

ON STAGE cont.

More Upcoming Productions

The West End's Apollo Theatre, London, will be doing *Long Day's Journey* with David Suchet (of Poirot fame), from April 2-August 18. The Pearl Theatre Company, NY, will be doing *A Moon for the Misbegotten* in March. And somewhere between intriguing and bizarre is a production of *Lazarus Laughed* that is being planned for Christ Our Hope Church, in Seattle, which will be performed in the context of mystery/miracle plays; no dates yet, but more information to come. J.Chris Westgate, *The Review's* theatre co-editor, at jcwestgate@exchange.fullerton.com.

Eugene O'Neill on Stage

Eugene O'Neill is considered to be America's greatest tragic playwright. Yvonne Shafer has created and performs a one-woman presentation which presents a view of O'Neill's life and career and the women he created in his plays. O'Neill repeatedly used material from his own life in his plays. His own tragic family background provided the material for *Long Day's Journey Into Night*. His experiences in the world of bums, gamblers, and prostitutes provided material for such plays as *Anna Christie*, which won the Pulitzer Prize for 1921-22.

The performance begins with slides which show the people in O'Neill's life and the performances of plays he wrote. The last half of the performance is the acting of scenes from *Before Breakfast*, *Anna Christie*, *Strange Interlude*, *The Iceman Cometh*, and *Long Day's Journey Into Night*. Dr. Shafer has previously presented several other one-woman performances, including *American Women Playwrights*, and *Moll Cutpurse and Other Elizabethan Eccentrics* and *Tennessee Williams' South*. She has performed these in many locations including Mint Theatre in Manhattan, the Boulder Colorado Shakespeare Festival and universities in Belgium, Norway, and Germany. She has performed *Eugene O'Neill On Stage in Berlin* at Amerika Haus and in universities in Potsdam and Leipzig.

Dr. Shafer was Editor of "Theatre in Review" for *The Eugene O'Neill Review*

and has written articles and books about O'Neill. She acted as a consultant for the Berlin premiere of *The Iceman Cometh* at the Deutsches Theater. *Performing O'Neill* includes interviews with James Earl Jones, Jane Alexander, Michael Kahn, Ted Mann, Fritz Weaver, Teresa Wright, Gloria Foster, and other notable theatre professionals regarding their experience with O'Neill. She has taught theatre in universities in the United States, China, and Germany and she was a Fulbright Professor in Brussels.

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EXOTIC O'NEILLIA

The complete and condensed stage directions of Eugene O'Neill Volume 1

Long Day's Journey into Laughter

By CHARLES ISHERWOOD

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Stage directions, those humble, practical and occasionally ignored players in the art of dramatic composition, are the stars of the show at the Kraine Theater in the East Village, where the New York Neo-Futurists are presenting a handful of early Eugene O'Neill plays, shorn of all dialogue. "The Complete & Condensed Stage Directions of Eugene O'Neill Volume 1: Early Plays/Lost Plays" sounds like the title of an exceptionally dreary doctoral thesis, but the show, adapted and directed by Christopher Loar, is something far more enjoyable, an impish illustration of how lively entertainment can be created from theatrical spare parts.

The critically acclaimed play had a short run, closing October 8.

THE ADDICTION PERFORMANCE PROJECT

Steve Bloom attended a seminar in Boston last Spring that used *Long Day's Journey into Night* to promote discussion about addiction treatment among health care professionals.

Sponsored by the National Institute on Drug Abuse, the program starts with a reading of Act III by award-winning actors. The reading is followed by a brief expert panel reaction and facilitated audience discussion.

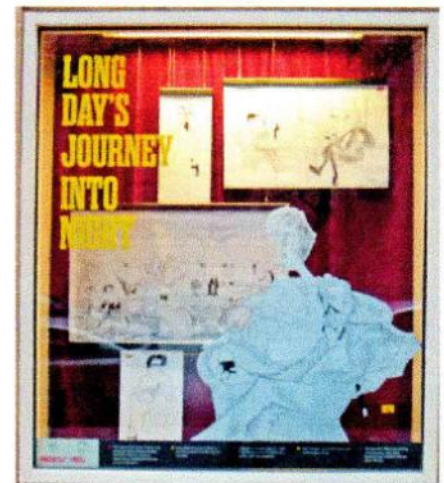
Topics include: the challenges and opportunities in caring for drug-addicted patients, provider biases, and how best to incorporate screening, brief intervention, and referral to treatment.

Steve says, "It was very interesting and cool to see others discovering O'Neill through this venue." The group has performed in several cities and is scheduled for Denver in November.

The link to the website is

<http://www.drugabuse.gov/nidamed/APP/index.html#upcoming>.

Another Hirschfeld window



Before Breakfast: The Journey of a Minor Play:

In 1916, every member of the Provincetown Players — Eugene O'Neill among them—probably would have laughed if anyone predicted that O'Neill's one-act play *Before Breakfast* would still be presented nearly 100 years later. Yet such is the case, not only on stage but also in opera, video, radio and TV.

While the recently founded Players may have been thrilled with some productions, including O'Neill's *Bound East for Cardiff* and Susan Glaspell's *Trifles*, they could have been excused for any skepticism about *Before Breakfast*. O'Neill, then 27, wrote the play mainly as an experiment to determine whether an audience would endure a long monologue. He was heavily influenced by August Strindberg's *The Stronger*, but in *Contour in Time*, O'Neill scholar Travis Bogard wrote, "Compared to its original, *Before Breakfast* is a paltry affair."

The cast of *Before Breakfast* comprises one actor and a disembodied hand:

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Mrs. Rowland, a shrew whose relentless tirades drive her unseen husband Alfred to suicide—and an actor's hand briefly extended from offstage. O'Neill himself portrayed the suicidal spouse on December 1, 1916, in the premier production, which was staged at the Provincetown Playhouse, 139 MacDougal Street, in New York's Greenwich Village. That performance marked the end of O'Neill's acting career; the theatrical run could also have been the end for the play, usually considered a minor work. However, *Before Breakfast* has endured.

What accounts for the persistence of this "paltry" play? As presented on [eoneill.com](http://www.eoneill.com) (<http://www.eoneill.com/texts/bb/contents.htm>), the text runs just five pages, about half of them stage directions. Some may credit its long life to its simplicity—small cast, short length, royalty-free availability and unit set. However, artists have been inspired to adapt the play, sometimes in complicated ways, for other art forms. These include a 1929 screen treatment by Dudley Murphy for a movie that was never made and at least two operas. *Dark Sonnet*, a one-act opera by Erik Chisolm, premiered in Cape Town in 1952, had over three dozen performances on stage, airings on television and BBC's Programme 3 and a Cape Town revival in 2004. *Before Breakfast*, a 1980 one-act opera by Thomas Pasatieri with libretto adapted by Frank Corsaro, was presented in Opera America's Salon Series: Exploring American Voices

In an adventurous twist on the play's kitchen-sink setting, Mino Damato directed Annie Chaplin's performance as Mrs. Rowland in a chilly cave in Italy. The resulting video, for Bio Imagine, had its world premier at the Washington University O'Neill conference in 1988.

Although radio broadcasts have been a frequent outlet for many O'Neill plays, *Before Breakfast* seldom appears on program rosters. A radio production by WMNF Studio@620 Radio Theater Project, broadcast on January 24, 2011 in Tampa Bay, is one of the exceptions. Director Dewey Davis-Thompson says he chose the piece in large measure because O'Neill's dialogue made it so easy to adapt.

That broadcast and a 2007 video appear on [eOneill.tv](http://www.eoneill.com) (<http://www.eoneill.com/TV/index.htm>), an electronic treasure trove



of O'Neill-related material. Dale and Yvonne Sims of British Columbia created the video, *An Augmented Euphony in Paradise: A Film Adaptation of Eugene O'Neill's Before Breakfast*. Their full production (which inexplicably changes the name of the husband to "Edward") has a running time of 23:19.

By contrast, the radio broadcast runs just 14:54. The difference is partly in the stage directions. In the video, the performer's silent actions required perhaps more time than the broadcast. Radio broadcast director Davis-Thompson chose to forego the reading of stage directions, which would have interrupted the flow. He replaced them with sound effects when possible (e.g., setting table, buttering toast, sweeping, opening and closing doors). When he could not, he inserted a short line. Thus the stage direction, "in the inside pocket of the vest, she finds a letter" becomes Mrs. Rowland's remark to herself, "'What's this in your coat pocket, Alfred?'"

Some claim that O'Neill's stage directions are overwritten and extraneous, and that his dialogue conveys his meaning. Others insist that the directions are vital to understand the playwright's artistic intentions. Still others view his directions as fodder for off-off Broadway comedy: In September, the New York Neo-Futurists presented *The Complete and Condensed Stage Directions of Eugene O'Neill*, generating laughter as they read and performed only O'Neill's stage directions.

In 1914, O'Neill proclaimed that he would become "an artist or nothing." He believed this in his youth and saw his conviction validated as a mature playwright, but changing styles and a crippling illness may have left him less confident when he died in 1953. He needn't have worried. While his masterpieces and

other major works have anchored his reputation, even his less majestic plays continue to be presented around the world, with or without stage directions, in various forms and in many languages. *Before Breakfast* holds its rightful place in O'Neill's extensive body of work.

Jo Morello

Watch for Jo's article, "O'Neill Exorcism: Lost and Found" in the December *American Theatre* magazine

LOOKING BACK

AN EARLIER SIGHTING OF JAMES SPEYER

As Louis Sheaffer told us in his *O'Neill Son and Artist* (1975), "For about a half-dozen years, in a relationship that started before and outlasted her marriage to [Ralph] Barton, Miss Monterey was the mistress of James Speyer, an elderly Wall Street banker whose philanthropies were many and varied." During this time Speyer established a trust fund for Carlotta which provided, for the rest of her life, an annual income that averaged fourteen thousand dollars, later helping in the building of the O'Neill houses at Sea Island, Georgia and Danville, California. After she met O'Neill in Maine during the summer of 1926, Carlotta introduced him to Speyer, and the two men became friends. Gene admired Speyer as one of Carlotta's oldest friends in New York, and when he learned of Speyer's patronage of the Museum of the City of New York, which he'd help found, O'Neill gave to the museum's theater collection his father's acting script for *Monte Cristo*. It was only many years after Speyer's death that O'Neill learned the source of Carlotta's trust fund.

But what about Speyer before Carlotta? In her thoroughly-researched biography of her great-great grandfather, Isais Wolf Hellman, founder of the Farmers and Merchants Bank of Los Angeles in 1871 and Regent of the University of California, 1881-1918, *Towers of Gold* (2008), Frances Dinkelspiel supplies this information:

"In April 1899 a thirty-seven-year-old man with a brown mustache and a high collar stepped off a train in San Francisco. He had not set foot on the West Coast for more than six years and was vitally

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