

**LONG DAY'S JOURNEY INTO
NIGHT**

DIRECTED BY MICHAEL
SOCRATES MORAN, UBUNTU
THEATER PROJECT
OAKLAND, CA, OCTOBER 4-
NOVEMBER 3, 2019

.....

Reviewed by Eric Fraisher Hayes

Arriving at the Flux Art and Design Center on a nearly abandoned side street in downtown Oakland, I wasn't sure if I was in the right place. I found no visible signs of a theatre, just a brightly adorned warehouse selling copious visual arts supplies. After confirming with a store clerk that I was in the right place, I passed the time admiring the vast selection of epoxies. Following a short wait, our multitude of milling patrons was ushered into a back room, probably a former stockroom, where we found ourselves center stage. The oblong high-ceilinged performance space had audience chairs lining the perimeter on three sides. On the fourth side, a large set-piece staircase ascended to the ceiling, leading to a precipitous drop at its apex. The visual dominance of the stairs ensured that the audience would always be confronted by the significance of each of Mary Tyrone's ascents into oblivion throughout the play. The remainder of the performance space was a long narrow strip of painted floor with a series of lone wooden chairs evenly spaced along the edge of the elongated playing space.

It became clear in the early moments of the performance that the actors were going to remain in the playing space, and in the audience's line of sight, for the entire play. When they were not directly involved in a scene, the actors struck poses of either anguish or reflection, or sometimes both. Other times the "offstage" actors performed repetitive physical actions of struggle and frustration, such as pushing against an unmovable wall. Mary's trips to the spare



FIG. 1

Cathleen Riddley as Mary Tyrone, with Alexander Kort as Cellist, in *Long Day's Journey Into Night*, Ubuntu Theater Project. Photograph by Carson French.

room upstairs were completely visible and were playlets in themselves. Mary would walk, stagger, and even drag herself to the top of the stairs, collapsing in a heap or freezing in place. After one such collapse, Mary rolled over on her back, evoking the arresting image of a helpless turtle or bug. The production was filled with powerful images of pain and suffering, and the cumulative effect was to ensnare the audience in the Tyrone family's web of pain.

But the inescapable immersion into this family's pain was a double-edged sword. While the strong visuals of this production initially enhanced the text, over the course of the play they began to compete with the text

and eventually distract from it. The vivid physical choice to show the family's perpetual anguish provided a powerful, visceral experience for the audience, but it came at a cost to the storytelling. Tragic stories often benefit from brief moments of levity, providing relief from the heavy subject matter. Unfortunately, the bold choice to keep the individual and systemic familial pain in the audience's face for the entire play meant that there were no moments of hope and almost no humor or irony. If the characters in the play, and the audience, are not allowed to imagine a hopeful outcome, to experience intermittent relief, the struggle and the expressions of pain seem meaningless. You can't experience a fall if you start at the bottom and never rise above it.

This production's heavily edited script played an hour quicker than most productions, in keeping with the attention span of a contemporary audience. But, again, the storytelling suffered. Act 1 hit the ground running by rushing through or skipping over some of the affectionate banter between James and Mary and heading full steam into the conflict. As a consequence, the audience was robbed of understanding what the family is so afraid of losing: an emotionally present wife and mother. Having Mary start the day in a frenzy and stay in a frenzy throughout the performance made the mournful silence of the Tyrone men at the play's end feel unearned. To the contrary, after experiencing Mary in an extended manic episode for nearly the entire play, I was relieved on behalf of the rest of the family when she was finally sedated.

Director Michael Socrates Moran chose to use a cellist to provide live accompaniment throughout the performance. The slurring legato of live strings chillingly reinforced an atmosphere of dread and doom on many occasions. Regrettably, like the poses of pain through the play, the cello often fell into a relentless and brooding pattern and never offered lighter contrasting notes that could have given more emotional shape—highs and lows—to this difficult day in the life of the Tyrone family. Moran's decision was particularly bold at the beginning of scene 3, where the cello's music stood in for the Irish maid Cathleen. The traditionally confessional scene where Mary plies Cathleen with liquor and takes her into her confidence was played as an extended monologue by Mary, with the cello providing an eerie underscore. At times Mary would pause and take in the sound of the cello as if hearing a voice from beyond. While the use of the cello in this way was dramatic and theatrical, I felt the overall effect was to make Mary prematurely play the ending. By the middle of the production, the interplay of actress and cello had placed Mary so firmly in her own world that she had no emotional territory left through which to travel.

The acting performances were generally very strong, with special recognition for Cathleen Riddley as Mary Tyrone. Riddley brought a mesmerizing focus and commitment to the family matriarch. It was easy to understand how she became the center of the family's swirling concerns.

With so much attention focused on the physical life of this production, it might have made sense to remove more of the text and highlight the dance-like visual qualities. Many directors and producers resist editing O'Neill plays, especially *Long Day's Journey*, but in this case, a more epigrammatic presentation would have better emphasized Moran's vision for a *Long Day's Journey* dominated by physicalizations of the play's emotional states. A shorter presentation would have de-emphasized the ways these perpetual physical representations of suffering flattened the story's arc. Ubuntu's *Long Day's Journey Into Night* was a visually arresting study of a family in pain; but, like the Tyrone family, this production found itself trapped in its own form of purgatory, oscillating between O'Neill's "sacred" text and the physical and auditory meditation on familial pain that it longed to be.

ERIC FRAISHER HAYES is the artistic director of the Eugene O'Neill Foundation, Tao House. Under his tenure, the O'Neill Foundation has become the leading producer of the plays of Eugene O'Neill in the United States. Mr. Hayes has directed more than half of O'Neill's fifty-one plays, ranging from the best-known like *Long Day's Journey Into Night* and *The Iceman Cometh* to the almost-forgotten *Chris Christophersen* and *Days Without End*. His Tao House productions of *Hughie* and *Long Day's Journey Into Night* traveled to Ireland where they were featured at the Eugene O'Neill International Festival of Theatre in New Ross in 2018 and 2019, respectively.