

## WELDED 2022: A CONVERSATION

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*Beth Wynstra*

*Eric Fraisher Hayes*

*Introduced by Beth Wynstra*

To say that the theater landscape shifted during the COVID era is an understatement. Yet, even during these trying times for the arts, and for theater in particular, productions of O'Neill's plays have continued, often in bold and innovative ways. For example, there was a virtual production of the Irish Repertory Theatre's *A Touch of the Poet* just as the pandemic was beginning and an Audible Theater production of *Long Day's Journey Into Night* as the pandemic (hopefully) was winding down. In the throes of COVID, however, where any end point to the international nightmare remained nebulous, there was the Eugene O'Neill Foundation and, specifically, Eric Fraisher Hayes.

Hayes, swiftly and successfully, pivoted to new modes of production and new ways of storytelling for the performances of the O'Neill Foundation. In 2020 he directed and filmed COVID-safe, script-in-hand performances of three of O'Neill's early one-act plays: *The Web*, *Recklessness*, and *Abortion*. At the start of 2021 he and the Foundation launched "The Ghosts of Tao House," a series of short films featuring actors performing monologues from O'Neill plays. These films drew on the beauty of the exterior and interior spaces of Tao House. In the fall of 2021 Hayes directed a film of *Beyond the Horizon*. While other theater companies recorded stage productions, Hayes conceived his *Beyond the Horizon* as a film, fundamentally distinct from the staged production that he and the Foundation would mount at around the same time. Compelling close-ups, integrated and original music, distinct camera angles, and wide-sweeping views of the gorgeous San Ramon Valley and Las Trampas Hills combined with first-rate acting make this *Beyond the Horizon* a highly successful film.

Along with his exciting artistic experimentations, Hayes used the COVID moment to expand and enhance the scholarly presence for the Foundation productions. He oversaw the filming of nearly two dozen videos for the

Foundation's website in which scholars discuss various aspects of *Beyond the Horizon*, O'Neill's "lost plays," the playwright's life, and American theater history. He also brought me on as the dramaturg for the Foundation's fall and early spring productions (*Beyond the Horizon*, fall 2021; *Welded*, spring 2021). In addition to serving as the official researcher for these productions, I developed an interactive engagement guide for *Beyond the Horizon* and appeared with Hayes in a virtual, pre-show talk. The "ghosts" and the scholarly presentations are accessible, gratis, on the Foundation's website ([eugeneoneill.org](http://eugeneoneill.org)), where one may also access the film of *Beyond the Horizon* for a modest fee.

The production of *Welded* marked the return of live, in-person, and indoor theater for the Foundation. The production took place at the Museum of the San Ramon Valley in January 2022. In early February we chatted about Hayes's bold choice to stage this historically neglected play, our long-distance collaboration, and *Welded* in a modern context.

**Beth Wynstra:** Hello, Eric, I'm so happy to be having this conversation about our cross-country dramaturgical experience. We are chatting just a couple of weeks after the closing of *Welded* in Danville and at the tail-end of our work together throughout the O'Neill Foundation season, with



FIG. 1  
Bonnie DeChant as Woman and Terrance Smith as Michael Cape in *Welded* at the Museum of the San Ramon Valley. Photograph by Eric Fraisher Hayes.

*Beyond the Horizon* in the fall and then *Welded* here in early spring. I was thrilled, of course, that you were directing *Beyond the Horizon*, one of my favorites, but also *Welded*, a work not often produced. *Welded* is a play that holds great interest for me given my current research. My forthcoming book, as you know, focuses on dominant cultural patterns that underpin marital life in the early twentieth century and that I see reflected in the plays of O'Neill. In marital guidebooks and advice columns, and even in essays and articles written by actors bringing O'Neill's wife-characters to life on stages, recurring themes and ideas emerge, namely that performance is a necessary ingredient for a successful marriage. So, in early twentieth-century marital advice literature, there is a lot about role playing and assumed and assigned behaviors, duties, spheres within a marriage. I think O'Neill was attuned to what was happening as far as marital trends go and what was expected of couples in the early twentieth century. This is all to say that I was delighted you were directing *Welded* and that in our conversations you took an interest in this idea of performance and role playing within marriages. So I'll turn it to you to talk about those elements.

**Eric Fraisher Hayes:** Your comments just now inspired one new thought: I'm really interested in knowing whether there was an equal division of advice. Was advice equally directed toward men and women or was it mostly directed toward what women need to do?

**Beth:** That's a great question! Well, I think this is going to be a very obvious statement, but magazine readership was largely made up of women at the early part of the twentieth century. So, although there were certainly men's magazines and marital guidebooks directed toward men, by and large the advice, and in particular the prescriptive advice, was prominent in magazines really geared to women. Much of the advice, of course, focused on physical appearance such as the highly touted idea that women should maintain their bridal beauty or wedding day complexion throughout many years of marriage. But then there was also prolific guidance about how to make a marriage look happy and harmonious to the outer public (even if it was not). This appearance work fell largely to women. And it makes sense given that issues of domesticity and child-bearing and -rearing and all of those things were in women's realms. So, these rules or directions around performance and roles, or acting like you're happy even when you're not, were really intended for women to follow.

**Eric:** It's interesting; it reemphasizes the notion that along with the idea of marriage is the idea of setting up a home.

**Beth:** Yes.

**Eric:** And so marriage equals home and home equals domain of woman and woman needs to do all these things to make that work.

**Beth:** Yes.

**Eric:** In some ways, the man's role is very caveman, like he's going to be out there hunting mammoth and the woman has to take care of everything else because it takes a lot of energy to hunt mammoth.

**Beth:** That's right. So, even though many early twentieth-century treatises and essays and articles were heralding new, modern marriages where couples could be true partners, the work or upkeep of such partnerships wasn't shared.

**Eric:** Right. It says something about the division of labor. One part is very fixed and handled by the man and then almost everything else falls on the woman. My history with *Welded* is that I was not much interested in it for a long time. I had read it a couple of times over the years, always enchanted by the stage direction about the lights being "auras of egoism," but otherwise I found the characters kind of insufferable, and I couldn't relate to them. It was in discussions with you that I got drawn into the idea of performing marriage and performing roles within marriage, that's where I got excited.

**Beth:** Which made me very happy.

**Eric:** I said, oh, wait, there's something here to look at with the light. We could explore the role of the individual within the group. In particular, I felt with Eleanor [i.e., Eleanor Cape, the wife-character] there's this struggle to maintain a sense of individual identity. Michael [Cape] is so overpowering in his passion and his rhetoric about his ideals about marriage. I feel that Eleanor gets swept into that. It's like being taken care of or "Oh, my God, you know everything, I'll just go along with you, you take care of it." But other times I think she has these moments when she says, "Wait a second, I'm not sure I know where I am in this. It's almost like it's all your picture and I'm not even—I don't even think I'm in it. I mean you say I'm in it but I don't feel that I have my own personal stake in this." So she's trying to think about her individuality within the context of their marriage and struggling with these ideals and how they seem to work against her—she even talks about being crushed.

**Beth:** And a *huge* criticism of the play when it was produced in 1925 was that Eleanor is a character who should have really gotten over this individuality issue. After all, she is five years into a marriage. It is both hilarious and shocking to read some of those reviews. Ah, silly Eleanor with all that individuality talk!

**Eric:** Michael's ideals are this thing that crushes her and makes her feel like she's definitely not an equal partner and that the marriage is suffocating her. You've mentioned that *Welded* is the only O'Neill play where a woman is a working woman, who is not walking the streets. She's got a professional identity and that is part of her. I was drawn to the idea that these characters were playing roles with each other and within their sense of self. As a director I was interested in exploring which part of a role is coming from within a person and which part of the role is being projected on them by their partner. This idea then got tied back into light and how light could emphasize isolation or could emphasize togetherness or show duality. I didn't realize until rehearsals that there was a role for shadows in the production, how shadows would feed into this notion of multiple identities within a relationship: you are constantly aware that you are looking at the actor and their silhouette. The actor and their shadow may be doing the same thing, but the size and energy of the actor compared to their shadow can differ moment to moment. The actors are relating to each other but the shadows also have a relationship to each other. Pretty soon it became a room full of people, and that grabbed my attention and I wanted to play with the effect.

**Beth:** And I can't wait to talk specifically about your beautiful production but yes, I'm so glad you mentioned the shadows that emerge during your production because absolutely the marriage in *Welded* has all those different roles embedded in it and at play. But the ideas that you were exploring there, Eric, are still very much with us today when we talk about partnerships and making it all work and how to balance professional ambition and love. And I just think it's so notable that Eleanor's profession is that of an actor. So we have this whole other dimension of role playing. I love that thing you said about Eleanor being left out of the picture. The line from this play, which actually is the title of my book, is one of Eleanor's: "I only act a part you've created." And I see that "you" as certainly Michael; he is, after all, a playwright. I also think we can imagine that "you" as something bigger, perhaps society as a whole. The roles women and wives are supposed to play are those that are largely culturally constructed. There's expectations and pressures that come from a number of places, and so for all these reasons *Welded* is an exciting and very timely play to me.

Eric, I'm hoping that you can talk about the choice of having the actors who are not on stage actually on stage watching and reacting to the production. Despite our focus on Eleanor and Michael, *Welded* is a play of four characters. Can you talk about those other two characters? And the choice to have "offstage" characters on stage?

**Eric:** As I was saying earlier, I had trouble with these two main characters, Michael and Eleanor, until I started talking with you and thinking about them playing roles and the idea of their lives revolving around theater. My first thought was, how do I ground the play in a place of reality, a place where there is at least one character on stage that an audience could relate to? When I thought about Michael and Eleanor and their lofty rhetoric in that first scene, I just wanted to gag, and my challenge became “how do we let the audience know that the play knows there’s something gag-worthy going on so they would stay with us and not ‘check out’?” My answer was to think of the characters not in the scene as still part of the show. Since I knew I was not going to have actual spotlights, I already knew that I was going to have the “offstage” actors holding hand-held lights to create the effect of spotlights. So knowing I had actors who would be on the periphery of the stage providing the light, I realized they could represent actors in the wings who might have something to say about the action in the light on stage. And then the first time I saw the two “offstage” actors sitting together I immediately said, wait a second, they look like a couple at the theater.

**Beth:** Or the old men at the *Muppet Show*.

**Eric:** Yes. Like Waldorf and Statler in the balcony of the *Muppet Show*, free to comment from the peanut gallery. Or any couple sitting at a theater performance. And since the play was all about a playwright and an actress and it was all about playing roles within society and within a marriage I said, “Well, heck, they can play the audience, I mean why not?” I got excited again and I found the play more and more compelling as it got more theatrical.

**Beth:** Yes! It all worked beautifully in your production, Eric.

**Eric:** I always knew the stage direction about the lights was a theatrical element, but now I was seeing possibilities in everything about the play. I was even struck by Michael’s first line in the play, when he is discovered sneaking up on Eleanor and she reacts to him before he is ready, and he chides her, saying, “You ruined it, you spoiled it, I was going to surprise you, announce myself with a kiss.” And I was like, oh, he’s even scripted his entrance!

**Beth:** Ha ha!

**Eric:** He scripted how the scene is going to go before a word has been spoken. I latched onto the notion that every character had a script in their head about how a scene was supposed to be played and in every scene one or both actors would “go off script,” which forced their partner in the scene

to adjust their expectation and see the person opposite them in a new light, so to speak.

**Beth:** I love these ideas in this production. And I see your choices here as so reflective of marriages in O'Neill's day, and probably in our own, where husbands and wives would each have lofty expectations and hopes, usually very distinct from their partner's.

**Eric:** Yes! With the actors constantly revolving from onstage to "offstage" as pseudo-audience, we had a lot of fun with the convention. When the second scene starts, one of the "audience" actors appears on stage as John and the other "audience" actor, who is still sitting in the audience, starts the second scene by commenting that the new actor on stage looks just like the person she was sitting next to during the first scene. We started to play with not only performing roles in the play but playing the idea of performing as audience as well. We only had a two-week rehearsal so I was finding new things every rehearsal. It was one discovery after another.

**Beth:** And I loved our conversations as you were getting into rehearsal and you were finding that these "audience" couples started to become almost Greek chorus-like with their guiding of the real audience. These couples guided us, alerting us when to laugh and when to think Michael's declarations of love were ridiculous. This terrific convention you developed really drove home points about how we all are performers in some way, particularly in partnerships. At the same time, I found myself thinking that I would never want a couple viewing my own marriage or inside my house at certain moments. I am acutely aware of the roles that we can play and play into in a marriage or what happens with designated responsibilities and behaviors. And so, watching your production, I kept having these moments where I was thinking, "Okay, I can laugh, but I would never want an audience sitting front and center for my own marriage. There would certainly be levels of ridiculousness being revealed there!" Eleanor and Michael are not unique, I guess is what I'm saying.

**Eric:** Yeah. And that was one of the things I would probably try to continue to explore. It is much easier to judge somebody in the light from a position outside of the light. And that's as topical as it gets. In 2022 people are looking at other people through screens all the time and commenting to themselves or the world how they know better. There has always been a lot of judging going on but now we are privy to so much of it through social media. It's so easy to do. You know, when you're in the light you're exposed and vulnerable; when you're outside of the light you at least think that you're not vulnerable and you can't be judged and you

can't be seen. In our production, I thought the actors onstage were like the smallest nesting doll. The actors holding the lights on them were a slightly larger nesting doll, and then the audience of patrons was a largest nesting doll.

**Beth:** Oh, I love that!

**Eric:** As I continue to think about this play, I have this intention of figuring out a more direct way to turn the light on to the audience and to get them to think, to make the connection. What couples say to each other sounds silly until you hear yourself and say, "You know, I've said something like that." I've read some of my grandparents' love letters, and they sound ridiculous. But I know they were earnest, and if someone in the future read something I wrote, they would have the same reaction. You can sit outside the lights, you can be buffered by time or space and get the idea that you're different than others when really you're not so different. I would have loved to figure out a way to turn those lights actually or metaphorically on the audience more directly so that they would be struck with this notion of "Oh, wait a second, we just caught ourselves doing something that we judge others for doing."

**Beth:** You know, something else I'd love to hear you talk about too, which I thought worked so well in this production, was the staircase. When I think of a staircase and a couple, instantly my mind goes to something like Scarlett O'Hara and Rhett Butler: the picking up of the woman and the romantic running up the stairs to the bedroom. These notions are very much played with and disrupted in your production, so I'd love to hear you chat about the staircase.

**Eric:** Yeah. It's very clear when Michael and Eleanor are ascending the stairs in the first scene that they are going to consummate their union in one way or another when they are interrupted by the knock at the door. But it was very interesting the very first time we rehearsed act 2, scene 1, which is when Eleanor goes off to their friend and theatrical producer John's apartment to have an affair. It dawned on me how important the stairs were to Eleanor. She definitely had a relationship with the stairs in John's apartment. At one point John says, "let me put you to bed," or something, and as she is going up the stairs she finds that she can't go all the way up the stairs with John. Later in the scene she's going to go up the stairs on her own and then she feels like she sees Michael's ghost or apparition or energy or spirit up there and is repelled again and races back down the stairs. Clearly, stairs are important in more than one scene. So the challenge became "what do the stairs mean in each scene of the play?" They are such a strong symbol of Michael's worldview and



his ideals about their marriage in the first scene and the last scene and represent Eleanor's struggles with those ideals throughout the play. At first Eleanor gets swept up in the passion of Michael's ideals, about their relationship, and she can go follow him up the stairs. But then she hears the words "my wife" and all of a sudden she is terrified that the role he has cast her in will eclipse the other parts of her identity. She's afraid she may lose herself and so she can't go up the stairs and be swallowed up by his vision. The stairs equal assimilation and loss of self. With the stairs acting symbolically in three of four scenes, I felt obligated to find a role for stairs in the third scene [act 2, scene 2] as well. It's the scene where Michael goes home with the prostitute. No stairs are indicated in the action of the scene. In this scene I chose to make the stairs purely symbolic. The stairs were directly upstage of the bed in the scene, so I had the woman go to the stairs at the start of the scene and drape herself across the stairs in a seductive pose to emphasize her role at the start of the scene as an enticing lady of the night. The stairs became the symbol of the destruction of Michael's ideals, a place Michael thought he wanted to go but ultimately couldn't. Repeatedly in the play, stairs represented a passage to a place Eleanor or Michael couldn't go. Sometimes it was fear that stopped them, sometimes it was guilt, sometimes it was to preserve a sense of self, and sometimes it was to preserve a sense of unity. Ideas of ascension came to dominate my view of the play. At the end of the play the stairs became important as a mirror to reflect the journey of Eleanor from the start of the play. I felt Eleanor's character had learned something, had gained some insight about herself and her relationship and what those ideals that the stairs represented meant. At the end of the play she is willing to go up the stairs with Michael but this time knowingly.

**Beth:** I thought the ending of your production of the play emphasized that Eleanor would still be performing but on her own terms. She, as you mentioned, followed Michael up the stairs and then recoiled at that word "wife" before descending the stairs to the landing. The choice to have Michael descend the stairs to meet her and to say the final lines of the play revealed that he experienced some learning and growing as well. I don't think we're supposed to leave the play with the confidence of "oh, they'll never have this moment again or this argument again," but at least in that instant we have a couple meeting each other, literally and figuratively, half-way.

**Eric:** Michael is so prone to indulging his ideals and leaving Eleanor behind and that's why it was important for me to have Michael come down and join her. He actually gets the last learning moment in the play. In a final

act of hope and perhaps learning, Michael comes down the stairs and joins her and she ends the play saying, “we love.” These final symbolic statements of both of them coming down off the stairs gave her last line a resonance that it wouldn’t have if they just marched off up the stairs.

**Beth:** I liked this ending and your choices, Eric, because Michael actually has to act in the play he created. At the start of the play Michael goes on and on about the modern, unique, and un-“kitchen range” marriage he has with Eleanor. This moment at the end, where Michael must come and meet Eleanor, really makes him walk the walk of his lofty talk. The ending of your production made me think about what Sheryl Sandberg famously espouses in her book *Lean In*. She argues that if you really want an equal partnership, you need to find a partner who will change the dirty diapers and not just talk about being a supporter of women’s rights or egalitarian marriages. You need to find someone who’s actually going to do the work. And I thought with your ending, we have an indication that Michael is ready to do the work and he is ready to join her.

Can you say a little more about John and the Woman, the supporting characters in this play?

**Eric:** In both those scenes, in the second scene with John and Eleanor and the third scene with the Woman and Michael, the person that is the member of the couple encounters someone much more grounded than either Eleanor or Michael. It forces them to adjust the roles they anticipated playing in the scene. Both Eleanor in scene 2 and Michael in scene 3 rush into a scene thinking that they’re going to play a certain role only to realize they are in the wrong play, so to speak. Both John and the Woman communicate to them, “this isn’t what you want, this isn’t who you want to be. Go back to where your play is taking place and do better,” basically.

**Beth:** And both of those supporting characters are highly symbolic as well. I see them as representative of societal norms and expectations. John literally tells Eleanor to go home and “play your part,” a nod to her profession but also her role as wife. And the Woman’s famous line that Michael needs to “loin to like it” highlights the idea that marriage is not all lofty ideals and romantic elements, as it is often promised to be (and how Michael hopes it will be), but rather work and a recognition of one’s partner.

**Eric:** In the last scene, the reunion scene, I wanted Michael and Eleanor to rush into each other’s arms. So there wasn’t some game of “do you still love me? Do I hate you? Did you do something horrible? Am I jealous?” I mean all those things are going to happen, but I wanted everyone to know that they wanted to be together desperately. They rush to each

other and embrace and then they start having an awkward conversation because the next part is difficult. Passion is easy for them. It's togetherness that's hard. Feelings come naturally, but relationships are work.

**Beth:** Yes, I love that, Eric. And I think O'Neill was so attuned in his writing to that idea of romance being the easy part. It is fun and flirty and frivolous to be in that premarriage moment. And, if you are following the prominent advice literature of the early twentieth century, you are not showing any unattractive or unbecoming parts of yourself to a potential spouse. Then comes the marriage, and the real getting-to-know-your-partner part, and the difficult work begins.

*Welded* is a play about a couple who are five years into a marriage written by O'Neill, who was five years into his marriage with Agnes Boulton, and starred Doris Keane (Eleanor), who was five years into her marriage. Both Doris Keane's marriage and O'Neill's marriage to Agnes would eventually break up, but that five-year mark, the true end of the honeymoon period, so to speak, where the work begins has, I think, real resonance in the play and in your production, Eric.

ERIC FRAISHER HAYES is the artistic director for the Eugene O'Neill Foundation, Tao House. He has directed twenty-eight of O'Neill's fifty-one plays, including a feature film of *Beyond the Horizon*. He holds an MFA in acting from the Theatre School, DePaul University and has been a member of AEA since 2001.

BETH WYNSTRA is an associate professor of English at Babson College. Beth's book, *Vows, Veils, and Masks: The Performance of Marriage in the Plays of Eugene O'Neill* (University of Iowa Press, Theater History and Culture Series) will be published in 2023. She regularly directs plays and musicals at Babson and most recently directed an original play called *Heart/Roots: Wabaunsee County* in the ruin of an old house in rural Kansas.