Michael Kahn directs

Strange Interlude

by Eugene O’Neill

Michael Kahn talks about his journey to Strange Interlude
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Dear Friend,

This issue of Asides highlights Eugene O’Neill’s *Strange Interlude*, a play I have wanted to share with you for a very long time. This rarely performed masterpiece earned O’Neill his third Pulitzer Prize for Drama, and played a part in winning him the Nobel Prize in Literature. Its novelistic complexity and experimental form have rendered it a classic, with intriguing possibilities for reinterpretation and restaging.

*Strange Interlude* attracted the attention of everyone from George Bernard Shaw to the Marx Brothers. It is a remarkable, intricate work with innovative form, and it displays O’Neill at the height of his power as a dramatist and thinker. This issue of Asides examines the ways in which *Strange Interlude* continues to push the boundaries of text, concept and performance.

STC keeps classical theatre alive by staging works of historical and intellectual stature, and *Strange Interlude* fits this mission. O’Neill has often been called America’s Greatest Dramatist. His works benefit from a fresh look and reintroduction to audiences as they were meant to be experienced, on the stage.

As Artistic Director, I continue to search for opportunities for STC to engage in local and national dialogue about classical theatre. I’m pleased that we are able to join Arena Stage for this year’s Eugene O’Neill Festival, which includes mainstage performances and educational discussions. The festival will take place through May 6, 2012, and a schedule can be found in a special insert to this issue. I encourage you to attend these events.

Please continue to visit Asides Online (Asides.ShakespeareTheatre.org) for more information and updates on the production, historical context and the Festival. I hope to see you in the theatre.

Warm regards,

Michael Kahn

Artistic Director, Shakespeare Theatre Company

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Opening on Broadway in 1928, Eugene O’Neill’s *Strange Interlude* shocked audiences with a plot line that incorporated abortion, adultery and eugenics. For STC Artistic Director Michael Kahn, the play’s power comes from an even more complicated topic: happiness. “Everyone wants it,” he says. “That’s what the play is about, people trying to find happiness, trying to figure out what it is and where they’re going to find it.”

Kahn first came across the Pulitzer Prize winner as a child. “My mother had been married to a bookseller before she married my father,” he explains. “So our home was full of books, including first editions of O’Neill’s plays and, among them, *Strange Interlude*. I read it when I was very young and I didn’t understand a thing, except that it was huge. Years later I saw Geraldine Page play Nina and I realized that I love the play, that it was this Mount Olympus that needed to be climbed.”

Before assaying Olympus, Kahn tested his strength with O’Neill’s other works. He directed *Mourning Becomes Electra* with Jane Alexander at the Stratford Shakespeare Festival in 1971, then with Kelly McGillis at the Shakespeare Theatre Company in 1996. His production of *Beyond the Horizon* at the McCarter Theatre was filmed for PBS’s Great Performances in 1976. A year later, he was in Boston directing José Ferrer and Kate Reid in *Long Day’s Journey Into Night*.

It was in the early 1980s that Kahn suggested *Strange Interlude* to Roundabout Theatre Company as a follow-up to his highly successful *A Month in the Country*. “I was encouraged to send the script to Glenda Jackson,” Kahn remembers. Jackson declined the Roundabout offer but was soon playing the role in a London production that came to Broadway in 1985.

“It was very disappointing,” Kahn says, “I thought there would never be another revival of *Strange Interlude*. It had been done.” It wasn’t until he was planning the Shakespeare Theatre Company’s 25th Anniversary Season that Kahn returned to the script that he loved.
“Like all of O’Neill’s plays, Strange Interlude is profound and intuitive and a little over-written,” he says. “It was originally six hours long and was done with a dinner break.”

Having gained permission from the O’Neill estate to edit the script, Kahn spent a year studying its every nuance. “O’Neill, coming out of the life he had, and his theatre family, writes with a vestige of melodrama,” Kahn admits, “but he also writes with passion and understanding and daring. Before I cut a word, I wanted a complete understanding about why it was there.” The result is a play he hopes is more accessible to modern audiences.

While working on Strange Interlude, Kahn returned to another literary masterpiece of epic proportions. “I had read Proust’s In Search of Lost Time twice before,” he says. “The first time I was very young and completely involved with how unhappy the characters were, and how unhappy my own love life was, and that’s what I saw in the book. Then I read it again when I had more of a social life in New York City, and I became fascinated by the depiction of the rituals and masks of society. Reading it now, I’m keenly aware of how much I didn’t understand before. It’s especially interesting to read it alongside O’Neill. Each of these authors came to a point where they wanted to examine what life is, to examine what consciousness is.”

In Strange Interlude, O’Neill gives voice to his characters’ stream of consciousness. As with a Shakespearean aside or soliloquy, the audience becomes privy to an interior drama in which a character’s thoughts often contradict what is said in dialogue. O’Neill’s extensive use of the device was revolutionary, but Kahn finds the portrayal of Nina Leeds, the central character, even more groundbreaking.

“When great playwrights write about women, whether it’s Medea or Hedda Gabler or Blanche du Bois, they focus on a very small portion of their protagonist’s life, and usually toward the cataclysmic end of that life,” he explains. “O’Neill had a much more challenging and original idea, which was to show a woman’s life over three decades and to pick out its key events. It’s like going through your photographs and choosing the moments that changed everything. O’Neill lets us see what happens over a lifetime.”

Nina’s life spans one of the most volatile periods in the nation’s history, encompassing world wars, the advent of new technology and a radical shift in social norms. “It’s about America, the American dream,” Kahn says. “Everyone in this play is striving for happiness. And each of them believes there is a way to get it—through work, through achieving success, through children, through sex, through service to others or through possessing someone.”

When asked if anyone in the play actually finds that happiness, Kahn pauses to consider. “I think we need to discover the answer to that question,” he says. “At the end of the play, there is a cleans. ‘I have a right. The frantic pursuit for happiness cease. They have this bittersweet ability to say yes, I’ve given up the struggle.’

Kahn is speaking of the older characters, whom we’ve watched struggle toward a hard-won contentment, but a more vital happiness remains a possibility for the drama’s younger players. “The play begins with news that the man Nina loves, a World War One pilot, has been shot down,” Kahn points out. “It ends with a young pilot, named for the one who died at the beginning, flying up into the sky with the woman he loves. Happiness—whatever you think that is—remains the engine of the play.” He shrugs. “Ultimately, it’s about us.”

Eugene O’Neill, by the winter of 1951, had long suffered from a degenerative neurological disorder that finally shut off his ability to write. Aggravating his depression was the fact that The Iceman Cometh, his last play on Broadway in his lifetime, was not the success he’d hoped for in 1946. Now 60, but looking some 20 years older, he was living a bleak, isolated life in Marblehead Neck, Massachusetts, with his wife, Carlotta.

She was a former actress and internationally acclaimed beauty, the same age as O’Neill, worn out from years of catering to her world-famous, Nobel Prize-winning husband. She herself was afflicted with various ailments, including severe nervous tension and depression. Both were taking strong medications containing bromide that had hallucinatory side effects of which they were unaware.

Their clash was inevitable. O’Neill, unable to give vent to paper to the dramatic furies that had driven his writing for the past 35 years, was compelled to act out the drama of his current dilemma. And Carlotta, the one-time actress, a woman of capricious temperament, was his Hell-sent foil. A few years after O’Neill’s death in 1953, she sardonically depicted to us the climactic (and decidedly operatic) conflict in Marblehead as “A little drama in the home.” The drama on the night in question resulted in hospital stays for both O’Neills—he with a broken leg and she for drug-induced psychosis. (The drama was depicted in a one-act opera by Tony Kushner and Jeanine Tesori at the Glimmerglass Festival at Cooperstown, New York, last summer.)

Carrolla Monterey O’Neill survived her husband by 17 years. Far from being released by his death from playing the role of tragic heroine in which O’Neill had cast her, she continued to follow his unwritten script. From the beginning of their marriage in 1929 when both were 41—a third marriage for him, a fourth for her—O’Neill and Carlotta enacted their passionate personal drama of love and fury.
She had fulfilled his expectations as both lover and antagonist. They had battled, but she had helped him to live and to write; and, nursing him devotedly (and long-sufferingly) during the tormented months of his final illness, she helped him to die.

Carlotta assumed with gusto her new role as widow and literary heir of the great dramatist she called (sometimes in mockery) “the Master.” Her guardianship, particularly with regard to the disposition of his plays, was sometimes viciously disparaged by O’Neill’s friends and associates. But O’Neill himself would probably have viewed her actions with ironic detachment. Knowing her inside out, he left her the absolute right to dispose as she pleased of his literary estate.

Uncannily, she began to assume O’Neill’s character, in much the same way that Lavinia Mannon, in Mourning Becomes Electra, assumed the character of her dead mother, Christine. Carlotta played a dual role—that of the dramatically mourning widow, who dressed exclusively in black, down to her carefully chosen jewelry, and that of O’Neill’s alter-ego, managing his literary property in a manner that was, she believed, dictated to her in vaguely mystical terms by O’Neill’s spirit. She became O’Neill.

Late in 1955 she moved from Boston, where she had buried him, to the Lowell Hotel in New York. She and O’Neill had stayed there briefly years earlier, and now his ghost moved in with her.

“Two years ago today—at this hour—Gene was dying! Will I ever be able to free myself from this man—and the love I felt for him!” she wrote to The New York Times theatre critic, Brooks Atkinson, with whom O’Neill had been friends.

Carlotta then began a tug of war to retrieve the manuscript of Long Day’s Journey Into Night, which O’Neill had consigned to the vault of his publisher, Bennett Cerf of Random House, with instructions that it be locked away until 25 years after his death—so that no one would be alive to question its autobiographical origins. Cerf did his best to honor O’Neill’s request but Carlotta, her husband’s legally undisputable heir and executrix, was of course triumphant.

The play was published in February of 1956 and in the same month was produced in Stockholm with great success. A month later Carlotta placed it in the hands of José Quintero and Theodore Mann for production on Broadway. She had admired their hugely successful off-Broadway revival, that May, of The Iceman Cometh—a production that featured an unknown actor named Jason Robards in the role of Hickey, the deluded salesman.

Critics began re-evaluating O’Neill, and Carlotta was shrewd enough to realize that a production of Long Day’s Journey could revitalize his reputation—and that Carlotta, who was beginning to run short of funds, could profit from the play’s presumed success.

Carlotta liked to eat well. She had been accustomed all of her adult life to luxurious and elegant surroundings. At 68, she was still a handsome, vital woman. After her many years of seclusion with O’Neill and following his death, she was enjoying her re-emergence into the world. Not that she became a social butterfly. She carefully maintained an aura of semi-seclusion and noblesse oblige, from time to time inviting select acquaintances to lunch—or, more rarely, dinner.

These meals—sometimes served in her hotel suite, sometimes at the Quo Vadis restaurant, sometimes at Passy, sometimes in the dining room of the Carlton House, where she moved from the Lowell—were always lavish, prolonged and quite often festive. While Carlotta was exceedingly erratic and volatile and could strike like a serpent when she fancied herself crossed, she could also be warm, funny, loquacious and entertaining.

During the next few years, Carlotta often complained to us that she was being haunted by O’Neill. She tended, at times, out of loneliness and depression, to drink too much. She had mental lapses during which she would give things away impulsively—jewelry, clothing, bric-a-brac, even the rights to plays.

Her final years of loneliness and desperation led to the sort of delusional existence O’Neill might have bestowed on one of his heroines. She progressed from mental aberration to senile psychosis, and her eventual collapse could well have been the climax of an O’Neill play.

There were no happy endings for O’Neill heroines, and Carlotta was the ultimate O’Neill heroine. Like Mary Tyrone of Long Day’s Journey Into Night, Carlotta became a ghost inhabiting her own past.

She spent the rest of her life in mental hospitals and nursing homes, finally winding up, in 1970, in the Valley Nursing Home in Westwood, New Jersey, where she died on November 18 of “arteriosclerotic coronary thrombosis.” She was 81.

As she had instructed in her will, her ashes were interred in the Forest Hills Cemetery in Boston where she had buried O’Neill 17 years earlier. She left a will, bequeathing most of her worldly goods to her daughter, Cynthia.

Her most priceless possession—the memories of her life with O’Neill—she could bequeath to no one. They were painfully, precisely, her own.
“Eugenic O’Neill” and Strange Interlude

by Tamsen Wolff

In his review of the original 1928 production of Strange Interlude, critic Walter Winchell neatly identified the play’s central concern and O’Neill’s preoccupation with heredity by announcing: “Another Eugenic O’Neill Baby.” Here drama merges with eugenics—the idea of hereditary improvement by controlled selective breeding—in O’Neill’s name. Winchell’s easy recognition of the presence of eugenics in the play suggests that the play’s now-scorned melodrama about heredity not only was understood differently in early productions, but also that the ideas of eugenics had a special resonance for O’Neill. Winchell’s easy recognition of the presence of eugenics in the play suggests that the play’s now-scorned melodrama about heredity not only was understood differently in early productions, but also that the ideas of eugenics had a special resonance for O’Neill.

Eugene O’Neill maintained that the only subject for drama to address was “man’s struggle...with himself, his own past.” As early as his first full-length play, Beyond the Horizon (1918), O’Neill created a modern version of ancient tragedy driven by intermingled hereditary, environmental and psychological forces, rather than by a larger, more abstract concept of fate. O’Neill wanted “to develop a tragic expression in terms of transfigured modern values and symbols in the theatre which may to some degree bring home to members of a modern audience their ennobling identity with the tragic figures on the stage.” Heredity, with its accompanying symbols, terms and controversies, is invariably one of these important modern values. Looking forward to the 20th century, sociologist Edward Ross announced, “heredity...is the new divinity that shapes our ends.” O’Neill brings this belief to bear in his drama.

In order to contemplate explicit questions of heredity in the early 20th century, O’Neill had to take on questions of eugenics. Claiming to be dedicated to “the improvement of the human race through better breeding,” the American eugenics movement enjoyed unparalleled popularity between 1900 and 1930. Predicated on the newly rediscovered Mendelian theory of heredity, eugenic rhetoric was pervasive and strongly emphasized biological determinism. The pressing historical and social contingencies that helped to produce eugenics included unprecedented levels of immigration; mass African-American migration to Northern cities; the women’s rights movement, and especially the related issues of reproductive rights and sexual freedom; rapid urbanization; and the First World War. The eruption of eugenic ideas responded to the resulting instability of national, class, gender and racial boundaries.

The eugenic popularization of Mendelian heredity provided a particularly stimulating environment in which to tackle questions about heredity and the past. For O’Neill, who was interested in developing complex relationships between the past and present on stage, eugenic insistence on the visibility and the force of the past in the embodied present offered a ready resource. O’Neill also shared with eugenicists an abiding concern with visibility and spectatorship. In eugenic theory, there is a vital tension between hidden truth (for eugenicists, usually ominous, recessive genetic secrets) and visible truth, or dominant genetic history displayed on the body. For eugenicists, this tension creates an unsettling vacillation between an assurance about what is clearly visible on the body and dread about what lurks unseen in the body. Of course, in theatre, a tension between hidden truth and visible truth is a playwright’s natural playground, affecting everything from dramaturgy, to stage design, to the place of the audience, to the theories and practice of acting. O’Neill both adopts and reconfigures ideas of heredity and eugenics in Strange Interlude in order to explore the influence of the past on the present and the power and limits of visibility.

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A Strange Sensation
by Laura Henry, STC Artistic Fellow

In the 1930 film Animal Crackers, Groucho Marx schmoozes two women at the same time. In the midst of his amorous advances, he steps forward and in a brooding voice says, “Pardon me while I have a strange interlude.” He peppers the rest of the scenes with weighty asides: “Party? Party? Here I am talking of parties. I came down here for a party. What happens? Nothing. Not even ice cream. The gods look down and laugh. This would be a better world for children if the parents had to eat spinach.”

This parody of the asides in Eugene O’Neill’s Strange Interlude confirms the play’s status as a cultural icon of the 1920s. Though he had already written more than 20 plays with considerable success, Eugene O’Neill became Eugene O’Neill after its premiere. The storm of accolades and arguments surrounding the play helped lead to a coup for the Theatre Guild and for O’Neill. Strange Interlude ran for 426 performances on Broadway and toured nationally several times. The published script sold 100,000 copies by 1931, and O’Neill sold the rights to MGM for a film version. The play also earned O’Neill his third Pulitzer Prize, and more importantly, made him the modern equivalent of a millionaire.

It was the talk of New York: a gargantuan show with daring new theatrical devices and scandalous subject matter. Audiences clashed over the play’s merits and pitfalls, but it remained on the tongue of every theatregoer, and laid siege to the pen of each columnist. A Chicago Tribune reviewer described the opinions of some audiences—“A freak play, overwritten, pretentious, and as bloaty with self-pride in its sheer bulk as a seven-foot prize fighter”—even while declaring it the most significant event in American drama that century.

What in this play had hit a nerve? To begin with, as is often the case, controversy bred interest. The subject matter seemed scandalous: promiscuity, abortion, adultery and the deep recesses of the human mind. The play was banned in Boston, driving the demand up even more for tickets in other cities. The length of the play fascinated audiences. Clocking in at six hours with a start time of 5:15 p.m., including a dinner break, Strange Interlude was a test of both endurance and cultural acuity. It soon became a very fashionable way to spend an evening, complete with an opportunity to be seen in your favorite restaurant. Socialite and philanthropist Otto Kahn even went home during his dinner break to change into evening clothes.

New ways of thinking permeated Strange Interlude. Freud and Jung’s revolutionary ideas about the unconscious and the powers of psychoanalysis appeared for the first time in English in the late 1910s and early 1920s, engendering an entirely new conception of the mind that was just beginning to take hold in America. O’Neill was a voracious reader—of Freud and Jung, among others—and Strange Interlude’s exploration of hidden drives and forbidden desires, couched in a theatrically exciting new form, fascinated a general public that was still unfamiliar with them.

Even while Strange Interlude was introducing new psychological ideas, it was also at the vanguard of a new literary movement. Modernism focused on the inner lives of characters and strove to create new literary forms to express them, and the current of experiment swept up O’Neill right alongside Joyce, Stein, Hemingway and Eliot. The structures that organized the world before the catastrophic war no longer seemed relevant, and artists needed to find a new language to represent a changed world. According to his journal, O’Neill was reading Joyce’s stream-of-consciousness novel Ulysses as he was writing Strange Interlude.

Digesting Joyce, Freud and others, O’Neill seized on stream-of-consciousness, writing in his journal in 1926: “Perhaps have the whole play nothing but thinking aloud...the thinking being more important than the actual talking—speech breaking through thought as a random process of concealment, speech inconsequentially or imperfectly expressing the thought behind...” In this way, the famous asides of Strange Interlude were created. In the 1928 premiere, director Philip Moeller instructed the actors to freeze during these moments, allowing Marsden to express his prudishness, Nina her scorn and Ned his unhappiness, while flowing freely between dialogue and thought. Although O’Neill may not have been the first to use this device, his asides became a sensation. Some thought them awkward, some tiresome and some transformative. But no one could deny that it was a theatrical experience that was unlike any they had seen before.

O’Neill had erected a new structure out of a tangle of Freudian thought and literary experiment, melodrama and allegory: a novelized theatre. The asides change the relationship between the characters and the audience; think of Hamlet, the most beloved Shakespearean character, whose brilliant soliloquies allow the audience to be constantly privy to what happens in his mind. In reading a novel, too, one develops a personal relationship with the protagonist: the reader knows their feelings and sees their motivations, whether he agrees or disagrees. It is an intimate bond. In Strange Interlude, O’Neill attempts to create this bond in the theatre, between audience and character. The characters’ inner lives are as important to the action as their outer lives, incorporating complex levels of consciousness that were rarely seen onstage. Though theatregoers can argue over the form O’Neill constructed, it changed American drama, giving a glimpse of the playwright that O’Neill was to become.
You have an inquisitive mind. Here you are, reading this page. The act of picking up this Asides magazine shows that you want to explore the productions. No work of theatre lives in a vacuum, least of all the work of American master Eugene O’Neill.

Theatre opens up the shadows of our lives and welcomes us to turn our attention to the moments that would otherwise go unnoticed. At STC, you can explore the layers within each show. Did you know that the Creative Conversations series allows audiences of all types the space to explore the deep shadows surrounding a production?

For the highly inquisitive audience member, we suggest you attend the AsidesLIVE symposium. Like this magazine, AsidesLIVE explores a production from all angles. One panel will feature representatives from Arena Stage, the New York Neo-Futurists and scholar Jackson Bryer addressing our interest in continually rediscovering O’Neill’s plays. In addition to O’Neill being performed at the Shakespeare Theatre Company and Arena Stage, artists around the country are exploring his work. American stages are filled with his voice. There has been a recent revisiting of the Early Plays by the experimental company The Wooster Group, the Neo-Futurists created a play devoted to O’Neill’s stage directions and Chicago will see an all-star revival of The Iceman Cometh. Eugene O’Neill’s work continues to speak to American dreams, past and present. Learn why.

Other panels will explore how O’Neill, writing at a time when Modernism was exploding, was inspired to explore structure. In addition The panel will look at the influence from O’Neill’s literary peers. The conversations over the morning will allow audience members to become experts before seeing the show.

Our production will be at the center of all of the conversations happening at STC. AsidesLIVE will feature Michael Kahn speaking with O’Neill scholar Yvonne Schafer about his approach to adapting and directing the play. On the same day, the artistic team will lead the Windows panel. This discussion is the time for audience members to look behind the curtains, through the windows and into theatrical workings that usually stay hidden.

Strange Interlude hits many deep internal cords. Audience members may feel the need to explore the personal and spiritual ramifications in the story of this family’s secrets. An ongoing partnership with the Virginia Theological Seminary allows for a unique discussion about the ethical reverberations of the production.

We know many audience members want to do more than passively observe. As inquisitive audiences, you also like to share your thoughts. The Classics in Context panel allows you to join the conversation. In a roundtable format, a local panel initiates the conversation and the always thoughtful audience quickly joins in, allowing for thoughts to be shared and the production to be illuminated.

No matter how you engage, STC can bring you close to O’Neill and his work.
Play in Process

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Strange Interlude Cast

Strange Interlude Artistic Team

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* Member of Actors’ Equity Association, the Union of Professional Actors and Stage Managers.
Past and Future Lives: O’Neill in his Own Words

Compiled and edited by Drew Lichtenberg, STC Literary Associate

Strange Interlude was not written in one burst of inspiration but over the span of a decade of restless experiment, creative ferment and personal tribulation. Begun as early as 1923, Eugene O’Neill completed the play in the fall of 1927. It would emerge as a fusion of the playwright’s varied interests and turbulent life: contemporary in setting and subject matter, fascinated with modern consciousness and world events, but with a spiritual depth revealing O’Neill’s lifelong search for the divine and his increasing interest in Greek tragedy.

Notes on first version of Strange Interlude, April, 1923:

An aviator, formerly of the Lafayette, Escadrille, has told me the story of a girl whose aviator fiancé had been shot down just before the armistice. [...]neurotic and desperate [...] started drinking and having promiscuous sex affairs [...] finally achieves a measure of contentment in life [...] I need to join the theme for a novel to the play in a way that would still leave the play master of the house. [...]a novel-play [...] “Godfather” [...] my woman-play [...] about the outer and inner life of a woman from the age of young womanhood until forty-five.

O’Neill’s mentor George “Cram” Cook dies unexpectedly in Greece in January 1924. Overcome with “self-condemning remorse,” O’Neill begins rereading Greek drama, producing the Aeschylean 1924 play Desire Under the Elms. In his notes for “Godfather,” he changes the character of Nina’s father from a professor of psychology to a professor of the classics.

To Arthur Hobson Quinn, 1925:

I’m always acutely conscious of the Force behind—Fate, God, our biological past creating our present, whatever one calls it—and of the one eternal tragedy of Man in his glorious, self-destructive struggle to make the Force express him instead of being, as an animal is, an infinitesimal incident in its expression.

To Joseph Wood Krutch, 1925:

Most modern plays are concerned with the relation between man and man, but that does not interest me at all. I am interested only in the relation between man and God. [...] The theatre should give us what the church no longer gives us—a meaning. In brief, it should return to the spirit of Greek grandeur. And if we have no Gods, or heroes to portray we have the unconscious, the mother of all gods and heroes.

To Kenneth Macgowan, 1926:

I’ve made a discovery about myself in analyzing the work done in the past six winters which has led me to a resolve about what I must do in the future. [...] The point is, my stuff is much deeper and more complicated now and I’m also not so easily satisfied with what I’ve dashed off as I used to be.

In 1925 O’Neill wrote a detailed scenario of the play, jettisoning the title “Godfather.” But he had yet to solve the problem of exposition in this “novel-play.” He would solve it in two steps: by introducing the character of Marsden, the novelist, and by using asides.

To his second wife Agnes Boulton, after their divorce, 1927:

You are still young and beautiful and, with any sort of even break from fate, you should have every chance for a real happiness before you—a happiness that it has become indisputably evident I never did and never can give you.

Notes in his journal, 1926:

[November 26, after shopping with Carlotta] I feel shot into the sky, with only my shadow moving down on the earth where there are houses and people who live in them [...] I had been without a destination. [The next day, on a ship to Bermuda] I have kept to my cabin, taking many strange journeys into diverse exquisite torture chambers of the soul.

Undergoing divorce proceedings while in Bermuda, O’Neill makes his final changes to the play. He cuts the final lines, a thanks from Nina to “Our Mother who art in heaven.”

In March 1927 Lawrence Langner of the Theatre Guild visits O’Neill in Bermuda and stays up the entire night reading Strange Interlude’s typewritten first six acts.

To Joseph Wood Krutch, June, 1927:

To me most modern playwrights are all totally lacking in all true power and imagination—and to me the reason for it is too apparent in that they make no attempt at that poetic conception and interpretation of life without which drama is not an art form at all but simply tricky journalism arranged in dialogue. [...] There is no theme too comprehensive or difficult to handle in the theatre. But “techniques” is a word worn groggy and it only blurs what I’m trying to say. What I mean is freedom from all the modern formulas that restrict the scope of the theatre to the unreal real and the even more boring unreal unreal.

Finding Strange Interlude the “bravest and most far-reaching dramatic experiment” since Ibsen, Langner convinces the Theatre Guild to accept the play on September 20, 1927.
What is a “Strange Interlude”?
Notes and Observations from STC’s Literary Associate, Drew Lichtenberg

If there’s one thing critics can agree on about Eugene O’Neill’s Strange Interlude, it is to disagree. The mammoth nine-act play received a litany of hosannas during its 1927–1928 heyday, but there were always strongly dissenting voices, pointing out the play’s tendency toward melodrama and potential for camp, puzzling over O’Neill’s innovative use of asides or simply wondering what all the fuss was about. O’Neill himself seemed to be of two minds. He was capable of burningish the play’s merits, appraising it as one of his finest works, then turning around and diminishing its accomplishments, all in one breath. In the intervening three-quarters of a century since the play’s heyday, it has continued to meet with a paradoxical combination of adulation, witticism, vituperation and befuddlement. Still, after all has been said and done, there is no consensus. No one agrees on what Strange Interlude is, or more importantly, what it’s about.

What do you think of O’Neill’s Strange Interlude? Email me: DLichtenberg@ShakespeareTheatre.org.

What the Critics Said

Alfred Lunt (1927): A six-day bisexual race.

Alexander Woolcott (1927): A play in nine scenes and an epicene.

Barrett H. Clark (1928): What is this Strange Interlude? It is many things, almost as many things as it has been called.

John J. Daly (1928): Relentless as death itself…the novelty of it all first grips the mind—and then the slow-moving vehicle, like a long, heavily laden train, captures the imagination…


Burns Mantle (1928): To many, Strange Interlude is by far the most significant addition to American drama made within the memory of this generation. To its opponents, it is a freak play, overwritten, pretentious, and as bloaty with self-pride in its sheer bulk as a seven-foot prizefighter.

Eugene O’Neill (c. 1928): I know what it is. It’s a four-decker with nothing but ham! (On being told a restaurant serves a Strange Interlude sandwich).

It trends on fanaticism, it seems to me. Myself, I wouldn’t stand up 4 1/2 hours to see the original production of the Crucifixion!

Malcolm Nichols, Mayor of Boston (1929): A disgusting spectacle of immorality and advocacy of atheism, of domestic infidelity and the destruction of unborn human life.

Quincy Mayor (1929): A beautiful play, worth a hundred sermons.

Hamilton Basso (1948): If there’s one thing critics can agree on about Eugene O’Neill’s Strange Interlude, it is the destruction of unborn human life.

Eugene O’Neill (1946): I’ve had about as much of a certain kind of success in Interlude as could be hoped for. You might add, as much as my stomach can stand!

Clive Barnes (1985): How can a play so bad be so good? Or at least so utterly engrossing?…This is a theatrical landmark, yet even more importantly, it is mesmerizingly entertaining.

Groucho Marx (1930): What is this Strange Interlude? It is many things, almost as many things as it has been called.

Robert Brustein (1963): [I was] shaking with suppressed rage, four days after the event…it may be the worst play ever written by a major dramatist.

Barrett H. Clark (1928): What is this Strange Interlude? It is many things, almost as many things as it has been called.

Frank Rich (1985): Theatrically gripping, Strange Interlude can be catalogued with such other one-of-a-kind American cultural artifacts of its age as [D.W. Griffith’s] Intolerance, [John Dos Passos’] U.S.A., and [George Gershwin’s] Porgy and Bess. It speaks to us from the century’s boom time, when our culture, like the author, was at once naive and inordinately ambitious. While it’s remotely possible that others might uncover more in Strange Interlude, do figure that another century will be here before we find out.

George Bernard Shaw (1930): Strange Interlude was such a success that the Theatre Guild begged me to write my next play in eight acts.

Susan Sontag “Notes on Camp” (1967): Camp is art that proposes itself seriously, but cannot be taken altogether seriously because it is “too much.” Titus Andronicus and Strange Interlude are almost Camp, or could be played as Camp. The public manner and rhetoric of de Gaulle, often, are pure camp.

Malcolm Nichols, Mayor of Boston (1929): A disgusting spectacle of immorality and advocacy of atheism, of domestic infidelity and the destruction of unborn human life.

Clive Barnes (1985): How can a play so bad be so good? Or at least so utterly engrossing?…This is a theatrical landmark, yet even more importantly, it is mesmerizingly entertaining.
Eugene O’Neill’s hauntingly beautiful plays have touched generations of audiences since his first premiere in 1916. The Shakespeare Theatre Company and Arena Stage have partnered with area institutions to celebrate O’Neill’s immense and continuing contribution to American Theatre with this exciting two-month-long festival.

FULL-LENGTH PLAYS

Ah, Wilderness!
Directed by Kyle Donnelly
March 9–April 8
Fichandler Stage at Arena Stage
A return to an idyllic age of Americana in O’Neill’s unabashedly romantic and sweetly funny love letter to a simpler time.
Tickets $40-$85

Strange Interlude
Directed by Michael Kahn
March 27–April 29
Shakespeare Theatre Company’s Sidney Harman Hall
A heartbroken Nina engages in a series of sordid affairs before marrying a man she does not love. Later, she learns a horrifying secret about his family, setting off a dramatic chain of events.
Tickets $20-$100

Long Day’s Journey into Night
Directed by Robin Phillips
March 30–May 6
Kreeger Theater at Arena Stage
Epic in scope and elegant in simplicity, O’Neill’s autobiographical masterpiece follows the Tyrone family as they confront their demons and attempt to change their desperate existence.
Tickets $40-$85

PRESENTATION OF THE NEW YORK NEO-FUTURISTS

The Complete & Condensed Stage Directions of Eugene O’Neill, Volume 1: Early Plays/Lost Plays
April 19–22
Arlene and Robert Kogod Cradle at Arena Stage
O’Neill’s stage directions are transformed into a rip-roaring physical comedy.
Tickets $20

NEW WORKS

Ah, Eugene O’Neill!, or The Birth, Death and (Impractical) Rebirth of American Theater
March 24 at 5 p.m.
Arlene and Robert Kogod Cradle at Arena Stage
A sea-weary O’Neill washes up onstage to explain his life and work.
Tickets $2

Begotten: O’Neill and the Harbor of Masks
April 26–29
Arlene and Robert Kogod Cradle at Arena Stage
A mythical exploration of O’Neill’s rejection of the world of his father (played by Rick Foucheux) and his vision for a new American theater.
Tickets $10

Begotten: O’Neill and the Harbor of Masks is part of the Arena Stage-Georgetown partnership which is made possible thanks to the generosity of Andrew R. Ammerman and the family of H. Max and Josephine F. Ammerman.

READINGS

Anna Christie
March 17–18
Arlene and Robert Kogod Cradle at Arena Stage
The Riot Grrls present an all-female version of this early O’Neill classic.
Tickets $2

Exorcism
March 25 at 5 p.m.
Arlene and Robert Kogod Cradle at Arena Stage
O’Neill’s recently discovered play about despair and rebirth.
Tickets $2
The Sea Plays
April 11–12
Capital Yacht Club
Light reception with a cash bar at 6:30 p.m.
Readings begin at 7 p.m.
Readings of O'Neill’s early maritime one acts, directed by Rick Foucheux.
Tickets $2

RADIO PLAY
Recklessness Before Breakfast
Running online throughout the festival
O’Neill’s one acts, Recklessness and Before Breakfast, are intertwined into a captivating radio play.
FREE

LECTURES AND PANELS
At Arena Stage
O’Neill in Cultural Context
March 21 at 6 p.m. Tickets $2
O’Neill: My Life in Art
March 28 at 6 p.m. Tickets $2
The Early Plays
April 14 at 6:30 p.m. Tickets $2
Family Dynamics in Long Day’s Journey into Night
April 29 at 4:30 p.m. Tickets $2

At the Shakespeare Theatre Company
Strange Interlude: AsidesLIVE Symposium
April 1 at 10 a.m.
Tickets $20 ($15 subscribers, $5 students)
Windows on Strange Interlude
April 1 at 5 p.m.
FREE
Happenings at the Harman: Sea Plays in Rehearsal
April 4 at 12 p.m.
FREE
Divining O’Neill
April 4 at 5 p.m.
FREE

ADDITIONAL EVENTS
O’Neill Saint Patrick’s Day Sing-a-long
March 17 at 5 p.m. in the Arena Stage lobby
Sea Shanties and Irish Pub songs in the tune of O’Neill
FREE
Al Hirschfeld Installation: O’Neill as seen by Hirschfeld
On display throughout the festival in the Arena Stage lobby
A unique installation of more than 40 works by Al Hirschfeld that spans 72 years of O’Neill’s productions on stage and screen.
FREE

Tickets for events at Arena Stage can be purchased at ArenaStage.org or 202.488.3300.
Tickets for events at the Shakespeare Theatre Company can be purchased at ShakespeareTheatre.org or 202.547.1122.

The Arena Stage portions of The Eugene O’Neill Festival are sponsored by Joan and David Maxwell.

Illustration of Peter Gallagher in Long Day’s Journey into Night by Al Hirschfeld (1986).
A Mis-Remembrance of Things Past: O’Neill’s “Nostalgic Comedy”

by Aaron Malkin, Production Dramaturg for Ah, Wilderness!

Eugene O’Neill and his wife, Mary Ellen Quinlan. Eugene grew up on the road and once he was old enough, in various boarding schools. It was only during the summers that the family lived at home—a cottage James O’Neill bought by the harbor in New London, Conn. And even these summers were far from idyllic. James was a self-involved man who struggled with alcoholism. Eugene’s older brother, Jamie, had a propensity for frequenting not only bar houses but also bed houses, where Jamie introduced a teenaged Eugene to his first prostitute. Their mother never fully recovered from the loss of her second son, Edmund, and spent Eugene’s childhood in and out of a morphine haze. O’Neill divulges this upbringing with brutal honesty in Long Day’s Journey into Night, set in the Tyrones’ New London living room on a single August day in 1912.

With such significant achievements over a 39-year career, why focus on September 1932? It was in this month and year that O’Neill wrote Ah, Wilderness! aptly subtitled A Nostalgic Comedy of the Ancient Days When Youth Was Young, and Right Was Right, and Life Was a Wicked Opportunity. “Nostalgia,” with its wistful connotation, is not often a word associated with Eugene O’Neill. “Comedy” is even less frequently linked. What inspired this admitted “change from the involved and modern and tragic hidden undertones of life” with which the playwright regularly grappled?

That O’Neill was cursed with a deeply troubled childhood is not surprising to anybody familiar with his work. Born in a Broadway hotel to James O’Neill and his wife, Mary Ellen Quinlan, Eugene grew up on the road and once he was old enough, in various boarding schools. It was only during the summers that the family lived at home—a cottage James O’Neill bought by the harbor in New London, Conn. And even these summers were far from idyllic. James was a self-involved man who struggled with alcoholism. Eugene’s older brother, Jamie, had a propensity for frequenting not only bar houses but also bed houses, where Jamie introduced a teenaged Eugene to his first prostitute. Their mother never fully recovered from the loss of her second son, Edmund, and spent Eugene’s childhood in and out of a morphine haze. O’Neill divulges this upbringing with brutal honesty in Long Day’s Journey into Night, set in the Tyrones’ New London living room on a single August day in 1912.

With such a sordid past, it may seem odd that O’Neill was tempted to try his hand at nostalgic comedy. He could hardly long to return to his childhood. And it is unlikely that he would be inclined to make jokes about it. Ah, Wilderness! is set in Nat Miller’s sitting room (a room described with striking similarity to the Tyrones’ living room) in an unnamed Connecticut town (much like New London) around July 4, 1906.

Seventeen-year-old Richard Miller is off to Yale in the fall (summer 1906 found O’Neill preparing for his first semester at Princeton). Thus, the setup is largely autobiographical. Yet, with the warmhearted Miller family’s celebration of Independence Day, O’Neill harkens back not to his days in the “Monte Cristo Cottage” but to an imagined childhood—a childhood he never had. He elucidates both the roots of his nostalgia and the intention of the comedy in a letter to his son written in January 1933.

Ah, Wilderness! "is more the capture of a mood, an evocation [of] the period in which my middle ’teens were spent—a memory of the time of my youth—not of my youth but of the youth in which my generation spent youth...It is a comedy...not satiric...and not deliberately spoofing at the period (like most modern comedies of other days)...but laughing at its absurdities while at the same time appreciating and emphasizing its lost spiritual and ethical values.”

In writing Ah, Wilderness!, O’Neill not only paid homage to the Turn of the Century, simple as the moment in history may have seemed, but also recognized that the “spiritual and ethical values” of the early 20th century remained relevant in September 1932. And it is this reverence for an era past that has allowed it to stand the test of time.
Eugene Gladstone O’Neill (1888–1953)

When Eugene O’Neill began writing for the stage early in the 20th century, the American theatre was dominated by vaudeville and romantic melodramas. Influenced by Strindberg, Ibsen and other European playwrights, O’Neill vowed to create a theatre in America, stripped of false sentimentality that would explore the deepest stirrings of the human spirit. In 1914, he wrote: “I want to be an artist or nothing.”

During the 1920s, he was awarded the Pulitzer Prize for three of his plays: Beyond the Horizon, Anna Christie and Strange Interlude. Other popular successes—including The Emperor Jones, The Hairy Ape, Desire Under the Elms, The Great God Brown and Mourning Becomes Electra—brought him international acclaim. In 1936, he was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature—the only American playwright to be so honored.

O’Neill experimented with new dramatic techniques and dared tackle such controversial issues as interracial marriage, the equality of the sexes, the power of the unconscious mind and the hold of materialism on the American soul. In each of his plays, he sought to reveal the mysterious forces “behind life” which shape human destiny.

Three of his final works tower over the others: The Iceman Cometh, Long Day’s Journey into Night and A Moon for the Misbegotten. These autobiographical plays portray with “faithful realism” the haunting figures of his father, mother, and brother, who loom in the background of most of his other plays. He was awarded a fourth Pulitzer Prize, posthumously, in 1956 for Long Day’s Journey into Night.

In a career that spanned three decades, Eugene O’Neill changed the American theatre forever.
Strange Interlude
PERFORMANCE CALENDAR

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Strange Interlude is a part of The Eugene O’Neill Festival. Look inside for details!

Did you know?...
There’s more to Asides than what’s on these pages!

AsidesLIVE
Sunday, April 1, 2012; 10 a.m. to 1 p.m.
Sidney Harman Hall

AsidesLIVE symposiums look deeply into both the text and production, and encourage audiences to examine the work they see on stage from a well-informed perspective. Join scholars Robert Combs, Jackson Bryer and Yvonne Shafer, Neo-Futurists Artistic Director Christopher Loar and other O’Neill experts. Featuring an in-depth conversation with Michael Kahn.

Asides Online
Visit Asides Online (Asides.ShakespeareTheatre.org) regularly for updated content on mainstage performances and exclusive articles for a behind-the-scenes look at the Shakespeare Theatre Company and season productions. Explore your interests and join the conversation by commenting!