

AN ARGUMENT FOR  
THE THIRD VOICE:  
REIMAGINING EUGENE  
O'NEILL'S *HUGHIE*

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ABSTRACT

Productions of *Hughie* have traditionally regarded O'Neill's late one-act as an actor's play, carried by dialogue and requiring minimal directorial intervention. But the dialogue tells only part of the story; my year working on *Hughie* at the Eugene O'Neill National Historic Site and at the Eugene O'Neill International Festival of Theatre in New Ross, Ireland, persuaded me that incorporating the stage directions into the play illuminated Hughie's rich inner life. The key choice in bringing this interpretation to life was the construction of a third character out of the stage directions. This character—Hughie's ghost—unlocks dramatic possibilities that justify and give voice to much of the play's richest text and facilitates fresh insights into the two named characters. With the inclusion of previously unspoken text, the play becomes about the struggles of two men and their relationship in a moment of existential crisis.

EUGENE O'NEILL REVIEW, VOL. 40, NO. 1, 2019  
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DOI: 10.5325/EUGONEIREVI.40.1.2019.0068

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KEYWORDS: *Hughie*, Eugene O'Neill, ensemble, directing, stage directions

**“He is awake and alive. I should use him to help me live through the night.”**

— Charlie Hughes, in *Hughie*

Eugene O'Neill wrote these thoughts for the night clerk Charlie Hughes in the stage directions of his late one-act *Hughie*. Charlie's thinking at this moment is crucial to our understanding of his journey in the play. For audiences experiencing a traditional production, however, this critical realization is buried in the play's extensive stage directions. The problem that this exemplifies is substantial: by relying solely on the dialogue, traditional productions of *Hughie* prohibit audiences from appreciating the need for human interconnectedness that motivates the characters and provides the play's most powerful message.

*Hughie* has been shackled to realistic representation long enough. Like Edmund Dantès at the Chateau d'If in *Monte Cristo*—or, closer to home, like James O'Neill in the role of Edmund Dantès at the Chateau d'If in *Monte Cristo*—*Hughie* has been sacrificed to a dubious principle: in this case, the belief that this is an actor's play, carried by dialogue and requiring only minimal intervention from a director. This view of the play has been solidified by productions in which leading actors treat the role of Eric Smith as a star turn, much to the delight of profit-minded producers and of audiences smitten by big-name actors. But the dialogue, dominated by Eric Smith, tells only part of the story, and my work with this play has convinced me there are theatrical riches hiding in plain sight on the pages of *Hughie*, between the lines of dialogue. While O'Neill's stage directions are always a treasure trove of human insight, some more playable than others, I believe they reveal a lost story in this play. *Hughie* is a hybrid piece of writing: part play and part short story, and the blending of the two in performance yields the fullest experience of the play.

Over the past dozen years as the artistic director of the Eugene O'Neill Foundation at Tao House, I have aspired to unlock the theatrical possibilities of over twenty O'Neill plays. Throughout the year 2018, I worked with dramaturg William Davies King and three very talented San Francisco Bay Area actors—Clive Worsley, Aaron Murphy, and Dorian Lockett—on

exploring how to incorporate the stage directions in O'Neill's *Hughie* into a production of the play. Our process consisted of a couple of week-long workshops in the first half of the year; six weeks of rehearsal in the fall; a two-week run at the Old Barn at the Eugene O'Neill National Historic Site (Tao House) in Danville, California; and, finally, three shows in Ireland highlighted by our performance at the Eugene O'Neill International Festival of Theatre in New Ross, Ireland. My year working on *Hughie* has persuaded me that the stage directions can be woven into the action of the play, revealing a rich inner life that previously lay undiscovered.

The key artistic and foundational choice in bringing this interpretation to life was the construction of a third character from the stage directions. The inclusion of this third character unlocks a flurry of dramatic possibilities and gives voice to much of the play's richest text. Freed from the limitations of the traditional dialogue, the play is permitted to enter the realm of magical realism, with our third character guiding us to greater insights into the two named characters and their relationship. The night clerk, Charlie Hughes, can finally be revealed as a fully realized character equal in importance to the story as Erie Smith. With the stage directions spoken, the audience understands Charlie's motivations: the device allows for the presentation of his inner monologue, which counterbalances the traditionally dominant "outer monologue" of the gambler Erie Smith. With the inclusion of previously unspoken text, the play becomes about the struggles of two men and their relationship in a moment of existential crisis. The speaking of this text, I believe, greatly enhances the dramatic stakes: in their own way, Erie and Charlie are as close to the brink as, say, the drunks of *The Iceman Cometh*. Additionally, through the voice of this third character, O'Neill demonstrates a playfulness and ironic sense of humor that can both charm audiences and heighten his fatalistic angst. The interplay of conventionally spoken and conventionally suppressed elements allows *Hughie* more fully to articulate definitional truths about the human condition and, specifically, about our ethical obligations to each other.

## REVERSE-ENGINEERING A GHOST

When I first read *Hughie*, I was intrigued by the narrative passages and amusing character details in the stage directions. There was something different about them. They had attitudes and shadings that went far beyond other O'Neill stage directions. These descriptions and directions exude a worldview and have a voice of their own. The voice was by no means complete, but

there were enough traces present to spark my imagination and drive me to go searching the play for an undetected story, perhaps one that O'Neill hadn't realized he was writing at the time and which many great theatre artists had not found a way to play.

With the goal of making the stage directions a part of the action of the play, I felt I needed to justify speaking this additional text. I did not want to treat the stage directions as just interesting footnotes. I did not want to distract from the action of the play, but to enhance it. In order to keep the dramatic drive of the story going, a character needed to be created and worked into the action of the story. When I asked myself who would know the tales and the motivations of the small-time gambler Erie Smith, and would know what it is like to be a night clerk pinned behind a desk listening to Erie Smith, the answer came quickly: the eponymous, recently deceased Hughie, Erie's sometimes confidant and Charlie Hughes's predecessor as night clerk. Only Hughie—or Hughie's ghost—would understand the plight of these two men so intimately that he could justifiably guide the audience through their interactions. While Hughie is described throughout the play as a man lacking dynamism, we took a liberty with the idea that, in death, he might have loosened up and become more loquacious. To my thinking, even Puritans probably dance and play cards after death.

Although our production team always thought of the third character as Hughie, I chose to list the character in the program as “Our Guide.” I thought a little mystery and intrigue would serve the play, and I wanted the audience members to reach their own conclusions about the character's function in my adaptation. Perhaps the “who” guiding the story was less important than the function he provided.

For an omniscient ghost to generate dramatic interest, Clive Worsley (Hughie) and I needed to construct a journey—an arc—for the ghost. This was the most challenging aspect of executing the vision for a third character. Our spectral Hughie had to make discoveries that led to moments of growth for his character. How to make Hughie worth caring about did not come into focus until shortly before our opening performance at Tao House. Ultimately, I drew on my love of *The Twilight Zone*, mixed with some popular cinema. I played with the idea that our ghost was trapped in some form of purgatory, experiencing the same situation over and over like Bill Murray in the movie *Groundhog Day*. At the start of the play, Hughie finds himself in the same lobby with the same night clerk. He knows that, in a moment, gambler Erie Smith will come through the door as he always does. But now there's a difference: he discovers that this time an audience is observing the lobby. He decides to assume the role of the audience's guide to this place and

to the two men who inhabit it. (After all, a ghost with time on his hands has to *do* something.) Hughie's exuberance in telling the audience about the night clerk and the gambler became the vehicle for delivering the exposition in the stage directions. His mastery of the situation—his understanding of who these two men are, of what Erie is about to say, of what Charlie is thinking and why he is thinking it—added new dimensions to the dynamics at work.

About a third of the way through the script, Erie makes his first serious attempt to go upstairs to his room. O'Neill's script calls for a few failed attempts to accomplish what would seem to be a simple task. The first time, Erie makes it partly up the steps before stopping to grumble, "What a crummy dump! What did I come back for?" (837).<sup>1</sup> He chooses to descend the steps and re-engage the night clerk. My extensive experience with O'Neill's plays has led me to the observation that, in O'Neill's world, almost nothing good comes from going upstairs. The conclusion of many of his early plays could be summed up by the description "character goes up stairs, sound of gunshot, end of play." Later in O'Neill's career, half of the Mannon clan seems to die this way in *Mourning Becomes Electra*. Later still, for Mary Tyrone in *Long Day's Journey Into Night*, upstairs is a place for high-risk drug use and thus for her family a site of acute anxiety. Almost the entire cast of characters in *The Iceman Cometh* is afraid to go upstairs, and when Don Parritt finally does venture upstairs, he immediately jumps to his death.

Given O'Neill's use of upper floors, I decided that we would instill an instinctive sense of danger in Erie. I viewed each aborted trip up the stairs as a benchmark in the play. For Erie, each attempt marked a rising sense of desperation; for Hughie's ghost, each signaled a shift in the way he shaped his narration. I grew to think of Erie's first failed ascent as the end of lap 1 and the start of lap 2 for Hughie. Erie comes down the steps and starts telling tales again, but now Hughie begins to question why. He still performs his guide role for the audience, but there is a more reflective quality to the way he does it. Hughie muses over why Erie continues to tell tales to the clerk, who is not listening. More important, why is he continuing to be the audience's guide? It is during this reflective phase of the play that O'Neill wrote the following passage in the stage directions, which became Hughie's dialogue:

The Night Clerk regards him with vacant, bulging eyes full of a vague envy for the blind. The garbage men have gone their predestined way. Time is that much older. The Clerk's mind remains in the street to greet the noise of a far-off El train. Its approach is pleasantly like a memory of hope; then it roars and rocks and rattles past the nearby corner and the noise pleasantly deafens memory; then it

recedes and dies, and there is something melancholy about that. But there is hope. Only so many El trains pass in one night, and each one passing leaves one less to pass, so the night recedes, too, until at last it must die and join all the other long nights in Nirvana, the Big Night of Nights. And that's life. (838)

The speaking of this text provided the audience with one of O'Neill's most delicious physical descriptions as well as keen insight into the night clerk's struggle to cope with Erie's endless gassing. It then moves into a deep meditation on the nature of life and longing. In our production, this moment was played by the ghost of Hughie stepping out of the action of the play, as the passage steps away from the story of the two men on the page. The moment seemed to linger and float off into the night sky. If there was ever a passage that suggested that O'Neill was a frustrated novelist, this is it.<sup>2</sup>

About two-thirds of the way through the script, Erie, having failed to hook the night clerk with his life stories, makes a second attempt to go upstairs. This time Erie (Aaron Murphy) made it further up the steps before being stopped by an existential gnawing. Erie exclaims "Christ, it's lonely. I wish Hughie was here!" and then charges down the stairs to make one last attempt to matter to the vacuous night clerk (844). This was the beginning of lap 3 for our ghost. Erie's desperate and panicked storytelling is now too much for Hughie. He is not going to play the guide in a thrice-told story. I had Clive's Hughie ascend to the top of the stairs, the furthest point from the action of the play, and sit facing off into the distance. He has given up on Erie and Charlie. He loses hope of anything changing and contemplates his own oblivion. Hughie's sudden lack of connection to the story mirrors the disconnect between Erie and Charlie.

At this point, all three characters are equally alienated; only Erie is psychically in motion, thrashing about trying to change something, anything, about his carping sense of isolation. Eventually, a spent Erie stops directing his words to the night clerk and turns inward to contemplate the painful loss of his pal Hughie. Once he is no longer trying to play the "big shot" for the new night clerk, his tone changes and a vulnerable raw humanity emerges. The "act" of being Erie Smith has been peeled back and he begins to speak from his heart:

ERIE. I could tell by Hughie's face before he went to the hospital, he was through. . . . I went to see him twice in the hospital. The first time, his wife was there and give me a dirty look, but he cooked up a smile and said, "Hello, Erie, how're the bangtails treating you?" I see he wants a big

story to cheer him, but his wife butts in and says he's weak and he mustn't get excited. . . . The second time I went, they wouldn't let me see him. That was near the end. I went to his funeral, too. There wasn't nobody but a coupla his wife's relations. . . . The kids was bawlin'. There wasn't no flowers but a coupla lousy wreaths. It woulda been a punk showing for poor old Hughie, if it hadn't been for my flower piece. . . . A big horseshoe of red roses! I knew Hughie'd want a horseshoe because that made it look like he'd been a horse player. And around the top printed in forget-me-nots was "Good-by, Old Pal." Hughie liked to kid himself he was my pal. And so he was, at that—even if he was a sucker. (846–47)

During this revealing and vulnerable speech, Hughie starts to take note of this new side of Erie. He is moved and can't help but be drawn to this honest display of grief over the loss of his friend. This moment was played like an epiphany and as such offered a strong contrast to Hughie's previous omniscience. By the end of the speech, Hughie has found a new directive: how do I help this man in pain? Hearing the sincere anguish of Erie forces him to invest in the outcome of the story and the fate of its two characters. He must help Erie and Charlie connect. He will spend the rest of the play pursuing this goal. For Clive, playing Hughie, showing off his knowledge to the audience is no longer his focus. His new acting objective is to get Erie and Charlie to recognize and value each other.

## FLESHING OUT CHARLIE HUGHES

If there is a primary beneficiary of the inclusion of the stage directions, besides the audience, it is the routinely underdeveloped and not well understood character of the night clerk Charlie Hughes, played by Dorian Lockett in our production. Charlie's inner life has traditionally been bound by the literary aspects of the play—the stage directions—and has thus been inaccessible to audiences. If one accepts the premise that *Hughie* is a hybrid piece of writing, part play and part short story, then it is reasonable to regard Erie Smith as the protagonist of the play but Charlie Hughes as the protagonist of the story. Since most people who experience *Hughie* experience it as a play, the role of Charlie has been enigmatic. Once the stage directions are added to the performance, Charlie is liberated. O'Neill's stage directions not only contextualize his scant dialogue but also reveal a rich inner life. Charlie is the character who goes on the greatest journey and learns the most in the critical hour in which this

story is told. In our production, I sought to give equal weight to Erie's speech and Charlie's thoughts. O'Neill's stage directions—and Hughie's dialogue—read thus:

Long experience with guests who stop at his desk in the small hours to talk about themselves has given [Charlie] a foolproof technique of self-defense. He appears to listen with agreeable submissiveness and be impressed, but his mind is blank and he doesn't hear unless a direct question is put to him, and sometimes not even then. Erie thinks he is impressed. (833–34)

Right from the beginning, O'Neill sets us up to understand that Charlie Hughes will primarily live in his mind, not his words. Charlie is almost always economical with his language, and when he speaks, he generally does so to pacify Erie and so more easily to move on to his own next thought. Numb to life, Charlie finds solace only in the wanderings of his mind. The sounds of the night are his primary scene partner as they allow him intermittently to escape his dead-end job and hardscrabble life and to imagine something better. This "foolproof technique" insulates him from the demands of a life that he has neither the imagination nor the energy to cope with. In our production, he spoke from this cocoon.

The gradual vocalizing of Charlie's thoughts was essential to our strategy of making Charlie an equal scene partner to Erie. O'Neill's stage directions led the way as, increasingly throughout the play, O'Neill chooses to move from simply describing the thoughts and emotions going through Charlie's mind to writing Charlie's thoughts in the form of interior dialogue. I chose to progressively lengthen these vocalized thoughts. The first time Charlie speaks one of his thoughts out loud, it was a shared line with the ghost of Hughie:

HUGHIE. [Erie] looks at the Night Clerk expecting reassurance, but the Clerk's mind has slipped away to the clanging bounce of garbage cans in the outer night. He is thinking: "[That's] a job I'd like. I'd bang those cans louder than they do! I'd wake up the whole damned city!"

NIGHT CLERK. (*Simultaneously*) I'd wake up the whole damned city! (837)<sup>3</sup>

As Erie's desperation becomes more oppressive and his stories extend mad-deningly, Charlie is forced to press his imagination further into the sounds of the night to save himself. Again, O'Neill's stage directions encourage the theatricalizing of these deeper forms of evasion. The fully formed dialogue



in Charlie's mind branches into scenes with other characters. Not only does he imagine being other places where these sounds exist, but now he is also having conversations with the characters he finds there.

HUGHIE. [Charlie's] mind has hopped an ambulance clanging down Sixth, and is asking . . .

NIGHT CLERK. Will he die, Doctor, or isn't he lucky?

HUGHIE. I'm afraid not, but he'll have to be absolutely quiet for months and months.

NIGHT CLERK. With a pretty nurse taking care of him?

HUGHIE. Probably not pretty.

NIGHT CLERK. Well, anyway, I claim he's lucky. And now I must get back to the hotel. 492 won't go to bed. (833–34)

Theatrically, this bifurcation was enabled by the creation of a Hughie who could shape-shift into anything that Charlie's mind could imagine and engage. For these sections, I felt that Charlie was so far into his head that the rules of space and time need not apply to him, and that he should be free to step away from his desk to play out these dialogues. Erie would freeze in place to indicate that, in his reality, the night clerk was still standing in front of him.

Eventually, I had Dorian speaking Charlie's thoughts as full monologues, as O'Neill wrote in the stage directions. Interestingly and perhaps ironically, O'Neill starts writing monologue thoughts for Charlie around the same time that Erie seems to have run out of words.

NIGHT CLERK. Arnold Rothstein! . . . I'd like to have the dough to get in a game with him once! The last pot everyone would drop out but him and me. I'd say, "Okay, Arnold, the sky's the limit," and I'd raise him five grand, and he'd call, and I'd have a royal flush to his four aces. Then I'd say, "Okay, Arnold, I'm a good sport, I'll give you a break. I'll cut you double or nothing. Just one cut. I want quick action for my dough." And I'd cut the ace of spades and win again. (847–48)

If this speech demonstrates anything, it is that we are all the hero of our own story. The inclusion of the stage directions in the performance emphasizes Charlie's centrality to the play. The drama inside Charlie's head is as compelling as Erie's dilemma. In fact, the biggest revelation in the play—that we all truly need one another—originates with Charlie when the staged directions are performed.

## EUGENE O'NEILL: A FUNNY GUY

The stage directions themselves and the juxtaposition of the stage directions with the dialogue showcase a wickedly funny, ironic side to O'Neill's writing. In *Hughie* O'Neill uses his keen understanding of human behavior for comic effect, sometimes taking on the voice of a Damon Runyon wise guy. Previously limited to a source of amusement for the reader, the addition of the third character allows audiences to enjoy a playful O'Neill.

Often the humor provides colorful narrative descriptions of the inner life of Charlie Hughes: "*The Night Clerk seems turned into a drooping wax-work, draped along the desk. This is what he used to dread before he perfected his technique of not listening: The Guest's Story of His Life. He fixes his mind on his aching feet*" (835). Avoiding direct indication and simultaneous mimicry, Dorian as Charlie was able to play off these physical descriptions for subtle, and sometimes not so subtle, comic effect. The audience felt like it was on the inside and enjoyed knowing something about Charlie's attitude toward Erie that Erie himself is comically unable to recognize—an ignorance heightened by O'Neill's deft and dreary comic description.

At other times, the stage directions allow for humorous contrasts between the action and dialogue of the play. Consider, for example, O'Neill's description of Charlie and Erie's initial meeting: "*The Night Clerk rises wearily. His eyes remain empty but his gummy lips part automatically in a welcom-*



FIG. 1  
(L to R) Clive Worsley and Dorian Lockett. Photograph by John Carter.

ing *The Patron is Always Right grimace, intended as a smile*" (831–32). Dorian and I chose to button the end of this line, delivered by Hughie, with a large forced smile from Charlie. It was an early signal to the audience that laughter was welcome at this production. When Charlie did make an effort to speak, the inclusion of the narrative description of what he was thinking provided a comic contrast:

NIGHT CLERK. I come originally from Saginaw, Michigan, but I've lived here in the Big Town so long I consider myself a New Yorker now.

HUGHIE. This is a long speech for him and he wonders sadly why he took the trouble to make it. (835)

This approach allowed Charlie to act on the line while Hughie's commentary on the line added an ironic playfulness. At the end of Charlie's inner monologue about his imagined poker game with Arnold Rothstein, O'Neill caps another rare burst of exuberance from Charlie with the following description:

HUGHIE. Beatific vision swoons on the empty pools of the Night Clerk's eyes. He resembles a holy saint, recently elected to Paradise. (848)

Coupled with a large, genuine smile from the blissed-out Charlie, the inclusion of this description created an opportunity for an eloquent and exaggerated moment of triumph, which audiences (and this director) relished.

In our production, we emphasized the humorous possibilities, especially in the first half of the play, to help the audience identify with the characters. When we wanted to do justice to the play's tragic elements, I often chose to omit the speaking of the stage directions in order to avoid irony, in the hope that the audience would become better attuned to the dramatic plight of the characters. The stage directions make the characters more sympathetic and accessible but, spoken at the wrong time, would diminish the dramatic tensions of the play.

## HIGHER STAKES, EXISTENTIAL CRISIS, AND THE GREATER MEANING

As a theatre director, I am always looking for ways to emphasize the drama in any situation. The outcome of an action must be important to a character for it to be important for the audience. Having read all of O'Neill's plays

and produced nearly half of them, I have grown to believe that O'Neill is a master at setting up dramatic conflicts between characters and within characters. My actors commonly complain of whiplash as they try to navigate the hairpin emotional turns required to play some of O'Neill's protagonists. While traditional productions of *Hughie* can be a tour-de-force for actors in the role of Erie Smith—like Jason Robards Jr., Al Pacino, and, more recently, Forrest Whitaker—productions built around a single actor tend to generate little in the way of dramatic tension. My theory is that, in most productions, the role of the night clerk seems so detached and uninterested in what Erie says that Charlie has been reduced to a glorified sounding board and Erie comes off as a blowhard. Erie needs Charlie to at least play the role of a first rung on a ladder if he is going to climb to any dramatic heights. The productions I have seen have planted Charlie behind the desk like a cow mindlessly chewing its cud while Erie buzzes around him like a gnat—apparently a very small gnat as the cow doesn't even feel the need to swat him away. I don't find much drama in this interpretation, and I feel it is a trap that limits the play's stakes. Erie's stories can be very engaging, but they build very little drama. I am sure that any actor playing Charlie, or director bringing a production of *Hughie* to the stage, will create a complete set of justifications for every action of Charlie's; but whatever these well-intended plans may be, they simply don't translate in performance. Charlie's sudden interest in engaging Erie at the end of the play comes out of the blue, and its motivations are completely lost on the audience without the stage directions to give them shape, gravity, and meaning.

The stage directions can raise the stakes: "*It is between 3 and 4 A.M.*" (831). Right from the opening description of the play I saw this as a story of a critical hour in the lives of Erie Smith and Charlie Hughes. The hour is a dark and indistinct time in which to set a play. It is a liminal space between dusk and dawn, which I took as an invitation to explore the possibilities of a *Twilight Zone* world. It is also clear from the beginning that there is a dance of disconnection taking place between Erie and Charlie. Erie talks "at" Charlie and Charlie does his best not to hear Erie. Yet there are moments when a wisp of self-disclosure, vulnerability, and connection come through, despite both characters' impairments:

ERIE. I miss Hughie, I guess. I guess I'd got to like him a lot. Not that I was ever real pals with him, you understand. He didn't run in my class. He didn't know none of the answers. He was just a sucker. (838)

During a short interval created in the beat between these lines, we chose to have Erie completely drop his tough guy act and display a glimpse of

heartache. Charlie and Hughie took notice and slowly turned to Erie as if seeing him in a different light. Conscious that his vulnerability is showing through his hard veneer, Aaron's Erie quickly scrambled to re-establish the aura of an untouchable. Once the façade is back in place, Charlie loses interest and returns to the sounds of the night. We were leaving clues of things to come.

HUGHIE. He makes a move to detach himself from the desk but fails and remains wearily glued to it. (844)

Throughout the script there are indications that Erie Smith does not want to leave the lobby. He instinctively knows that upstairs holds no answers for him, at least no answers he is willing to accept. He seems to understand that his only chance at salvation and safety is in the lobby and at the night clerk's desk, yet what he wants from the night clerk continues to elude him. I came to see Erie's inability to recognize Charlie as a potential gambling partner as a sign of his being in a deep state of grief, able only to look backward, not ahead toward a possible release from his condition. Hughie's speaking of O'Neill's description of Erie's behavior at the desk, when Erie "twirl[s] his key frantically as if it were a fetish which might set him free" (844), testified in performance to Erie's desperate desire to save himself, to will a solution into existence. Clive spoke the words; Aaron acted them out. This simple yet critical physical action helped me identify the play's dramatic unpinning and became a signpost to the hidden tensions in the script. Throughout the play, Erie knows he's in trouble, but doesn't know how to save himself, and time is running out.

After repeatedly failing to make his way upstairs, Erie, I felt, must make one last impassioned attempt to be heard by the night clerk. We had Erie storm back to the desk and frantically redouble his efforts to engage the night clerk. Erie tries to be the ultimate gambler and ladies' man, but to no effect. Eventually, he is spent and gives up. This was the loneliest point in the script in my view. The night clerk's mind is as far away as possible; Hughie sees narrating as pointless; and Erie is left with a sense of resignation that the game is over and he lost. O'Neill describes Erie at this point in this way: "*His eyes fall to the floor. For a while he is too defeated even to twirl his room key. . . . [He] begins talking again but this time it is obviously aloud to himself, without hope of a listener*" (846). After a brief, deeply sad feint at engagement, Erie "*pauses, his false poker face as nakedly forlorn as an organ grinder's monkey's*" (7). At this point in the play, I wanted to focus on the isolation and sense of loss. I chose to not speak these stage directions because I felt it would distract from Erie's tragic trajectory.

I employed this strategy as the play drove toward its dire moments. I thought that interjecting Hughie’s voice into a moment like this would recall the playful earlier moments and detract from the pathos that O’Neill now seemed intent on building. Erie’s own “defeated” speech seemed paramount. “I could tell by Hughie’s face before he went to the hospital, he was through,” says the gambler; “I’ve seen the same look on guys’ faces when they knew they was on the spot, just before guys caught up with them. I went to see him twice in the hospital. . . . ‘Good-by, Old Pal.’ Hughie liked to kid himself he was my pal. [*He adds sadly*] And so he was, at that—even if he was a sucker” (846–47). I referred to this section in the script as “the Descent.” As we have seen, O’Neill called for Erie to stop trying to talk to the night clerk. His monologue is for himself. In our production, I had Aaron walk away from the desk, the location of the only other human being, and go to the far corner of the stage where there was a lone chair. Exhausted from his efforts to forge a connection with Charlie, he sat staring into space, talking to himself, with no hope of salvation. With no need to play the big shot, he starts talking about Hughie tenderly and nakedly. I saw this moment as a portal into a vulnerable Erie Smith, a statement of love for a friend that corrects his tough-guy assertion that “Hughie liked to kid himself he was my pal.” We used this tonal shift to stir Hughie’s desire to re-engage. Hughie had given up on Erie, seeing him drowning in the narcissism of his hard-boiled persona, but this sensitive and open-hearted display moves Hughie, and he starts to listen to and sympathize with Erie. I had Hughie walk back down the stairs and stand



FIG. 2  
 (L to R) Aaron Murphy, Dorian Lockett and Clive Worsley. Photograph by John Carter.

parallel to Charlie, who was still lost in the sounds of the night. Upon hearing this new side of Erie, Hughie moves from indifference to compassion and a desire to help.

With Erie lost to a sense of defeat and Charlie lost in the sounds of the night, the only character active and, ironically, alive is the ghost of Hughie. O'Neill attenuates the sense of hopelessness by rolling out the most dramatic passage of the entire play. Normally inaccessible to the audience, this description, tweaked in performance as follows, is essential to understanding Charlie Hughes and the meaning of the rest of the play:

HUGHIE. A rare and threatening silence has fallen on the city, and the Night Clerk's mind tries to fasten itself to some noise in the night, but his mind cannot make a getaway. The city remains silent, and the night vaguely reminds him of death, and he is vaguely frightened, and now that he remembers, his feet are giving him hell, but that's no excuse not to act as if the Guest is always right. Outside, the spell of abnormal quiet presses suffocatingly upon the street, enters the deserted, dirty lobby. The Night Clerk's mind cowers away from it. He cringes behind the desk, his feet aching like hell. There is only one possible escape. If his mind could only fasten onto something 492 has said. (846–47)

The diversion of the night has vanished. Hughie is the first to recognize the silence. I had Clive split his focus between looking out into the night, seeking to understand the change, and turning back to Charlie and Erie to see if they noticed it. Eventually, he sees a restlessness stirring within the night clerk. An awakening is happening within Charlie. It is not a coincidence but rather the marker of an emotional reaction to the open-hearted suffering of Erie Smith. My interpretation was that the sounds of the night went away for Charlie Hughes, because he could no longer avoid feeling for Erie. His heart was finally touched, and he is moved by a fellow human being's distress. A sense of communal obligation is aroused in Charlie. Action is demanded. The stage directions as spoken by Hughie heighten the imperative that Charlie needs to find a way to bond with Erie Smith. Again, we built a speech from the crucial realizations that O'Neill had provided for Charlie in the stage directions. "I should have paid 492 more attention," says Charlie, "After all, he is company. He is awake and alive. I should use him to help me live through the night. What's he been telling me? Gambling! He said a lot about gambling. That's something I've always wanted to know more about, too. Maybe he's a professional gambler. Like Arnold Rothstein" (847). The audience gets to share this

revelation with Charlie. Not only does he have an obligation to his fellow man, but he realizes that by helping Erie, he may help himself.

But Erie is too far gone and can't recognize Charlie's newfound interest. Resigned, he accepts his fate and slowly walks up the stairs to face his oblivion. Charlie intervenes "*pleadingly*": "Just a minute, Erie, if you don't mind. So, you're an old friend of Arnold Rothstein! Would you mind telling me if it's really true when Arnold Rothstein plays poker, one white chip is—a hundred dollars?" (849). This time Erie has made it to the top of the stairs and has nowhere to go. He is staring at oblivion. With a great cry of pain, he shouts in response: "Say, for Christ's sake, what's it to you—?" (849–50). After a moment of silence, Erie slowly turns to Charlie, "*his face [lit] up with a saving revelation*": "Say, Charlie, why didn't you put me wise before, you was interested in gambling? Hell, I got you all wrong, Pal. . . . Now I see you're a right guy. Shake" (850). O'Neill's description of this moment as a "saving revelation" for Erie led me to see this as a profound and dramatic discovery that informs the importance of these two men finding each other. Erie's huge smile was a crucial moment in our production.

At the coaxing of Erie, the two men agree to do a little gambling on the desk as Erie and Hughie once did. To add a little extra drama and stage magic to the play, I had Erie Smith dig through his pockets to try and find his dice. He discards object after object—but no dice. He grows a little frantic, as if he senses that if he can't produce the dice this newly discovered relationship might falter. As a last symbolic act, Hughie, who had been watching Erie, walks between the two men, takes a quick glance at both of them, and drops a pair of dice on the desk. He smiles and walks off. Erie sees the dice and "realizes" he must have already pulled the dice from his pocket but somehow missed this happy circumstance. The sound of the shop bell rings on the exit of Hughie, as it had for Erie's entrance at the start of the play, and the two men look to the door together for a moment. Then a reflective Erie tells Charlie: "Y'know, it's time I quit carryin' the torch for Hughie. Hell, what's the use? It don't do him no good. He's gone. Like we all gotta go. Him yesterday, me or you tomorrow, and who cares, and what's the difference? It's all in the racket, huh? [*His soul is purged of grief, his confidence restored.*] I shoot two bits" (851).

Traditionally, Erie pulls his dice from his pocket and is ready to play. I wanted to expand this sequence to represent usually neglected aspects of the play. Erie searching for the dice and pulling everything out of his pockets but the kitchen sink—vaudeville notes and all—allows the audience a brief reminder of the sense of play that O'Neill can manifest while also emphasizing, as usual, O'Neill's obsession with fate and consequence, here exemplified



in the high stakes that attend the search for the dice. With O'Neill, you can't have enough desperation, even if it seems to be over a little thing. Finally, having the ghost of Hughie intercede to solve the problem adds a moment of stage magic that pulls together the threads of this interpretation of the play. Dropping the dice on the desk is Hughie making peace with the place and these two men. With his work done, Hughie can move on to join the sounds of the night, in the big night of nights.

## UNLOCKING THE THEATRICAL POSSIBILITIES

Incorporating the stage directions into the action of *Hughie* opened up magical and emotional layers and created new design possibilities. Not only did a third character get to hover around the stage, directly addressing the audience in ways that the other two characters could not, but the rich soundscape that O'Neill describes in the stage directions could be employed to great storytelling effect. Instead of settling for incidental and atmospheric effects, sound designer Rob Evans intricately wove sound into the fabric of the play in order to accent Charlie's internal journey. The sounds of the night became an unseen character that interacted with Charlie throughout the play. This provided many opportunities for me as a director to punctuate moments and to add humor to the play. For example, when Charlie's mind escapes the confines of the lobby to go have a conversation with the doctor on the ambulance, Rob added the sound of a roaring siren to signal to the audience that Charlie's mind has left the building. When Charlie learns that the attending nurse would probably not be pretty, and his fantasy has been broken, the wailing siren comically dissipates and Charlie glumly acknowledges that he has to get back to the hotel. In the context provided by the stage directions, Charlie's relationship to the sounds of the night become some of the most theatrically fertile ground in the play.

Set design, too, benefited from the production's commitment to triangulation. Designer Carlos Aceves worked creatively with my interpretation of *Hughie* as a story about loneliness and the importance of the connection between human beings; this production was less about a specific place (and time) and more about an emotional landscape. With this in mind, Carlos and I abandoned the notion of a literal hotel lobby and focused on a symbolic place where the emotional and spiritual needs of the characters met and interacted. While the set still suggested a lobby, we didn't sweat the dingy details. Rather, we chose to make the walls and steps of the set black with swirling white lines reminiscent of the disorienting movement of the

opening credits of *The Twilight Zone*. The wall that represented the bank of cubbyholes for multiple room keys was reduced to a single hook and a single hanging key. This hotel had only one guest and the set reflected it.

The two elements on the stage that have meaning for Erie are the desk where he instinctively knows his only salvation lies and the stairs that lead to some unknown danger. Our steps were not realistic. They were more like a jumbled stack of ascending platforms that went up toward an unknown and terrifying oblivion. We sought symbolically to support Erie's instinct that only isolation, defeat, and death were waiting for him up there, as it had awaited Don Parritt and other characters whom I have mentioned. At the top of the steps, we did not provide a doorway, just a dead-end. Because the Tao House shows were performed in O'Neill's old barn, we were able to open a hay door that looms over the stage. During evening performances, the open door provided a large window onto a black sky at the top of the stairs; this heightened the sense of oblivion for Erie at the play's climax. The set was designed to match Erie's feelings of futility and fear. Only the desk of the night clerk was realistically rendered, as it represents the one place Erie and Charlie could connect and play the game that would give each other meaning.

## CONCLUSION

*Hughie's* stage directions unlock a world of rich performance possibilities. Incorporating these essentially literary features into the dramatic dialogue, I believe, creates the purest reflection of what the playwright was thinking as he wrote *Hughie*, trapped by his view of himself as a playwright yet yearning to have the complete control of a novelist. Our hybrid production honors O'Neill's instincts and his ambitions, while demonstrating that O'Neill could be a comic as well as a dramatic writer. Charlie Hughes becomes a full player in the drama, O'Neill's ironic and playful side is free to be expressed, and the play becomes a dramatic story about a relationship with the affirming message that we need each other. Life had taught Eugene O'Neill that there is no escape from pain and disappointment, but in *Hughie*, he seemed to add a note of hope and instruction: the game of life is better if we play it together.

ERIC FRAISHER HAYES is the artistic director for the Eugene O'Neill Foundation, Tao House. He has directed nearly two dozen O'Neill titles ranging from the notable *The Iceman Cometh* and *Desire Under the Elms* to the obscure *All God's Chillin Got Wings* and *Days Without End*. Last October his innovative production of *Hughie* was

featured at the Eugene O'Neill International Festival of Theatre in New Ross, Ireland. In fall 2019, Eric will direct *Long Day's Journey Into Night* for the twentieth annual Eugene O'Neill Festival in Danville, California. The production will then tour Ireland. As a leading scholar/practitioner of the plays of Eugene O'Neill, he has given presentations at the American Literature Association Annual Conference, the Comparative Drama Conference, Oregon Shakespeare Festival, A Noise Within Theatre (Pasadena), and at the International Eugene O'Neill Conference in Galway, Ireland. Eric holds an MFA in acting from the Theatre School at DePaul University and is a proud member of AEA.

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## NOTES

1. Stage directions that are not spoken in our production are set italic, per the Library of America edition (ed. Travis Bogard [3 vols., 1988]), but also to distinguish them from spoken passages. Stage directions converted in performance to spoken passages are set roman in order to emphasize their status as spoken elements. The names of speakers of stage directions and those of dialogue are recorded in conventional form as a convenience to the reader.
2. For the novelistic O'Neill, see Normand Berlin, "O'Neill the 'Novelist,'" *Modern Drama* 34 (1991): 49–58; Kurt Eisen, *The Inner Strength of Opposites* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1994), 9–12, 115; and Robert M. Dowling, *Eugene O'Neill: A Life in Four Acts* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2014), e.g., 308–10.
3. I have retained O'Neill's charactonym "Night Clerk" in introductions to passages that were spoken in our production, whether or not these passages are marked for speech in O'Neill's text. The addition of a third and onomastically similar character prompts me to clarify that the designation pertains to the current clerk, Charlie Hughes, not to his predecessor Hughie.