

Pittsburgh Public Theater

AN IRISH WAKE

by Heather Helinsky



James O'Neill and sons Jamie and Eugene at the summer Monte Cristo Cottage in New London, CT.

"I am the last of this pure Irish branch of the O'Neills," Eugene O'Neill declared shortly before he penned *A Moon for the Misbegotten*. The death of his parents and brother weighed heavily on him throughout his life, but his last play is full of Irish wit and humor. From Wilde and Shaw through Synge and O'Casey to Beckett and McDonagh, Irish playwrights have a gift for wringing laughter from pain. In *A Moon for the Misbegotten*, O'Neill uses the acerbic humor of Phil and Josie Hogan to mourn the death of his brother, James O'Neill, Jr.

Eugene O'Neill's parents had distinctly different experiences as Irish immigrants. Ella Quinlan O'Neill lived a sheltered, middle class life as the daughter of a successful Cleveland shop owner. She attended the finest convent in the Midwest and aspired to be either a nun or a concert pianist. James O'Neill, Sr., on the other hand, was born in Kilkenny, Ireland in 1846 and came to New England when his parents fled the Potato Famine in 1850. At age 11, James apprenticed in a machine shop, and when he later earned a significant income as an actor, he never forgot his initial poverty.

As James O'Neill, Sr. achieved success as a matinee idol in *The Count of Monte Cristo*, he purchased a summer house in New London, Connecticut to maintain Ella O'Neill's expectations for a comfortable life. In New London, the O'Neills had an Irish tenant named John Dolan who worked a pig farm and had a feisty reputation at the local bar. While Dolan is the primary model for the character of Phil Hogan, he is also a tribute to O'Neill's father. In a diary entry from August 11, 1936, O'Neill stated he wanted to write "a comedy of his Father...a lovable, kind comedy."

Yet *A Moon for the Misbegotten* springs from a deep place of pain in Eugene's life. Within two years of winning his first Pulitzer Prize, O'Neill's father, mother, and brother died. The unexpected death of his mother and the immediate deterioration of his older brother Jamie proved too much for the playwright. Between his mother's death in 1922 and *The Iceman Cometh* in 1940, the quality of O'Neill's work was erratic. His inability to mourn his lost family powerfully affected his work.

Through the character of Jim Tyrone in *A Moon for the Misbegotten*, O'Neill explores the soul of his brother shortly before he died of alcoholic psychosis. The tragedy of Jamie was his inability to find his place in life and break free from his dependencies. As a child, Jamie seemed to be on the path for success. He possessed his father's charisma and charmed his teachers with an outstanding scholastic record.

O'Neill's Awards & Accomplishments

- 1920 Pulitzer Prize for *Beyond the Horizon*
- 1922 Pulitzer Prize for *Anna Christie*
- 1928 Pulitzer Prize for *Strange Interlude*
- 1936 Nobel Prize for Literature
- 1956 posthumously wins the Pulitzer Prize for *Long Day's Journey into Night*

In the fall of 1892, young Jamie fell off the Honor Roll when he learned that his mother was addicted to morphine. When James O'Neill, Sr., a devoted Catholic, learned that his son was sneaking away to visit prostitutes, he wrote to the school President, "If he can be kept well in hand for the next two years, I am sure he will make a good man. On the other hand there is a possible chance of his going to the dogs."

Jamie and his mother seemed to have a symbiotic relationship and the troubles of one exacerbated the troubles of the other. He changed schools frequently until adulthood. In 1894, his father noted, "Jamie seems to have lost heart and appears devoid of ambition." As Jamie floundered to find a job, his father employed him in his acting company. Jamie's heavy drinking and lewd behavior on stage constantly strained their relationship.

Eugene O'Neill, 10 years his junior, idolized his older brother. Yet imitating Jamie's self-destructive behavior led Eugene to ruin his own life. Eugene dropped out of Princeton, frequented brothels, eloped with a society girl that he had gotten pregnant, and then abandoned her to spend a year at sea, living in poverty. When he returned to New York, he tried to commit suicide. But Eugene turned his life around while recovering at the Gaylord Sanatorium for tuberculosis, where he read the playwrights Strindberg, Yeats, and Synge, among others. These highly metaphorical playwrights gave Eugene a clear sense of the world, and by the end of 1913, he made a serious vocational commitment to playwriting.

The relationship between brothers became strained as Eugene rose to success with the Provincetown Players. In the last two years of their father's life, O'Neill, Sr. saw that his younger son had gained an independence that Jamie lacked. After the death of the patriarch, Jamie and his mother became even closer. Jamie sobered up for two years and daily dined with his mother in New London. When they went out to California to settle some property that O'Neill, Sr. had owned, Jamie tried to persuade her to cut Eugene out of the inheritance due to jealousy for his brother's success.

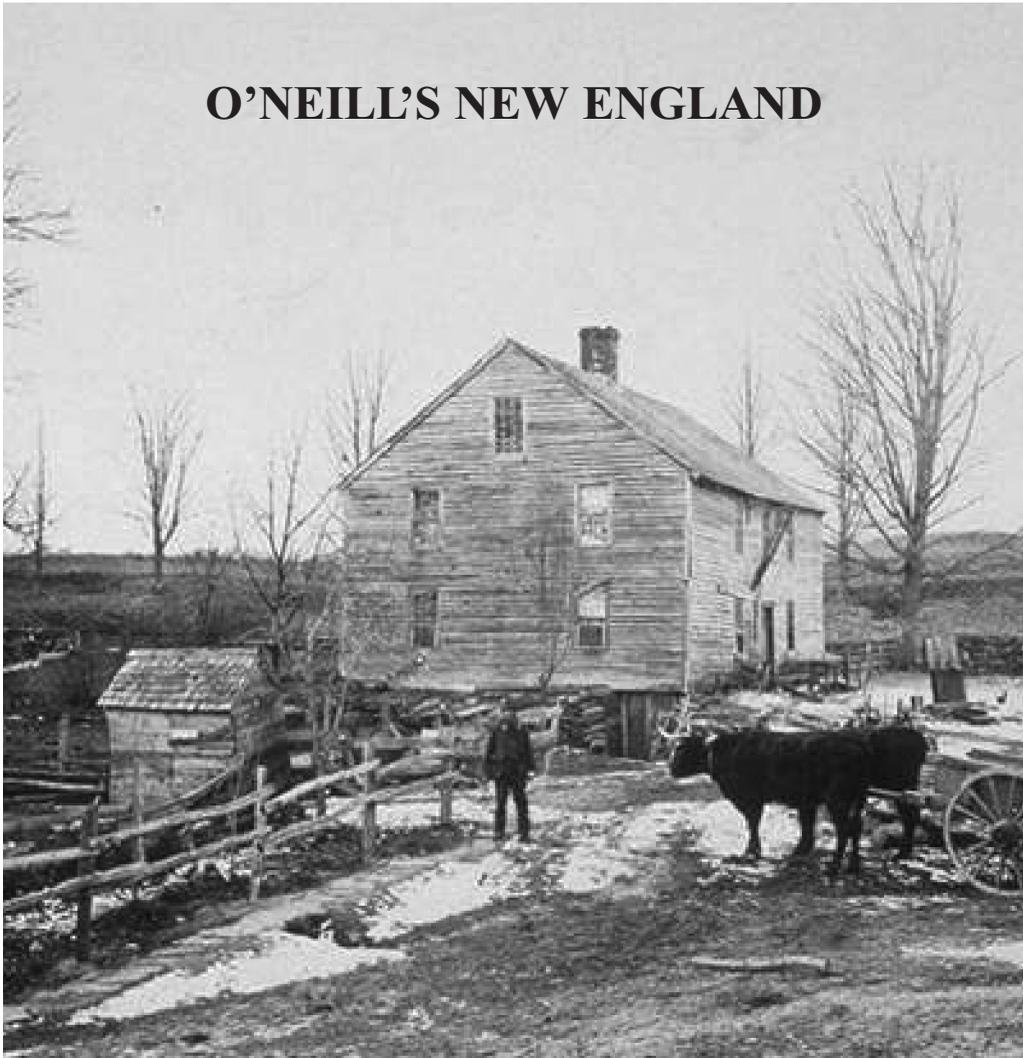
When it was discovered in California that Ella O'Neill had a brain tumor, Jamie returned to drinking. Jamie's behavior on the train from California to New York, as described in *A Moon for the Misbegotten*, so repulsed Eugene that he refused to face his brother again, leading to guilt in later years. When Jamie died in a sanatorium in Patterson, NJ, he was so impoverished he didn't even have clothes to be buried in.

Psychologists agree that so much loss in a short period of time leads to a long period of mourning, often called delayed or chronic grief. It wasn't until October 28, 1941 that Eugene mentioned *A Moon for the Misbegotten* in his work diaries. By then, O'Neill had written *The Iceman Cometh* and *Long Day's Journey Into Night*; personal dramas that explore the complexities of family interrelationships—at a time when most playwrights were writing social plays that decried American policies.

In *A Moon for the Misbegotten*, O'Neill uses a female character to represent his own conflict with his brother. Through Josie Hogan, O'Neill confronts the man his brother was, instead of his youthful adoration of him. Like an Irish wake, James O'Neill, Jr. receives a glorious send-off through a play that brews joy and sadness in the same distillery. And through this, his final play, Eugene O'Neill found forgiveness and peace.

Heather Helinsky is the Resident Dramaturg for Pittsburgh Public Theater in the 2008-2009 season.

O'NEILL'S NEW ENGLAND



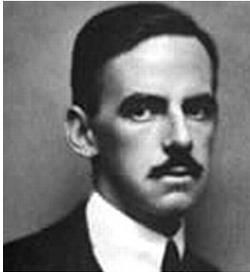
A turn-of-the-century Connecticut farm.

The Irish experience in New England is as rocky as the terrain. In 1851, a journalist at the *North American Review* stated, “New England taken as a whole is the hardest soil for an Irishman to take root and flourish in. The settled habits of the people, the untainted English descent of the great majority, discrepancies of religious faith and a jealousy of foreign intermixture of any kind, all operate against the Irish.”

Connecticut had plenty of what the Famine Irish needed: jobs. *The Irish Emigrant's*

Guide to the United States painted a picture of a land of plenty. By 1850, Connecticut had the third largest percentage of their population, behind Massachusetts and New York. But in Connecticut, immigrants did not flock to the cities. Instead, they settled in small towns across the state. The census of 1850 confirms that the Irish were settling in more rural locations, which is the setting for *A Moon for the Misbegotten*.

WRITING THROUGH THE DEPRESSION



Eugene O'Neill

so that his plays spoke to not only the psychology of his characters, but the psychology of the American experience.

Eugene O'Neill made the decision to become a playwright in 1913 and his passion to write plays continued until his death in 1953. During that 40-year span, O'Neill dedicated himself to the study of

*Never a man of means, he had to survive the roller coaster ride of Great Depression after his initial success in the Roaring Twenties as a Pulitzer Prize-winning playwright for **Beyond the Horizon (1920), Anna Christie (1922), and Strange Interlude (1928).** Yet O'Neill persevered and by the time the United States entered World War II, he had written some of his greatest works: **The Iceman Cometh, More Stately Mansions, A Touch of the Poet, Hughie, Long Day's Journey into Night, and A Moon for the Misbegotten.** Below are some of O'Neill's comments about the times in which he lived.*

Nov. 1929 "I am no prophet but it looks to me as if the legit [theater] is in for a couple of very sad years, what with the crash of the stock market. I am working like a devil every day [on *Mourning Becomes Electra*] and getting along with my new work in fine style. It is going to be a real big thing, you will see, but there is a tremendous amount of labor involved in it...I hear that the Wall Street crash has nicked almost everybody. What you say about it not affecting the theatrical business is too good to last, I am afraid. It is a good season to have subscribers back of you!"

Sept. 1932 "Now I am up a tree with everyone else...I'm cash broke and borrowing money to keep me over until *Electra* opens up again...facts are facts."

Oct. 1932 "Tell the Income Tax Man to have a heart!"

Nov. 1932 "The Guild is hoping now that the [presidential] election is over things may improve a bit—but I doubt it. That's what everyone in these United States is doing, hoping against hope and kidding themselves along with very little, or no, basis in fact for their wish-fulfillment dreams."

Jan. 1933 "The theater here is in a frightful shape as a business. I don't know what the hell they will do if it keeps on much longer. Even the big hits in New York are cutting prices. Everyone seems desperate."

Mar. 1935 "But I do know my theatre—any kind of theatre!—and I know any audience is always compelled by the fresh approach—the unique—provided it is well done and has the blood and power of living life in it."

Aug. 1936 "As for economic history—which so many seem to mistake for the *only* history now—I am not much interested in economic determinism, but only in the self-determinism of which the economic is one phase, and but no means the least revealing—at least, not to me."

July 1940 "The war news, also, has affected my ability to concentrate on my job. With so much tragic drama happening in the world...the only thing is to go ahead and do your stuff, as long as you can, no matter what happens."