THEATRE ARTS MAGAZINE

Volume IV | October, 1920 | Number 4

Eugene O'Neill

By Walter Prichard Eaton

The Pulitzer prize for the best American play produced in a New York theatre during the year was awarded last June to Eugene O'Neill, author of *Beyond the Horizon*. Prizes of this sort do not always have great significance; they may, for instance, merely mean that all the other plays were pretty poor. However, it is well remembered that all the other plays were not pretty poor during the year of the contest, and *Beyond the Horizon* was not victor without competition. That the judges, though, could have hesitated long over their decision is difficult to imagine, for Mr. O'Neill's drama possesses so conspicuously one merit over all competitors, the merit of a tense, driving emotional sincerity, imparting to the spectator—when he withdraws a little from the spell of the tragedy—the sense that the dramatist has been imaginatively at the mercy of his people; not manipulating them so much as being manipulated by them.

If there is any one thing more than another which wearies the intelligent spectator of the average play, it is the almost constant sense of calculation — by the author, the producer, the actors, but especially the author. Calculation can, and does, result in great "successes"; but it almost never gives deep or lasting pleasure to the thoughtful. "Calculation" might well be blazoned over Mr. Belasco's proscenium, for the average play in his theatre is an almost perfect illustration of what we mean. Consideration of what each actor can do best, or most appealingly, consideration of the time-limits to serious attention before a "laugh" becomes desirable to pick up the pace, consideration of just what sort of emotions, just what kind of characters and scenes, are most appealing to the public — these and others like them mark the drama which is conceived and forwarded by outer, not inner, compulsion. And, if the truth be told, the penalty most theatre workers pay for working in the theatre is the acquisition of an exaggerated idea of the value of calculation, which, of course, they term "technique," a word which spreads a world of whitewash.

Although Eugene O'Neill was, in a sense, born to the theatre, being the son of James O'Neill, an honored and famous actor on our stage for many years, it was his good fortune, it seems to me, to come into the theatre as a playwright after a boyhood and young manhood spent in an utterly different environment, and, further, to come in through the introductory portals of the Provincetown Players' theatre, where (and when) the only calculation was not to

calculate, where individuality counted far higher than conformity. *Beyond the Horizon* is, after all, strangely of a piece with the one-act sketches he wrote for the Provincetown Players. It is his individual vision written into the three-act form, with something added of firmer story and fuller feeling. How uncalculated it is, in the grosser sense, may be guessed from the fact that it is a naturalistic tragedy—and both naturalism and tragedy are supposedly anathema to our theatregoing public. Suppose for a moment the original conception of the play subjected to considerations of what managers or public would supposedly want and demand! What is unique, what is finest, in the work instantly evaporate. Is it not quite possible, then, that O'Neill was able to find himself as a dramatist, to feel his way through character sketches and episodes to character development and rounded drama, without sacrificing his vision, his personal sincerity, because he had a small, free theatre to work in, where his individuality was applauded, fostered, it may be almost overpraised, rather than suppressed? At any rate, there is strong presumptive evidence, which should cause us all to watch still more closely and hopefully our experimental theatres.

A rereading of *Beyond the Horizon* and of O'Neill's one-act plays of the sea, in the volume called *The Moon of the Caribbees,* brings home to one anew the immense value to a dramatist—to any literary worker, for that matter—of a first-hand knowledge of the life portrayed, and of the eye-single to truth of portraiture rather than supposed "effects." The rough, tough seamen of the British tramp, who figure in so many of the short plays, reveal themselves in talk and action, rather than propel a story for the dramatist. The stories here are insignificant, certainly bare of all complication. They are suspensive rather because of the grim allurement of the strange, rough beings caught so unexpectedly in their sordid existences, and because of a certain intensity of emotion which resides in all the writer's work. When the grim old captain in *Ile* orders his boat into the ice,—though the crew is in mutiny and his wife has gone mad,—driven by some mystic pride of a full catch which he cannot put into words, nor conquer, the brutality of the incident might predominate with another dramatist, or we might be involved in a welter of explanation for a course so strange. But with O'Neill, we are captured, shaken, by the mystic instinct, this irrational drive of pride. It is charged with emotionalism, like some higher power suddenly felt, unseen.

Beyond the Horizon is not without its faults. But at least it possesses this atmosphere of emotional intensity (just as, for instance, *The Great Divide* possessed it). Indeed, mention of Moody's

play suggests what is much more than a fanciful analogy. Moody was a fastidious poet, a professor of English, an intellectual New Englander born to a far different inheritance. Yet O'Neill seems at present to be his legitimate successor on our stage, by virtue of their joint possession of that tense emotional sincerity which comes, and comes only, perhaps, from the roused poetic imagination. Moody was an older man than O'Neill when he wrote *The Great Divide,* and he was a far wiser man. He knew his Arizona roughs far less intimately, to be sure, than O'Neill knows his sailor men, and missed thereby the sharp sting of realism; but he saw life deeper, for all that, saw its complexities and escapes. The character spiral of *The Great Divide* winds upward toward the light. Its assertion is the power and nobility of the human will. The character spiral of *Beyond the Horizon* goes neither up nor down, but inward to the point of annihilation. In the particular case in point, there is a social weakness here, as well as a moral one (using "moral," of course, in its finer sense). The degeneration on an American farm, from sturdy independence and moral fibre to the dire and flabby acceptance of fate's buffets exemplified by the end of *Beyond the Horizon,* is never a matter of one generation, and seldom enough, even in its beginnings, a matter of accident—for it was an accident which kept Robert on the farm, as the author intended it should be, as his gesture at Fate. The degeneration of our Eastern farms and farm folk has been a gradual process, with its causes varied enough, but at the bottom invariably economic and social. It began when the railroads followed the valleys, it continued when the railroads opened up the virgin, black prairie soils, and has kept steady march with our urban expansion. So, in the last analysis, *Beyond the Horizon* is not in a true sense naturalistic, however tragic it may be. Though he sees in terms of characters, though instinctively, with a poet's vision, he drives for what is dramatic not by the common manipulation of situation, but by the creation of emotional intensity as his lines unfold before us, still O'Neill has some way to go before he can justly be ranked with Moody, or with certain English dramatists who likewise have command of more intellectual background.

But to admit this, perhaps, is but to admit his youth, and certain limitations of intense emotional vision in all but the greatest artists. Certainly as between the ordinary "problem" play or specimen of "the intellectual drama," and *Beyond the Horizon,* we would not hesitate to choose the latter. It may miss the correct social implications, but it does not miss the bitter sting of actuality so far as its immediate personages are concerned; it has passion and the throb of feeling. It has something else, too, which is rare enough in our

theatre—it has form. Form rare in our theatre? you ask in surprise, thinking of all the chatter about technique and all the array of dramas with correct exposition and almost mechanically smooth development. But that isn't form, because it isn't organic. It is construction. Some wise fool has said that plays are not written, they are built. Most of them are, to be sure. But not the fine ones. The fine play is neither written nor built; it is an organic growth, from within, and if it observes technical "laws," that is because the "laws" happen to have been deduced from previous fine plays, not because the dramatist was bothering much about them. The fine play is an organic unit, as flower and plant are a unit, and when the last word is spoken there is nothing more to be said. The play is resolved as a Mozartian melody is resolved. One has only to think of the sense of perfect form, of finality, imparted by *The Gods of the Mountain* or *Macbeth,* to gather what is meant. That *Beyond the Horizon* achieves this rotundity, this self-sufficiency of form, seems to me also apparent. It is something that dubiously can be taught, for its achievement or lack of achievement depends on the dramatist's possession or lack of the artistic flare. Logic and reason will never serve to give us the living sense of organic unity, the profound satisfaction of contemplating true form. By virtue of its gift, O'Neill seems to me the more certainly a rare artist.

But as yet we are judging him, it must be admitted, on the strength of but one achievement for the larger theatre of commerce, a theatre in which his present rather restricted, if intense, outlook, and his apparent preoccupation with the grim brutality of fate over souls too weak-willed to resist, will not carry him very far in a nation as buoyant as ours. His is a double danger, then. There is the danger every dramatist faces, of compromising with his individual methods of work under the insidious and multifarious temptations of the "practical" theatre; and the danger of trying to satisfy the outlook of his audiences upon life, without first expanding his own outlook. No man can see the whole of life; perhaps it is much to have seen the fo'castle of a tramp liner. Yet, for all his intensity of emotional vision, his true dramatic instinct for internal development of his story, his artist's sense of form, his gift for the enveloping atmosphere of reality, O'Neill's work to date remains intellectually and spiritually thin. It is a little impoverished, like his farmhouse sitting-room; and a little murky, like the window panes. But he must go back to life, not to the theatre, for his enrichment. Like Emerson's traveller in Europe, no dramatist will find in the theatre more than he brings to it.