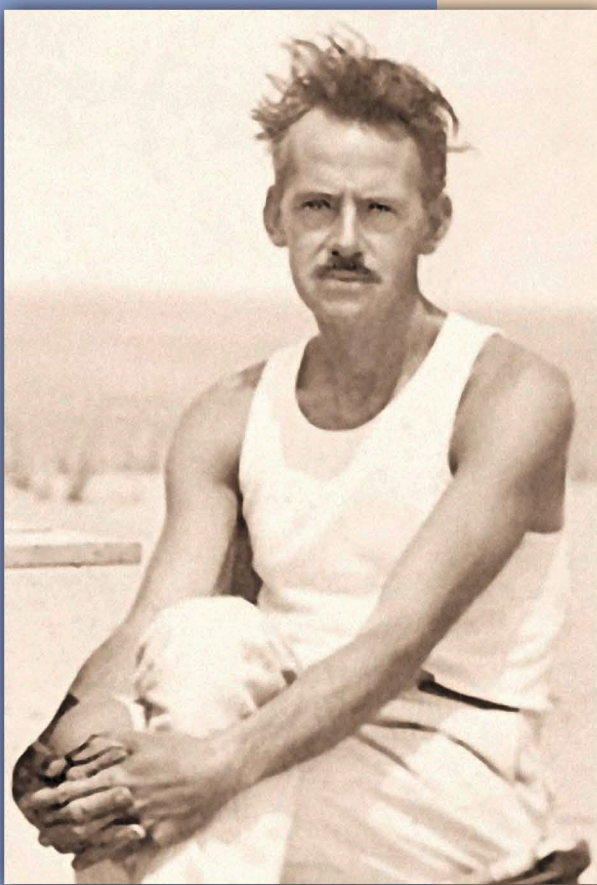


BIBLIOTECA JAVIER COY D'ESTUDIS NORD-AMERICANS

EUGENE O'NEILL AND AMERICAN SOCIETY

IVONNE SHAFER



PUV

EUGENE O'NEILL
AND AMERICAN SOCIETY

Biblioteca Javier Coy d'estudis nord-americans

<http://www.uv.es/bibjcoy>

Directora
Carme Manuel

EUGENE O'NEILL
AND AMERICAN SOCIETY

Yvonne Shafer

Biblioteca Javier Coy d'estudis nord-americans
Universitat de València

© Yvonne Shafer
Eugene O'Neill and American Society

1ª edición de 2011
Reservados todos los derechos

Prohibida su reproducción total o parcial
ISBN: 978-84-370-8350-6

Imagen de la portada: Sophia de Vera Hölz sobre foto del *New York Times*, 1922
Diseño de la cubierta: Celso Hernández de la Figuera

Publicacions de la Universitat de València
<http://puv.uv.es>
publicacions@uv.es

To Carme
with gratitude for her encouragement and kindness

Table of Contents

Introduction	11
Chapter 1	
<i>The American theatre scene in transition</i>	17
Chapter 2	
<i>The young playwright</i>	45
Chapter 3	
<i>The Provincetown Players</i>	63
Chapter 4	
<i>O'Neill moves to the full-length play</i>	87
Chapter 5	
<i>The Triumvirate and the end of an era</i>	97
Chapter 6	
<i>Early productions with the Theatre Guild</i>	121
Chapter 7	
<i>Theatre in the Depression</i>	139
Chapter 8	
<i>The conclusion of O'Neill's career</i>	161
Afterword	183
Appendix	
<i>O'Neill, Glaspell, and John Reed: anti-war, pro American social reform</i>	189
Bibliography	205

Introduction

Theatre in America developed fairly slowly in the years of the early nation and was itself largely a mirror of English theatre. Throughout the nineteenth century, however, it began to take on a form which was identifiably American, rather than British, and American actors and playwrights began to appear in ever increasing numbers. As copyright laws improved, a career as a playwright consequently became more attractive financially. In the first half of the twentieth century large numbers of theatres were built, technology developed rapidly, and new types of stagecraft came into play. For many Americans, theatre became a standard part of life. This book will examine the theatre of the period, often described as “the Golden Age of American theatre,” with a focus on America’s foremost dramatist, Eugene O’Neill.

O’Neill began writing plays in a time of immense social, political, economic, and cultural change. Although he did not begin writing plays until 1913, he was affected by the theatre from his earliest years. His father’s great success as a matinee idol was already established when O’Neill was born in 1888. As a child, Eugene was both behind the scenes and in the audience. As he grew older, he was an avid theatre-goer, enjoying a wide range of plays and attending those he really enjoyed as many as ten times. Thus, in his lifetime, he watched the dramatic change from the conventional melodramas and formulaic comedies of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries to serious drama written in imitation of European playwrights and unconventional, witty comedies about the changing American scene.

The earliest plays O’Neill saw were often tailored for particular actors and actresses. Many playwrights, both male and female, were able to earn considerable sums of money by creating plays which enabled a performer to show off his or her particular talents in plays which enabled a performer to show off his or her particular talents in plays which were predictable in plot and neither challenged nor

surprised the fans. Some actors played a particular type of character, such as the Yankee or a New York Bowery figure, in a number of different plays throughout their careers. Others played the same role in a perennial favourite for most of their careers. Joseph Jefferson acted in a variety of plays, but was most famous as Rip Van Winkle. He enjoyed playing the role for decades in big cities and villages throughout America. Audiences never failed to thrill at the dramatic lines, "Are we so soon forgot when we are gone? No one remembers Rip Van Winkle." Jefferson did not object to the repetition of the role, but some actors felt imprisoned in their popular moneymaking successes. Edwin Forrest grew to hate the role of the great Indian Chief Metamora, but audiences continued to demand it. Following him, James O'Neill became trapped in the leading role of *The Count of Monte Cristo*. After achieving fame as a Shakespearean actor, he bought the rights to the adaptation of the Dumas novel, viewing it as a great acting opportunity. Unfortunately, audiences preferred him in that role to any others, and he came to loathe the play, feeling that it had killed his opportunity to be a great Shakespearean actor.

The young O'Neill saw his father in the play and as a adult mocked both that play and all the commercial plays that were typical of the period. This set him apart from the majority of American playwrights of the early part of the century who simply churned out vehicles for actors or wrote plays which capitalized on popular trends. Martha Morton was frequently working on two or three plays at once, all following familiar patterns. Augustus Thomas was recognized as the major American playwright of the first two decades of the century with his often preachy plays set in various parts of the country. By the forties, historian Geroge S. Freedley had dismissed him as a "geographical playwright." Although audiences applauded these plays, there were definite signs of change and a readiness to see plays with more depth, variety, and intellectual content as well as experimental plays in new styles.

Playwrights such as Rachel Crothers who wrote *A Man's Word* and Edward Sheldon, who wrote *The Boss* and *The Nigger*, were breaking ground for playwrights such as O'Neill, Susan Glaspell, Elmer Rice, Sophie Treadwell, and Zona Gale. These later playwrights were following the European trend of psychological realism in the creation of their characters. Whereas earlier American playwrights had usually relied on recognizable types in recognizable situations (such as the fallen women who dies, as one wit quipped, "of the third act"), in th

“teens” (1910-1919) playwrights tried to create individuals with particular psychological and physical characteristics in situations which mirrored the reality of the time. Naturally, the increasing interest in psychologically realistic characters paralleled the popularization of the theories of Freud, who visited Clark University in 1909 and whose book *The Interpretation of Dreams* was published in English in 1913. In 1915 Alice Gerstenberg, a young Bryn Mawr graduate, wrote *Overtones*. It has two characters represented by four actresses playing the ego and the id of each of the two women in the play. By 1916, the ideas of Freud were so well known that Susan Glaspell and her husband George Cram Cook wrote *Suppressed Desires*, a satire about a woman who becomes obsessed with psychiatry and nearly ruins her marriage. This comedy and Gerstenberg’s play achieved popularity not only in America, but throughout the world and have continued to be produced to the present day. As more playwrights turned to psychologically realistic characters speaking realistic language, audience taste changed and plays with conventional characters, language, and plots became less popular.

Strindberg, Maeterlinck, and other European playwrights reacted against the realism which came to dominate the theatre and wrote experimental plays of various types. One of the most influential types in the American theatre was expressionism. Although Strindberg wrote before the expressionists, his plays were the forerunners of the movement. Rejecting reality when portrayed only from the outside, he tried to present a world seen through the eyes of a particular character, colored and interpreted by his/her particular world view. German playwrights and designers led the way in utilizing the form. O’Neill was one of the many American playwrights impressed by expressionistic plays and films. Also impressed was Robert Edward Jones, who worked closely with O’Neill both as designer and a director, and was in Germany before World War I. In later chapters the influence of expressionism on Jones, on O’Neill, and on the Provincetown Players will be examined in depth.

By and large the commercial producers in the first quarter of the century had little or no interest in producing plays which were experimental in technique or which contained subject matter which might be objectionable to some viewers. Standard Broadway fare, which bohemians from Greenwich Village scorned, included operettas, dramas with melodramatic elements, drawing room comedies in imitation of English playwrights, plays by conventional English playwrights, musicals (often set on a college campus), and plays which emphasized the “get up

and go” qualities of Americans or demonstrated the superiority of American democracy to decadent European culture. David Belasco was delighting audiences with plays in which standard characters in standard situations were presented with staging which was realistic down to the last degree. In one of Belasco’s plays, the interior of Childs restaurant was recreated and real pancakes were cooked on stage. At the same time, some producers were eager to present plays which rejected the accepted formulae and standard themes in favour of plays which utilized the “New Stagecraft,” experimented with new techniques, and challenged audiences with their unconventional qualities. This book will examine the influence on the theatre of such producers as Winthrop Ames and Arthur Hopkins.

The Provincetown Players were foremost in the American theatre in the “teens” in terms of producing experimental plays. The founders of the theatre, including George Cram Cook, Susan Glaspell, and John Reed, were among the bohemians who lived in Greenwich Village and championed avant garde art and literature, free love, sexuality for women and generally expressed contempt for bourgeois values, particularly in the theatre. They often expressed the idea that Broadway plays were simply commercial. They were purposefully amateur in the best sense of that word. Everyone was to work together to create a theatre which would bring American playwriting to a new level of art.

In contrast to most commercial producers, the Provincetown group eagerly sought all types of experimentation in theatre, as well as realistic plays. When O’Neill became part of the group he had the opportunity to write and to see performances of his realistic sea plays as well as his plays informed by expressionism. His friendship with Glaspell, Jones, and others was an important part of his life and career.

The Washington Square Players was another important producing group which emerged in the same period and which contributed to the blossoming of American playwriting. Lawrence Langner and others put on one-act plays by written by its members, and also by some of the Provincetown group. Starting in an amateur fashion, they developed into a producing group with plays in a commercial venue, the Bandbox Theatre. The First World War brought a break in the theatrical activities of the group, but after the war some members reformed it as the Theatre Guild. Ultimately, this group became one of the most important and prestigious producing groups in America.

By the twenties O'Neill was perceived as America's greatest playwright, but there were many other playwrights who contributed to the richness of American theatre in this time. The Theatre Guild productions toured the country, producers found success with the works of American playwrights in England and many other countries as well as in America, and playwrights had many more opportunities to see their works produced. There was great excitement about theatre. Such groups as Eva Le Gallienne's Civic Repertory Theatre presented the plays of foreign playwrights and encouraged American authors. The sheer number of plays produced in the twenties is amazing when compared to the situation in New York today. In 1928, two hundred new Broadway productions opened. Playwrights such as Sophie Treadwell, Maxwell Anderson, Robert Sherwood, Sidney Howard, Rachel Crothers, Clare Kummer, Elmer Rice, George S. Kaufman, Moss Hart, Marc Connelly, and George Kelly found critical and commercial success. They were encouraged by both the Pulitzer Prize for drama, established in 1917, and by the excitement of theatre critics over the new playwrights coming to the fore. It should be noted that dozens of women playwrights had their share in popular and critical success and prizes for their work. Playwriting had become a viable career for women, and literally hundreds of them took advantage of it. American society was changing in many ways and these changes were reflected in the theatre.

Chapter 1

The American theatre scene in transition

The many changes in American society during the first part of twentieth century were closely reflected in the theatre. The changing role of women, for example, was reflected in the plays about women and American society and in the increasing numbers of women who became successful playwrights. The productions of the Abbey Theatre affected playwrights and encouraged the development of producing groups attempting to imitate the Irish company. Similarly, plays by Ibsen, Strindberg, Hauptmann, and other European innovators attracted audiences and influenced playwrights. Producers such as Winthrop Ames turned from standard commercial fare and performed European plays and plays by emerging American playwrights. Many new producing groups were formed throughout the country as part of the Little Theatre movement. In New York the Washington Square Players moved from amateur productions of one-act plays in the back room of bookstore to full-length plays in a Broadway theatre. The Negro Little Theatre Movement and the Harlem Renaissance were important elements in the cultural development of the country and both encouraged black male and female playwrights. The Neighborhood Playhouse and the Civic Repertory were also very important in providing opportunities for audiences to new and challenging plays and offering playwrights a venue.

Although there were few professional women playwrights in the American theatre before the twentieth century, their numbers increased dramatically after 1900. One of the most important of these was Martha Morton (1865-1925). She began writing plays in 1888, the year of O'Neill's birth. Unable to find a producer, she produced *Helene* with her own money and scored a success with Clara Morris in the lead. By the turn of the century she was earning great sums, particularly for

her plays tailored for specific actors. Three of her plays for the popular comedian William H. Crane earned her \$250,000 and she went on to earn \$250,000 for her greatest success *The Bachelor's Romance*. She often cast and directed her plays, frequently working on several at once. In 1910 she told newspaperwoman Shirley Burns, "When I first started in, the idea of a woman directing a rehearsal as unheard of. But now they think nothing of it. In those days, too, women were not admitted to the Dramatists' Club" (Burns 632). The reason she and other women playwrights were not admitted was that the club was a "gentlemen's club" like the Players' Club and private clubs related to universities. Never daunted by a challenge, Morton formed the Society of Dramatic Authors in 1907. She joined with twenty-nine women playwrights and one male playwright to form the rival group. Commenting ironically about the treatment she and the other women had received from the Dramatists' Club, she said, "We are not going to ostracize you because *you* are *merely* men—we invite you all!" ("A New Society" ix). Soon most of the men joined and Morton effected an amalgamation of the two organizations with Augustus Thomas as President and herself as Vice President.

Although Morton was the most prominent woman playwright in the early twentieth century, she was part of a fast-growing group. In 1906 she noted the increasing numbers of actors, theatres, and productions and stated, "There is an almost frenzied demand for plays, especially for the conventional 'star' plays, which can be sold like potatoes" (Burns 632). Commenting on the first decade, a writer for *Theatre Magazine* stated, "Writing for the stage, once such a discredited and even perilous occupation that authors hesitated to sign their names to their manuscripts, has come to be one of the most reputable and profitable of the professions." Quite amazingly, the writer concluded, "A successful playwright's income today is considerably larger than that of the President of the United States" ("Big Earnings" 151).

Part of the reason for the change was the increasing demand noted by Morton, but a significant factor was the change in the copyright laws. In the 1840s some American playwrights had tried to get a copyright law that would stop others from stealing their plays, but had no success. Throughout the century playwrights such as George Henry Boker and Dion Boucicault made efforts to protect playwrights. With each attempt circumstance improved for playwrights but it wasn't until the Copyright Act of 1909 that playwrights were afforded the kind of legal protection

which insured the monetary return and protection from theft needed to make the profession of playwright attractive and feasible.

Women were moving into many new professions. The theatre had attracted many women as actresses and occasionally as managers of theatres, but now women were writing plays depicting the changing status of their counterparts. They treated such subjects as careers for women, feminism, and social injustice and began to replace the concept of the pathetic or comic "old maid" with career women who were single by choice. When Shirley Burns assessed the contributions of women playwrights in the first decade of the twentieth century in 1910 so many women had become successful playwrights that she could not include them all. She commented on the increasing numbers saying, "The list of women playwrights is so long that detailed mention of all of them is impossible" (Burns 632).

As Morton said, the plays could be sold like potatoes, such was the demand. Unfortunately, many of the plays were as common and familiar as potatoes. Their plays were among those O'Neill and the members of the Provincetown Theatre scorned. However, there were some women who were challenging accepted conventions and characterizations. At the forefront was Rachel Crothers, a highly intelligent woman who dared to take on such questions as the double standard and the right of women to make their own decisions. She had graduated from high school at the age of thirteen and had earned an M.A. at the New England School of Drama. She was one of many women in this period who moved into graduate schools. She used her theatrical training to write successful plays from 1904 to 1937. Her play *The Three of Us* challenged accepted depictions of women by featuring a heroine who is independent, strong, and courageous. When urged to make a marriage she does not want to "save her honor" she responds that her honor is in her own hands. Even her name, Rhy, was unconventional in that it did not indicate gender. Crothers went further in her highly successful play *A Man's World* produced in 1910. In this play she depicts a woman who writes successful novels under a man's name (a practice which continues today!). "Frank" is bringing up the child of a friend who was seduced by a man, had a child, was disgraced and died in shame. She abhors the double standard which allowed such a thing to happen. When a newspaperman wants to marry her if he can be sure she, herself, is not the mother of the illegitimate child, she attacks his morality and ultimately refuses to marry him. He responds by stating what most of the people in the audience believed, "Why this is a man's world. Women'll never change

anything... Women are only meant to be loved—and men have got to take care of them. That's the whole business" (*A Man's World* 43). The play created a controversy with many critics attacking her views and a number of others supporting them. Augustus Thomas was so disgusted that he responded with a play attacking hers and presenting the opposite viewpoint called *As a Man Thinks* (Shafer, "Whose Realism?" 45). In addition to writing plays, women increasingly moved into directing plays they had written and plays by others starring a woman.

Martha Morton felt that a woman had to be able to do the "important work" of the process of play production by casting it, choosing the scenery and costumes, and directing it that she advised women unable to do anything but write a play to stick to other forms of writing (Patterson 126). Rachel Crothers shared Morton's view that a woman should direct plays, but extended her rationale, saying, "For a woman [playwright], it is best to look to women for help; women are more daring, they are glad to take the most extraordinary chances." Referring to her own opportunities to direct other women's plays and plays by men starring a woman, she said, "I think I should have been longer about my destiny if I had to battle with men alone" (qtd. in Shafer, "Whose Realism?" 158).

One of the men she had to battle, as indicated above, was Augustus Thomas. At the time she wrote her first plays, Thomas was widely regarded as one of the major American playwrights, a man interested in realism and in depicting American characters and scenes. Chiefly because of that, he was highly regarded by critics and was immensely popular with audiences. His first play to be named after a state was *Alabama* (1891) and after that he wrote more than sixty plays. When he wrote *As a Man Thinks* critics praised him as the foremost American playwright and said that rarely had such beautiful speeches been written for actors to perform. In effect, the play elevated him to the position of the head of his profession. Although he often wrote about challenging subjects, it was always in a manner designed to appeal to the public and never to challenge accepted views. In other words, Thomas was a successful playwright representative of the commercial theatre of his time. *The Copperhead* (1918), dealing with a double agent during the Civil War, provided a fine role for Lionel Barrymore, making him a star. *The Oxford Companion to the Theatre* concluded that "on the whole Thomas's plays were not profound, and provided entertainment of a kind acceptable to his audiences" (828). Long called the "dean" or "king" of American playwrights, by the twenties changes in society and a new generation of critics soon revealed his plays as

conventional, shallow examples of commercial work. He was part of the transition to realistic and/or experimental playwriting which excited the critics, but his easy, culinary theatre (to use Brecht's phrase) no longer seemed acceptable. In 1926 George Jean Nathan launched a major attack on his work, ridiculing *As a Man Thinks* and other successes which had, like the plays of many others of his type, filled theatres for decades. After seeing Thomas' newest play, Nathan wrote, "With 'Still Waters' Mr. Augustus Thomas has now at length been officially lowered into the grave in which, apparently unbeknownst to the majority of writers on the American theatre, he has been peacefully resting for the last twenty-five years. In other words, it has taken American dramatic criticism just one-quarter of a century to arrive at the conclusion that Mr. Thomas, the so-called dean of our dramatists, is what he has always been: a playwright without any authentic talent save the most obvious melodramatic kind" ("In Memoriam" 117).

New critics and new American playwrights were forces moving against the easily consumed plays of Thomas and others. Another factor was the presentation in English of plays by European playwrights whose plays challenged accepted morality, utilized Freudian elements, and utilized non-realistic scenery. In the nineteenth century, tours by foreign actors such as Tommaso Salvini, Sarah Bernhardt, and other notable performers were major attractions despite the fact that the stars performed in their native languages and there was, of course, no simultaneous translation. Often the foreign star appeared in a play with an English speaking cast creating the odd effect of speaking in, say, Italian, and being answered in English. Most of the foreign plays that were presented were simply translated by a hack who knew the language pretty well and were then altered to suit an American audience. Before international copyright laws were effective this was a cheap way to get a new play to perform. For example, *Les Pauvres de Paris* became *The Streets of New York* or *Pity the Poor Poor*. Even worse were the botched translations of plays that transformed them into grotesque parodies of the original. Ibsen's *A Doll's House* first appeared in English in a translation so ludicrous that it is still quoted as an example of unintended comedy (Van Laan). Martha Morton tried to write a serious and challenging play by adapting the German playwright Leopold Kampf's play *On the Eve*. The play, which had been banned in Russia and Germany, but performed in German in Paris and America, had a heroine who sacrificed her love to take part in a revolutionary plot. Morton was criticized for reducing Kampf's play to "antiquated theatrical effects." The

critic for *The New York Times* concluded that Morton had mirrored the slaughter in the play by slaughtering the original work (qtd. in Shafer, "Whose Realism" 159) and others said she had ruined a good play with a poor adaptation.

In order to avoid the problems of poor translations, Eugene O'Neill made a serious study of French and German before and during the time he spent at Harvard and he later studied Greek to be able to read the famous tragedies. At the time of his apprenticeship, playwrights such as Heinrich Schnitzler (whose *Reigen* created a scandal) and Eugene Brieux (whose *Damaged Goods* demanded that society address the problems of syphilis) were unavailable in reliable English translations and were not appealing to American producers whose chief purpose was to make money.

There was change in the air, however, prodded by the efforts of actresses such as Minnie Maddern Fiske and her pioneer efforts with Ibsen. In these productions she utilized many realistic details in the staging and costuming. Even the Shubert brothers, whose instincts were always commercial, spotted the lucrative possibilities of foreign plays in translation when Alla Nazimova appeared in New York performing in an obscure theatre with a Russian company. Despite the threadbare production, the play attracted attention because of Nazimova's obvious talent and beauty. When the troupe, including her first husband, returned to Europe, she stayed behind. She accepted the offer of the Shuberts to pay her \$100 plus 20% of the profits for twenty-five weeks during the 1906-1907 season. They paid for a tutor so that she could learn to perform Ibsen in English. The result was the unforgettable performance of *Hedda Gabler* and other plays which made such an impression on O'Neill (Lambert 130). As the century progressed, innovative foreign plays were performed by Ethel Barrymore, who played in Hauptmann's *Rosa Bernd* and Eva Le Gallienne, who stunned audiences in Hauptmann's *Hannele*, Molnar's *Liliom*, Schnitzler's *The Call of Life* and Ibsen's *The Master Builder* and *John Gabriel Borkman*. One way that these productions were made possible was in "special matinees" in which stars who were performing long runs in more commercial vehicles would act in something more challenging in the afternoons.

Problems with innovative plays arose when the Abbey Players came to New York in 1911. The troupe had been formed in Ireland in an effort to transform the theatre. Lady Gregory and W.B. Yeats first formed the Irish Literary Society as a means of raising consciousness about Irish society and replacing the sentimental,