

Review

Reviewed Work(s): LONG DAYS JOURNEY INTO NIGHT

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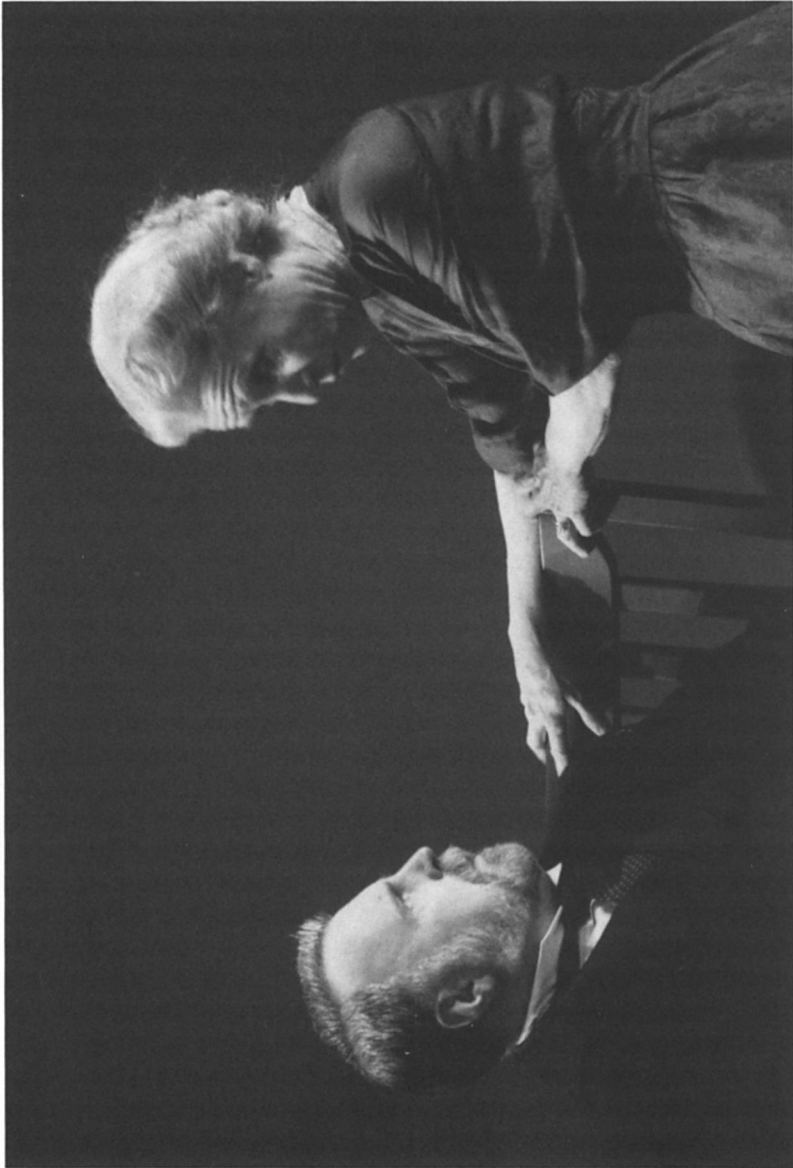
has revitalized the *Het Zuidelijk Toneel*, which began as a small regional company and now is considered to be an important part of European theatre. And their O'Neillian encounter was truly memorable.

Dr. Robert S. MacLean
City University of New York

LONG DAYS JOURNEY INTO NIGHT. Dallas (TX) Theatre Center, March 10, 1998

IN *LONG DAY'S JOURNEY INTO NIGHT*, O'NEILL offers a picture of a family torn by hate, but held together by love. All too often the hate comes to the fore, making it unclear what holds the Tyrones together. This production offered a good balance between the two, and the essential elements of O'Neill's tragedy were convincingly conveyed to the audience. For someone expecting a realistic depiction of Monte Cristo Cottage with Victorian architectural details, director Richard Hamburger's production must have come as a particular surprise. More than one critic has noted that the expressionism of O'Neill's early plays continued to inform his later works, even though the latter take the structure and setting of realism. So it was interesting in this production to see a move *away* from realism to a setting which still had some realistic elements, but seemed to be set in a post-modern climate with only the bare suggestions of a room present. Similarly, the acting moved the focus from realism to stark outbursts of emotion, long inward-looking speeches, and shrill cries of angst.

The setting was a great platform with little on it: a piano up-right, a wicker table with four chairs around it to the left, and downstage four wicker chairs, one a rocker, about a round table with two piles of books on it, and downstage-left a wicker chaise. A strong dramatic effect was created by a great shaft of ceiling above the stage and a dark stairway leading upstairs stage-left with a symbolic black opening above. This was the area to which Mary would retreat in order to seek the peace offered her by morphine. There was a strong dramatic moment when Jamie and James went out to clip the front hedge: Mary was left alone onstage contemplating her sorrow, and Edmund was seen only in shadow at the top of the stairs. The bare space at the rear was filled with changing colors, and the groupings of characters on stage were frequently arresting. There was a particularly strong moment when Jamie, having arrived drunk and given his advice to Edmund, fell asleep with his head on a pile of Edmund's books downstage-right. Edmund and James



Kevin and Tarbuck in Dallas *Long Day's Journey Into Night*.

stood looking down at him with a mixture of emotions, and James said, "A sweet spectacle for me! My first-born, who I hoped would bear my name in honor and dignity, who showed such brilliant promise!"

Throughout the play there was a stripping away of the setting, even as there was a stripping away of the façades, and the complexity and anguish of the characters were revealed. By the end of the play the stage was nearly bare and the focus was entirely on the characters and their intertwined feelings. Heightening the mood in many scenes was music or other haunting sounds which amplified the feelings of frustrated yearning. I found the major scenes quite gripping, particularly those with James and Jamie. Michael Kevin, a very experienced actor with a wonderful voice, was compelling and convincing as James, although (not to put too fine a point on it) he was too fat. It was unconvincing that the maid should praise his looks so strongly, and incompatible with his role as a matinee idol. On the other hand Kurt Ziskie was exactly right physically for Jamie, exhibiting "booze fat" and fully capable of shifting from the pose of Broadway Sport to a parody of a ham actor. Tara Gibson as the maid was pleasing indeed, with a good accent and a fetching manner. She was young, thin and pretty—much as Mary must have been when she first met James.

There were, however, a number of things about the production which disappointed me. First of all, all the actors were miked. That is never truly pleasing, but in a play so small in space and so intimate in relationships, it was really a sad mistake. Apparently, the architecture of the playhouse (not the Kalita Humphreys Theatre) demanded the amplification. It is really a big barn, a sort of sports space with folding chairs placed around a thrust stage. Despite the padded seats, it seemed a long time on those chairs—from 8 to 10:45 p.m. with a short intermission. An inexplicable disappointment was the lighting—a key visual factor in the final act. The lights were hung too low and there were chains hanging down from each bulb. Why? Anyone in the cast could have pulled the chains without standing on a chair, yet they did stand on chairs, and Jamie even got up on the table. It was also puzzling to consider why Mary would hide her hypodermic needle in an unlocked music box on the table instead of leaving it in the spare room with the drugs. Only because she could then take it out when she was alone, wave it about, and make an exit holding it out for the light to strike menacingly as she went upstairs. Now here was a dramatic effect which simply struck down logic!

Which leads to my question about the casting of Mary. After the performance, I spoke to someone who opined that Mary should be a wilted violet. Barbara Tarbuck, who has played in many stage and television productions, was certainly not wilted and could never have been described as

violet. She spoke coarsely, sometimes drawing a laugh at the harshness of her delivery. She certainly was not plump, as Mary is supposed to be, but rather a thin woman, running and jumping about the stage as if she were in an aerobics class. At her final entrance she was not carrying the wedding dress but *wearing* it. O'Neill certainly never envisioned his mother at this age with the body of a young girl. But even letting that all pass, Ms. Tarbuck simply never conveyed a deep sense of the character. All of that talk about the nice home and the life in the convent seemed just talk—and maybe that was the director's intention. However, O'Neill balances the play with faults for all the characters, even building up James's miserliness to counteract Mary's frailties. In this production, unfortunately, the balance was lost.

Edmund, played by Mark H. Dold, was very athletic and seemed very much of our time, as did his mother. Although he exhibited sensitivity at points, much of the time he seemed like a show-off actor: standing on his head when talking about his mystical experience on the beach, running and jumping about with his arms outspread. He never seemed to reach the depths of O'Neill's intensely moving characterization of himself as a young man.

Ultimately, it seems to me that the balance in the play—one which O'Neill artistically created in contrast to the actuality of his family life—was not clear, and certainly the oppositions in character were not fully developed. Jamie is supposed to be the spry, drunken sport who always has a joke; and Edmund the bookish, shy, indulged pet of the family, frail in health and hypersensitive, but exhibiting the potential of a great writer. O'Neill surely introduced the maid to provide a contrast to Mary. Her vocabulary and manner are coarse and vulgar in a way Mary's never are, but now her youth and prettiness contrast with Mary's appearance, calling up an idea of Mary's looks when she had first met James. Mary's hands are crippled with rheumatism, she suffers physically and mentally, whereas Cathleen is the bubbling picture of mental and physical health. The parallels between James and Jamie and between Mary and Edmund were also blurred. At one point Mary slapped and hit Edmund vigorously. There was a surprising amount of physical violence throughout the play, which detracted from those climactic points when the surprise of physical violence should shock. So it was strange that a family so concerned about Edmund's health should be knocking him down and hitting him! That distracted from the impact of the scene when James threatens to do just that and painedly remembers Edmund's illness. Similarly, when Mary appears in the last act, it should be a shock when Jamie says, "The Mad Scene. Enter Ophelia" and "*his father and brother both turn on him fiercely. Edmund is quicker. He slaps James across the mouth with the back of his hand.*" There was no shock here because Edmund had previously slugged

Jamie and now only pushed him down.

What I will remember positively about this production are the strong moments director Hamburger created and the striking setting, lighting and sound which demonstrated that the play does not need to be approached realistically. Particularly effective was the long scene in which James talked about his past. This was a very satisfactory impression of a real actor with a fine voice talking about lost hopes and lost opportunities. I see him clearly, sitting on the stairs, weeping at the memory of his mother. This was the high point of the production.

Yvonne Shafer
St. John's University

AH, WILDERNESS!, Vivian Beaumont Theatre, Lincoln Center, New York City, March 27, 1998.

THE PLAY WAS DIRECTED BY DANIEL SULLIVAN, director of the Seattle Repertory Company, where he has directed over 60 plays, including Chekhov, Goldsmith, Shakespeare and Shaw. It was apparent from this production that he has a keen ability to perceive the particular aura and style of a playwright and convey that to an audience. Not that this production was a detailed, naturalistic presentation—quite the opposite. Working with Thomas Lynch (settings) and Peter Kaczorowski (lighting), Sullivan created a very imaginative, open-stage, subtly suggestive presentation, the mode of which was clear in the opening moments. The Miller house was indicated only by a raised platform on the thrust stage. On it were three worn wicker chairs, two wicker footstools, two small wicker tables, a long table up right and a bench down left indicating the yard. At the start, the Miller family stood together at the back of the stage as if posing for a family portrait. Behind them was a great oblong screen with a projection of green at the bottom, a faint suggestion of trees and hills, and a loop of telegraph wires across the whole, while at the top was a strong line of magenta color. A few of the opening lines were given with the group standing together; then it broke up, the characters drifting to various positions on the stage. Tommy ran out into the yard and out of view down one of the exits at the front of the stage. Afterward, the noise of fireworks was soon heard. The holiday mood of the Fourth of July was quickly established, and the ensemble approach to the acting was clear. The physical interaction of the players throughout all the scenes was very fine. The director introduced some business in each scene