

What we are viewing, The Web, from the Eugene O’Neill Foundation at Tao House, is a test of an idea. This virtual production is separating two things which we typically associate as being inseparable concepts: liveness and theatre. Three classic key elements of theatre are being morphed and reconstructed in these filmed stagings by Eric Frashier Hayes of the O’Neill Foundation: the stage, the audience, and the actors. The energies of each typically feed off of one another; but now, given that the production is not live in the traditional sense, we need to consider what liveness means.

In his article titled “Digital Liveness,” an update to his aptly named book, Liveness, Philip Auslander describes the novelty of liveness, pointing out that it has only been a concept for 100 to 150 years and is “bound up with the history of recording media” (Auslander, “Digital Liveness,” 3). At the time of O’Neill’s writing of The Web in 1913, the idea of liveness in relation to other media was just coming into the picture. While cinema had been around since the late nineteenth century, it had not become popular until the early 1900s with the pioneering of the nickelodeon and Hollywood studios (Dixon 10). The parallels between O’Neill’s time and ours raise questions about an ongoing, everchanging philosophy about what constitutes performance in the age of media.
Along with the ontological aspects of liveness, Auslander considers the use of mediatization of rock music as his key example in exploring how live concerts fold media into these events. We can extrapolate from Auslander’s position that, "Sound alone cannot establish rock authenticity (or inauthenticity) any more than visuals alone" (Auslander, *Liveness*, 75). If we conclude that live theatre is similar to rock in its interaction with live audiences, then it does not mean what we are viewing is inauthentic just because we lack our traditional visual avenue. While it is futile to pretend that the “filmed stage performance,” as Hayes puts it, is live theatre, it still holds typical aspects of theatre. For example, Hayes described a key similarity, saying, “One real benefit is *The Web* will have a premiere. It is being done intentionally so people all over can be there for the performance.” Hayes’ consideration allows for people who are potentially a great deal of distance across the globe to achieve a sense of community that we typically get in a theatre. With help from Auslander’s and Hayes’ philosophies of liveness in relation to mediatization, then we as an audience can determine whether what we are viewing is live or not.

The way in which each person considers the liveness of a performance stems from two of the previously described three key concepts of theatre: the audience and performers. Auslander says that it is the performers’ job to produce a claim to liveness, and then “it is up to the audience whether or not to respect the claim and respond to it” (Auslander, “Digital Liveness,” 7). The way in which artists arrive at a legitimate assertion of liveness is of importance. As the director of *The Web*, Hayes pointed out in a recent interview with me, “Not only am I directing the actors; I’m directing the camera.” The notion that what makes theatre different from other media, like television, is the focal point. Auslander considers a similar issue in the early days of television when cameras were not as nimble, saying, “the television image was frontal and oriented toward the viewer” (Auslander, *Liveness*, 21). Even though the camera is more mobile now, we still don’t choose what we see when watching filmed media, whereas the camera operator does. We expect our viewing to be organic and not forced when watching a live play. Typically we decide what we look at, but now we will rely on Hayes to put us in the best positions to feel and see the play as a filmed event.
While I have opined that it is up to us to determine the efficacy of liveness, it is without a doubt that the feel of The Web as a filmed stage performance will not be the same as sitting in an actual theatre and viewing it. When I probed Hayes for more details, he described how energy flows in a performance: "There's a quality of tension. It spurs on performers. A problem is that it is subjective. It's always subjective and creates a level of insecurity for performers. The audience influences the energy. The performance. You can feel the group [audience]. Are they leaning in? Do they breathe at certain moments?" And while the performers are unable to feed off our energy and feel the effects online, there's no reason we cannot engage in the filmed play in the way we normally would. If you feel you should applaud at the end, do it. If you feel you should put on a nice set of clothes while viewing the production, do it. Our homes are our theatres, and we are experimenting the same as the artists are.

Works Cited


"What we are viewing, The Web, from the Eugene O’Neill Foundation at Tao House, is a test of an idea."
"GO TO SOME PLACE OUT IN THE MOUNTAINS AND GIT RID OF THAT COUGH."
--TIM MORAN, THE WEB
As has been recounted by numerous scholars, O'Neill's writing was heavily influenced by his own life experiences. In his play *The Web* (1913), which was originally titled *The Cough*, the main character Rose suffers from tuberculosis, the same disease O'Neill was diagnosed with at the age of 24. Tuberculosis, also known as consumption or TB, is an infectious airborne disease that is spread when infected individuals cough or speak, which spreads the bacteria in their lungs through the air. Though it is well known as a respiratory disease, tuberculosis can also affect many other parts of the body such as the kidneys, bones, the brain and even the skin. It is caused by the mycobacterium tuberculosis bacteria (MT). MT has been around longer than most people realize, having existed for an estimated 70,000 years. MT's early progenitor is believed to have existed as early as three million years ago “having infected early hominids in East Africa” (Barberis et al). Due to its ancient existence, the disease has gone by many names over the course of history.

Some of the earliest documents about the disease date back to 3300 years ago from India and 2300 years ago from China. There are also similar documented descriptions of TB related to Hebraism long ago since “The ancient Hebrew word schachepheth is used in biblical books of Deuteronomy and Leviticus in order to describe TB” (Ibid.). Tuberculosis was also familiar during Roman times and ancient Greece. The Greek physician Hippocrates in Book 1, of the Epidemics (410-400 BCE) described a disease of “weakness of the lung with fever.
and cough which he refers to as phthisis” (Frith). The description of Phtisis’s characteristics matches the lung damage caused by TB. In the middle ages, Scrofula, a TB-esque disease that infected the lymph nodes, was well known in France and England. It was known as “king’s evil.” Both countries had a practice called the king’s touch since “it was widely believed that persons affected could heal after a royal touch” (Barberis et al).

Many sanatoriums were built to treat patients with TB during the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. The first person to start off the Sanatorium Movement was “Hermann Brehmer, a German physician,” who opened “the first sanatorium ... in 1854 in the village of Göbersdorf in the Bavarian Alps’” (Working Group). While there, patients got fresh air, good food, rest and exercise. Dr. Edward Trudeau, who had read about Hermann’s work, was the founder of the first public sanatorium in the United States: the Adirondack Cottage Sanatorium in Saranac, New York in 1884. Dr. Trudeau’s own experience with consumption prompted him to believe that fresh air and sunlight was the best treatment since it helped him feel relieved of his own symptoms. Even though he still had TB, he continued treating patients and researching the disease. American treatments in the early twentieth century focused on patients receiving fresh air, rest, good food, and sunlight. Given the prevailing wisdom about treatment and the fact that TB was contagious, sanatoriums were located in low populated areas and “became isolated communities containing a series of buildings that provided housing for patients and staff, medical and administrative offices, utility plants, and other uses” (Grahn). These institutions were very self-sufficient and the rules were strict for patients. Despite social status and quality of these institutions, “the majority of American tuberculosis sanatoria were framed by strict rules on how patients should act, sleep, dress and exercise; what they should eat and when; and even with whom they should and should not associate” (Markel). Many of these rules are portrayed in O’Neill’s play The Straw (1922).

Some sanatoriums in the U.S. were run by the state and often had bad reputations in regards to their treatments and cure rates. Other, more expensive institutions were seen as better opportunities for survival and social standing. O’Neill’s father, James O’Neill, had initially admitted Gene to the Fairfield County State Tuberculosis Sanatorium to save money in the winter of 1912. When they arrived at “the seedy institution ... they found that the physical plant consisted of little more than a ramshackle clinic building and a smattering of cottages housing exceedingly ill patients” (Markel). Luckily for O’Neill, he only stayed two days before being sent to the Gaylord Farm Sanatorium in Connecticut; he arrived Christmas Eve (the debate over the differences between such institutions is featured in Long Day’s Journey Into Night).

"Rose’s character as the consumptive prostitute was often a familiar figure in literature and drama in the mid nineteenth and early twentieth century."

In The Web, Rose is not only a prostitute, but also suffers from consumption. Rose’s character as the consumptive prostitute was often a familiar figure in literature and drama in the mid nineteenth and early twentieth century. The stage directions describe her as “a person in an advanced stage of consumption —deathly pale with hollows in under the eyes, which are wild and feverish” and having “a harsh, hacking cough that shakes her whole body” (O’Neill 15). Her social status leaves her no opportunity to even be admitted to a state sanatorium. She barely has the money to go to a doctor. She reveals to Tim Morgan, her recent acquaintance in the
tenement house in which she resides, that she has been to the doctor, but the results of the visit gave her no hope. She tells him: “He said the only hope fur me was to git out in the country, sleep in the open air, and eat a lot of good food. He might jest as well ‘uv told me to go to Heaven and I told him so. Then he said I could go out to some dump where yuh don’t have to pay nothin’, but he said I’d have to leave the kid behind. I told him I’d rather die than do that” (22). Even if there were an opportunity financially, she would still have to think of the placement of her baby, who is also at risk of catching the disease.

When comparing today’s treatments to those from the twentieth century, medical research has progressed quite a bit over the years. Illnesses like TB, which were the leading cause of many deaths in the past, are handled more efficiently now. We limit the spread of infectious disease by constantly keeping up with hygiene practices and wearing protective equipment such as gloves, and face masks when needed. Treatment for TB made its breakthrough with the discovery of antibiotics in the 1940s. Today the four most common medications used for treatment are: “isoniazid (1951), pyrazinamide (1952), ethambutol (1961), and rifampin (1966)” (CDC). With these medical developments, the treatment for TB has improved, but it still has a long way to go. Tuberculosis is still considered a global threat. One of the major reasons for this is antimicrobial resistance, which means microorganisms responsible for infectious diseases become immune to the medicine used to treat it. In 2016, “The World Health Organization estimated that 10.4 million people became sick with TB. Of these, 580,000 cases were drug resistant” (TB Alliance). The knowledge of TB still being a global pandemic really puts in perspective the severity of Rose’s illnesses within the context of the early twentieth century. Even if she was able to get out of her situation with her controlling pimp, Steve, and find a temporary place for her baby, there is a slim chance the treatments in sanatoriums during that time would save her. As far as her fight with tuberculosis goes, there seems to be no way out of the web in which she is caught.

Works Cited


AN INTERVIEW WITH DIRECTOR
ERIC FRASHIER HAYES
BY BRITTANY WARREN

Director Eric Frashier Hayes

I spoke via telephone with director Eric Frashier Hayes on September 24th to discuss the staging and filming of The Web. Below are excerpts from that conversation.

Brittany: O’Neill’s writing was heavily influenced by his own life experiences. Is it necessary to have some understanding or knowledge of O’Neill himself in order to act in his plays?

Eric: His most famous play was written [but] not produced until after his death. Long Day’s Journey Into Night was autobiographical. Performers and directors don’t need to know everything. You have to work with the script you have. I work with these plays; I take things out if I think it will work better. A good performance of the play is really based on the script. So while I think it would help to know about O’Neill’s life, the actors need to act out what is on the page.

Brittany: Considering how different the public’s views are regarding women, prostitution, and contraceptives today, if The Web was written in modern times, how do you think the story would have ended?

Eric: I have two different ideas there. The ending is dominated by the entrance of the police and how they handle the situation. They would have to read [Rose] her rights and be concerned about fingerprints. There are things they would have to do differently [now]. Essentially you have police busting in predetermined about what they are going to find. In the example of Breonna Taylor, they assumed all sorts of things about what they would find. Same in The Web: the officers bust in assuming what they will find. They aren’t that different; the officers never check the window. The procedures would be different [today]. People busting in with bias seems topical.

Brittany: People who hold positions of power can overshadow others because they believe they are right. Would anything else change?

Eric: I think society would offer things they didn’t offer then. Power dynamics, those things haven’t changed. Why would someone stay in a bad situation? It is so much more complicated. [Rose] doesn’t feel like she has any options. People outside a situation say “do this or that,” but aren’t considering the complications. It’s a real thing to worry about an ex coming to hurt you. Today Rose would at least be more aware of things that
Eric: Maybe the baby’s name should be Tim junior [the antihero from The Web]. Tim has stories about growing up in reform school, where you’re treated like a criminal and maybe he is a criminal. Maybe Rose’s situation can carry over. At the end of the play, we have a child that is going into a system. The system has its bias too; a privileged child gets the best path to a better life versus a poor baby born to a prostitute. There is a path/trajectory. The system will treat it like a baby, but ultimately they will probably see the baby through the same biased lens that they were looking at Rose from.

Brittany: It’s like the cycle of poverty; if you’re poor, your children will be too.

Eric: There’s a total parallel between the baby and Rose. Neither have anywhere to go. Is the baby “one of those babies?” Are they starting way down at the bottom of the ladder? By some luck, the baby could escape. But it seems to be on a parallel trajectory to [where] Rose was.

Brittany: Cross referencing another one of O’Neill’s plays, “Anna Christie,” what do you think Anna has and Rose lacks that makes their stories have different outcomes despite the women having the same occupation?

Eric: Anna in “Anna Christie” was revolutionary because she squares off with two men [her father, Chris and her lover, Matt]. If Rose was more like Anna, she’d tell the men fighting over her off. Rose doesn’t do this. [In] The Web, O’Neill is trying to capture a sense of people in their societies. Anna is much more complex; written than Rose. Actress, Emily Keyishian adds a lot of depth by how she delivers her lines. She conveys much more than what is written in the lines. Anna stands up for herself and fights back and tells both of them to go to hell. Rose doesn’t do that. O’Neill [was] taking a somewhat similar character but giving them more depth and empowerment [in “Anna Christie”].

Brittany: How would you define “the web” that Rose is caught in? How does it affect her and can the people around her also be caught in it?

"O’Neill is trying to capture a sense of people in their societies."

--Eric Frashier Hayes
From left to right: Charles Woodson Parker as Steve and Ryan Hayes as Tim in the Eugene O’Neill Foundation’s production of The Web, directed by Eric Frashier Hayes.

From left to right: John Hale as a Policeman, Emily Keyishian Rose Thomas, John Tessmer as a Policeman, and Will Long as a Policeman (looking away in disgust) in the Eugene O’Neill Foundation’s production of The Web.
PROSTITUTION DURING THE
PROGRESSIVE ERA

BY JASON COOK

Eugene O’Neill’s The Web (1913) takes place at a unique time in American history and its pressing sexuality debates, portraying what has commonly been referred to as the world’s oldest profession. Explored through the character of Rose Thomas in this early one-act play, the life of a prostitute was one of desperation and oppression, typified by a collection of young women forced into work by a society that refused to protect them. Despite working women making up 18% of the workforce circa 1900, the average wage for women remained far below meeting even basic necessities with only 39% of paid women making even $7 a week, while the 1900 census reports that a single woman required $7.60 a week to maintain even the lowest standard quality of life (US Census Bureau). This disparity between what was given versus what was needed was further compounded by the fact that the majority of these women were already in financial turmoil, as it was exceedingly rare for a wealthy woman to join the workplace. For these women, prostitution was a way out, a road to a new standard of living many had never seen at the risk of disease, pregnancy, and a loss of personal liberties. Yet, despite the risks involved, the necessity of the business can not be overstated. In a literal matter of life and death, engaging in prostitution was often the only thing keeping roofs over these women’s heads and food on their tables.

Unfortunately, the early decades of the 1900s was an odd time in American history, one where archaic views of spiritual morality would clash regularly with the economic realities of the most vulnerable citizens.

Beginning in the late 19th century, a moral panic began to spread throughout America (especially in New York City) concerning what would now be known as human trafficking. Rampant misinformation and objectively biased media began to portray prostitution as “White Slavery”: a cruel industry exploiting young, white women for nefarious ends (this of course is not to say that no prostitutes worked under inhuman conditions, merely that such reports were blown wildly out of proportion by the media). Publications with these claims ran rampant throughout the states with popular discourse extolling prostitution’s perceived threat to the idealized white American standard of femininity, a narrative attempting to both reassert social control over the female form and patrol the color line with the construct of the white feminine ideal, ideas soon reflected in legislature (Gallagher-Cohoon 1).

In 1875 a bill known as the Page Act was put into effect in the US for the primary purpose of limiting Chinese immigration into America, but it also provided new laws targeting the prostitution industry and ushering in an era of anti-prostitution legislature. The law stipulated imprisonment for up to one year for any woman found guilty of engaging in prostitution, which in practice served to strip legal protections specifically from women while protecting male interests. In 1910, just three years before The Web, the Mann Act further targeted prostitutes by removing legal protections of brothels and red light districts and giving authorities the power to investigate reports of prostitution at will after intense pressures from overwhelmingly popular publications to
target. These attempted moral reforms clashed directly with the necessity of prostitution in order to support thousands of American women, a topic explored in both this production as well as other works of O'Neill, such as “Anna Christie” (1921). More than simply threatening their freedom, these targeted assaults on the “Social Evil” of prostitution became mechanisms that determined the fate of these women.

Rose Thomas is not merely O'Neill's depiction of a simple prostitute, but rather a reflection of the larger conflict engulfing turn-of-the-millenium American culture's struggle with its own codes of morality and the victims caught in the wake of this spiritual war while fighting every day for survival.

Works Cited


"WHAT JOB C'N I GIT?
WHAT AM I FIT FOR?"
--ROSE THOMAS, THE WEB
One year ago, I was working in the luggage room at Tao House as the Travis Bogard Writer-in-Residence. The beauty of the San Ramon mountains surrounding O’Neill’s residence, where he wrote his final masterpieces, inspired me greatly. I wanted to share this with my students.

So when I began teaching a seminar on O’Neill, I wanted my students to connect with Tao House. Then Eric Frashier Hayes notified me he was producing virtual productions of “The Lost Plays,” and I wondered if my students could link their research projects with real audiences. With you.

What you see before you is the hard work of emerging scholars crafting dramaturgical projects for The Web (1913) and Abortion (1914)—two early plays by O’Neill. These dramaturgical packets highlight the contexts surrounding the historical moment in which O’Neill wrote these early plays—from Progressive Era abortion laws to the ontological question of what liveness means. In working intensely with O’Neill, they have come to know him, with all his faults and radical breakthroughs. They have researched, written, revised—and revised again—to bring you relevant contexts for understanding these works a century later.

I hope you enjoy their work. And who knows? You may one day drive up the hills to Tao House and see where O’Neill charted the future of American theatre.