

PROSCENIUM

Anna Christie

By Eugene O'Neill

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Wednesday 31st October to Saturday 3rd November 2012
Compass Theatre, Ickenham

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Cast:

'Johnny-the-Priest'	Keith Bayross
Larry, the bartender	Richard Brice
Chris Christopherson, captain of the barge 'Simeon Winthrop'	Colin Hickman
Marthy Owen.....	Aimie Daly
Anna Christopherson, Chris's daughter.....	Clare Wooster
Mat Burke, a stoker.....	Michael Wells

Directed by.....	Michael Gerrard
Stage Manager	Anne Gerrard
Set design and construction.....	Mark Brookes
Assistant stage manager.....	Sheila Harvey
Properties	Izzie Cartwright
Costumes	Anne Gerrard
Sound recording.....	Richard Brice
Lighting and sound operation	Compass Theatre

Act 1: "Johnny-the-Priest's" saloon near the
waterfront, New York City.

Act 2: The barge, 'Simeon Winthrop', at anchor in the harbour of
Princeton, Mass. Ten days later.

Act 3: Cabin of the barge, at dock in Boston. A week later.

Act 4: The same. Two days later.

Time of the play - about 1910

The Author

“Eugene O’Neill has ever walked alone and seemed a stranger to those about him”

Elizabeth Shapley Sergeant: *Man With A Mask*

Eugene O’Neill was born in a Broadway hotel room in what is now Times Square. Where the hotel stood is a Starbucks, which has a commemorative plaque posted on an outside wall: ‘Eugene O’Neill October 16th 1888 to November 27th 1953, America’s greatest playwright, was born on this site then called the Barrett Hotel.’

He was the second son of an Irish immigrant actor, James O’Neill, and Mary Ellen Quinlan. His father’s favourite role was the Count of Monte Cristo – a part he played for some thirty years. Eugene later in life attributed some blame to his father for their itinerant life-style, which disrupted family life and harmony and was, he thought, a contributory cause of his mother’s drug addiction.

“The first seven years of my life was spent mostly in hotel rooms and railway trains, my mother accompanying my father on his tour of the United States, although she was never an actress, disliked the theatre and held aloof from its people.”

At seven he was sent to a Catholic boarding school, where he had a lonely existence, finding solace mainly in books. He was very conscious of the conflict between what he described as his father’s ‘peasant Irish Catholicism’ (reflected in the views of Mat Burke in *Anna Christie*) and the gentle mystical piety of his mother: a conflict he dramatized in his later plays.

He spent a year, 1906-7, at Princeton University but dropped out, perhaps because he attended too few lectures or was suspended for ‘conduct code violation’, though there is a more interesting but

probably apocryphal account of him throwing a beer bottle through the window of Professor Woodrow Wilson.

He spent several years at sea after this, which he described as his real education in ‘life experience’. He suffered from depression and alcoholism, lived on occasions a derelict existence on the waterfronts of Buenos Aires, Liverpool and New York and met the poor, the despised and the outcast who were to people so many of his plays.

He began to feel ill in 1912 and for a few months became a reporter and contributor to the poetry columns of the New London Telegraph. He became too weak to work and for a while was confined to home, looked after by a nurse but eventually was moved to a sanatorium for treatment.

“Eugene’s illness was worse than pleurisy, it was one of the most feared of all diseases, tuberculosis, known on both sides of the Atlantic – because so many Irish fell victim to it – as ‘the Irish disease’. At first Ella O’Neill refused to accept the doctor’s findings, stubbornly insisting that her son’s illness was only ‘a bad cold.’”

Louise Sheaffer: *O’Neill, Son and Playwright*

During his recuperation he confronted himself ‘soberly and nakedly’ and recognised the chance of ‘rebirth’. “It gave me chance to think about myself and what I was doing – or rather not doing. I got busy writing one-act plays.” His father was persuaded to enrol him in Professor George Baker’s playwriting course at Harvard. After which he joined the Provincetown Players, a group of young writers and painters interested in experimental theatre and performing first in a ramshackle theatre on the wharf and then in Greenwich Village. O’Neill turned up, he said, “with a trunkful of plays” including the first to be performed, *Bound East for Cardiff*. They were all one-act plays, set largely at sea and in the

docklands, peopled with prostitutes, derelicts and lonely sailors and much concerned with God's injustice to man.

His first published play to receive a Broadway opening in 1920 was *Beyond the Horizon*, which won the Pulitzer Prize for Drama, followed closely by *Emperor Jones* and in 1921-2 *Anna Christie*, the second of his four Pulitzer Prizes. These plays showed O'Neill as a playwright rejecting the conventional Broadway theatre of the time, which largely consisted of melodrama and farce, and moving away from the theatre of his father.

“O'Neill was one of the most important voices of his age. He articulated its ambiguities and plumbed its depths, and did so through a medium that was, before he seized hold of it, almost entirely successful at resisting depth and ambiguity: the American theatre. It is not excessive to write that O'Neill created serious American drama.”

Tony Kushner

He began to use both the stories and the dramatic power of Greek tragedy to illuminate his vision of contemporary America, particularly in *Desire Under the Elms*, 1924 and *Mourning Becomes Electra*, 1931. In 1936 he was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature – the only American playwright to be so honoured.

Between 1920 and 1943 he wrote more than twenty full length plays. By the 1940s, however, when he wrote his three great autobiographical works, *The Iceman Cometh*, *Moon for the Misbegotten* and *Long Day's Journey Into Night*, he was suffering from what was thought to be Parkinson's Disease and by 1943 his hands were shaking so badly that he was unable to hold a pen.

The Play

In 1920 he wrote a somewhat sentimental and uncharacteristic comedy, *Chris Christopherson*, but, dissatisfied, he rewrote it as *Anna Christie*, a much darker and more ambiguous play, no longer the story of a Harlot with a Heart of Gold.

Michael Billington in his review of the recent Donmar production wrote: “O’Neill’s real protagonist is none of the human characters, it is the sea.” The sea is certainly a powerful and ambiguous force in the play. To Chris – a seaman all his life and therefore dependent on it for his livelihood – it is ‘That Old Devil with her Dirty Tricks’, which will eventually swallow up all who venture on her and destroy all hope of family life. But he is in part blaming the sea for his own failings and inadequacy. For Anna the sea is, for a moment, a life-changing experience offering hope for the future: but the audience must decide how deep and long-lasting this experience is.

Similarly ambiguous is the play’s ending which seems on the surface to offer some resolution to the terrible conflict between Chris and Mat, father and lover and their response to Anna’s secret. But, in reality, Anna is left at the end in a state of desolate uncertainty: the tragic power of the play once more threatens.

Some Observations

“More clearly than Strindberg, O’Neill identified the family as a destructive entity.” (Strindberg was O’Neill’s favourite playwright).

Raymond Williams, 1966

“Much that an American playwright needs to know can be learned by studying Eugene O’Neill’s life and work. He read

a lot. He sailed the ocean and he suffered. His income went up and down and was never reliable. His reputation went up and down and was also unreliable. He wrote of the self and also of the world. He argued with God. He hid from the world. He knew he had a soul.”

Tony Kushner, 2003

Although a left wing sympathiser his plays are not didactically political, he wanted perhaps not social transformation but transformation of the individual. His political creed is like that of Larry in *The Iceman Cometh*:

“I was forced to admit, at the end of thirty years’ devotion to the Cause, that I was never made for it. I was born condemned to be one of those who has to see all side of a question. When you’re damned like that, the questions multiply for you until in the end it’s all questions and no answers. As history proves, to be a worldly success at anything, especially revolution, you have to wear blinders like a horse and see only straight in front of you. You have to see, too, that this is all black and that is all white.”

“As an emotionalist, who knows how to dramatise the curdling rancour of hate, the surging of thwarted passion, and the taut demands of murder, O’Neill has no equal in the contemporary theatre”.

John Mason Brown, 1931

“Oh for a language to write drama in! For a speech which is dramatic and isn’t just conversation”

Eugene O’Neill, in a letter of 1929

Iron, by Rona Munro

Josie is visiting Fay for the first time in 15 years. Fay is serving life for murdering her husband, Josie's father. Mother and daughter try to break through the barriers of time, memory and punishment that separate them. Between them lies the fact of a murder Josie cannot remember and Fay has been trying to forget. Uncovering the memories they share is more dangerous than either of them can imagine.

'Iron resonates and will stay with the viewers long after they have left the theatre', British Theatre Guide

Directed by David Pearson

Wednesday January 16th to Saturday January 19th 2013

7:45 pm, Compass Theatre, Ickenham

Box Office : 020 8866 7075

About Proscenium

Proscenium was founded in 1924. Since then, the aim of this experienced group has been to present classic and contemporary plays to as wide an audience as possible. Since 1990, performances have taken place at the Harrow Arts Centre and, more recently, at the Compass Theatre, Ickenham.

The company meets three times a week, at the Harrow Arts Centre for rehearsals, so that four plays are presented in each season. Social, fund raising activities and play readings take place throughout the year.

Artistic Director : Michael Gerrard

Secretary : Izzie Cartwright

Chair : Crystal Anthony

Contact us at www.proscenium.org.uk