

ah, wilderness!



Left to right: Eugene O'Neill. Photo by Carl Van
Vechten, 1933. Courtesy Library of Congress;
Eugene O'Neill at Sea Island Bend. Photo by Carl
Van Vechten, 1936. Courtesy Library of Congress.

THE NECESSARY PLAY

BY | MICHAEL PALLER

THE TRAGEDIAN GOES HOME

By 1931, Eugene O'Neill, great American tragic playwright, had won Pulitzer Prizes for *Beyond the Horizon*, *Anna Christie*, and *Strange Interlude*. He'd written 23 full-length plays, including *The Hairy Ape*, *Desire Under the Elms*, *The Emperor Jones*, and *All God's Chillun Got Wings*, which the police in New York attempted to close because it depicted a black man kissing a white woman. That same year saw the debut and critical acclaim of *Mourning Becomes Electra*, his seven-hour Americanization of Aeschylus's *Oresteia* set in New England during the Civil War. He was lauded—not without justification—as the creator of the modern American theater.

Before O'Neill, American theater had been melodrama, vaudeville, and star-driven vehicles. With the aid of his collaborators at the Provincetown Playhouse, he forged an American theater that could aspire to stand beside the European accomplishments of August Strindberg, Henrik Ibsen, and Anton Chekhov. Like theirs, his was an experimental theater. In his early plays, O'Neill employed a host of theatrical conventions, from masks to spoken inner monologues, and styles, from naturalism to expressionism, to peel away the surface of everyday life and reveal the struggle and torment that he sensed seething underneath. O'Neill devoted himself to tragedy, striving to make it a viable genre for the twentieth century.

During the two-year gestation period of *Electra*, he felt himself encountering the limits of his talents. He wrote to his friend, the drama critic Joseph Wood Krutch, "Oh, for a language to write drama in! For a speech that is dramatic and isn't just conversation! . . . But where to find that language?" Once he was finished with *Electra*, he feared such a language had eluded him once again. He didn't know that the solution would soon present itself in a homey idiom and a genre for which he'd had little or no professional interest: comedy.

Waiting for fall rehearsals of *Electra* to get underway in New York, O'Neill and his wife, Carlotta, took a vacation home in Northport, Long Island. When the weather was clear, he could look across Long Island Sound toward the south shore of Connecticut and the town of New London, where he'd spent some of his unhappy boyhood and adolescence. Seized by a sudden desire to see the family house again, he told Carlotta he wanted to visit the once-thriving seaport town. She was dubious. "Don't do it, darling," she said. "Don't ever try to go back. Keep your ideas, but don't go back." O'Neill was determined, however, and off they went.

Once there, they couldn't locate the house, so completely changed was the neighborhood. When they finally managed to find it down by the water, they discovered that—of course—someone else was living in it, and they had to settle for a view from across the street. According to Carlotta, O'Neill said, "I shouldn't have come. Let's go away. I don't want to look at it." It was back to Northport, where he made a few notes for a play tentatively called *Nostalgia*, which he stuck in a drawer.

A year later, in September 1932, at his home on Sea Island, Georgia, O'Neill awoke one morning from a dream in which the whole plot of *Ah, Wilderness!* unfolded itself. From 7 a.m. till late afternoon he wrote out an entire scenario, and over the course of six weeks, the play, he said, "simply gushed" out of him.

LIT, SONG, AND SLANG

The play reflects three of O'Neill's abiding loves: literature, turn-of-the-twentieth-century popular music, and slang. As an adolescent, O'Neill read all the literature referred to in the play—and there's a lot of it, from Omar Khayyám (whose *Rubáiyát* inspired the title), Algernon Charles Swinburne, George Bernard Shaw, Oscar Wilde, and Rudyard Kipling, to the anarchist writings of Emma Goldman, to the dime-novel exploits of detective Nick Carter and George Peck's *Bad Boy*. Every summer O'Neill read the novels of Alexandre Dumas, Victor Hugo, and Charles Dickens, the philosophy of Ralph Waldo Emerson, and the poetry of Lord Byron. For all his reading, though, the teenaged O'Neill was much less worldly than he knew; like Arthur in *Ah, Wilderness!*, he believed that Oscar Wilde went to prison for the unspeakable crime of bigamy.

Many people sang or played an instrument at home and on social occasions in early twentieth-century America, and this domestic pleasure was dear to O'Neill's heart. He filled his plays with snatches of songs; according to O'Neill scholar Travis Bogard, only 8 of his 31 full-length plays are without music. Ten songs are heard or referenced in *Ah, Wilderness!*; one of them, "Bedelia," is plunked out on a player piano at the Pleasant Beach House in Act III. After the play opened to great success, Carlotta surprised O'Neill with a like instrument; allegedly, it had once graced the parlor of a New Orleans bordello. He named it Rosie and would sit at it for hours at a time, happily singing along. In one of the few photographs that show O'Neill with a smile, he sits contentedly at Rosie, hands splayed across the keys. According to Bogard, once O'Neill had settled into his last home, Tao House, in the hills above Danville, California, on warm summer nights residents for miles around could hear Rosie crank out "The Sunshine of Paradise Alley."

O'Neill may have strained for a tragic language, but the slang of his youth flowed from him freely. It's even more ubiquitous in his plays than music. The slang he used came almost exclusively from the first decade of the twentieth century, and



Eugene and Carlotta Monterey O'Neill. Photo by Carl Van Vechten, 1933. Courtesy Library of Congress.

he used it in plays, letters, and everyday speech, long after it had gone out of fashion. In later years, some critics wondered if he knew any contemporary idioms; on the other hand, those who knew him would comment on the unique flavor the words lent his speech.

Many of O'Neill's themes and character types appear in *Ah, Wilderness!*: the young man at odds with the world of his father, yearning for a mother figure and dreaming of illicit passion with prostitutes (or, in O'Neillian parlance, "tarts"); the grasping material life of America versus the higher callings of love and self-sacrifice; the divided nature of man's soul. Here, though, these themes appear in a congenial atmosphere. The big thematic guns of tragedy in his other plays are rendered in *Ah, Wilderness!* as Fourth of July firecrackers. Dark issues lurk, such as Uncle Sid's drinking problem and Aunt Lily's lonely future and perpetual disappointments, but their implications are the shadows, not the substance, of the work.

Those shadows belonged to the true story of O'Neill's youth, which *Ah, Wilderness!* decidedly is not. The play depicts, in his words, "the other side of the coin," the family that he wished he'd had: parents who love each other and care for their children, and children who feel secure and loved, even while in full-blown adolescent rebellion. O'Neill's own family—a self-involved father, tight with money and love; a mother who disappeared into the spare bedroom to emerge later in a

morphine haze; an elder brother who spent his days and nights in brothels and bars on a lifelong bender of guilt and self-loathing—is erased in this telling.

Perhaps O'Neill had to imagine his youth in the fictional glow of comedy before he could face his family's tragic truths. He would depict those with courage and honesty in the masterpieces that came later—*Long Day's Journey into Night*, set in the same (yet very different) house as *Ah, Wilderness!*, and *A Moon for the Misbegotten*, which takes place just a few miles away on a piece of property that his father owned. Playwrights write the plays they need to write. *Ah, Wilderness!* is O'Neill's most popular and most produced play. Even if it weren't, the fact that it laid the groundwork for the last great ones makes it one of America's most significant plays, too.

WORDS ON PLAYS

Want to know more about *Ah, Wilderness!*? *Words on Plays*, A.C.T.'s renowned performance guide series, offers insight into the plays, playwrights, and productions of the subscription season with revealing interviews and in-depth articles.

PURCHASE YOUR COPY AT THE THEATER OR
BY VISITING ACT-SF.ORG/WORDSONPLAYS