



UNLIKELY TEMPLE:
BUILDING A THEATER
AT TAO HOUSE

.....
Eric Fraisher Hayes

ABSTRACT

During the height of his popularity in the 1920s, Eugene O'Neill imagined "a theatre returned to its highest and sole significant function as a Temple where the religion of poetic interpretation and symbolic celebration of life is communicated to human beings." As the artistic director of the Eugene O'Neill Foundation, I have labored for the better part of a decade to establish O'Neill's "temple" with productions at the playwright's former home, Tao House, in Danville, California. Directing *Chris Christophersen*, *The Iceman Cometh*, *Desire Under the Elms*, *The Emperor Jones*, *A Touch of the Poet*, *Hughie*, and *Long Day's Journey Into Night* in Tao House's Old Barn has been a unique artistic and spiritual experience. My goal has been to build reverence for the sacred experience of seeing O'Neill's plays a stone's throw from where he created some of his best work.

KEYWORDS: Eugene O'Neill, Tao House, Old Barn, productions, directing

I mean a theatre returned to its highest and sole significant function as a Temple where the religion of poetic interpretation and symbolic celebration of life is communicated to human beings, starved in spirit by their soul-stifling struggle to exist

Eugene O'Neill, "A Dramatist's Notebook" (1933)

During the height of his popularity in the 1920s, Eugene O'Neill dreamed of a theater committed to the realities of the human experience as he saw them. With society's burgeoning emphasis on psychology, religion seemed to be on the wane, and O'Neill saw the potential for a brave new theater that dared to tell the truth about humanity. This new theater could provide a vision for living in a "post-God" world: what had been lost in the church could be found in the theater. Still craving the sacred, O'Neill envisioned theater as the temple of the future. In predictable and ironic fashion, God outlasted O'Neill, and the playwright's aspiration to build a temple through theater never materialized.

I have labored for the better part of a decade to establish O'Neill's "temple" at Tao House, the playwright's former Danville, California, home on what is now the Eugene O'Neill National Historic Site. Since 2013 I have directed fully staged productions of O'Neill's plays at the Old Barn at Tao House during the Eugene O'Neill Festival, held annually in September under the auspices of the Eugene O'Neill Foundation. My directing journey at Tao House has carried me through productions of *Chris Christophersen*, *The Iceman Cometh*, *Desire Under the Elms*, *The Emperor Jones*, *A Touch of the Poet*, *Hughie*, and *Long Day's Journey Into Night*.

I was not the first to recognize the power of Tao House; others worked to save the property, and the United States government thought the site important enough to formally recognize its national significance. Additionally, the barn hosted many performances in the years before my tenure. Previous performances were the equivalent of the circus coming to town. Generally, outside companies were contracted to present an O'Neill or O'Neill-related play. Productions featured minimal sets and lighting, and three performances constituted a "long run." I have worked to honor the magic of O'Neill's plays with a fully functional theater, where productions enjoy multi-week runs. My goal has been to build reverence for the sacred experience of seeing O'Neill's plays performed at Tao House.

O'Neill wrote his Tao House plays between 1937 and 1944, the seven years when he and his third wife, Carlotta Monterey, lived on site. I recently

reflected on the fact that I have directed and produced O'Neill's plays in the Old Barn for roughly the same span of time. During my tenure at Tao House, I have grown to see the experience of bringing his plays to life in his barn, within sight of his house, as magical. Directing at Tao House, a stone's throw from where O'Neill created some of his best work, has been a unique artistic and spiritual experience.

BURNING THE MIDNIGHT OIL: A MOMENT OF INSPIRATION

During my early years with the Eugene O'Neill Foundation, I was indifferent to whether O'Neill's plays were performed at Tao House or other local venues. I was comfortable producing his plays a few miles away in downtown Danville, where, as it happens, I have continued to direct staged readings of O'Neill's work. Increased seating capacity and greater accessibility made sense to me. I ascribed to the motto "bring O'Neill down off the mountain."

But in 2012 my view changed. That September's festival, we imported a production of *A Moon from the Misbegotten*, and I volunteered to sell concessions and assist with house management for the performances at the Old Barn. Not having the pressure and distraction of the director's fallacy (that I needed to concentrate all my psychic energy into holding the performance together), I was free to think "outside the barn." During the performances I was stationed outside in the small field between the Old Barn and Tao House. Free of the need to "will" the play to success and standing in the dark outside the glow of the performance in the barn, I started to muse about the significance of this historic site and the reason it was still standing so many years after the O'Neills left it. I listened to the words Eugene O'Neill wrote while I stared at the darkened house where he wrote them. My mind traveled from the performance back to the early 1940s, and I imagined Eugene O'Neill up late in his study writing the play. In the space provided by the darkness of night, between the illuminated barn and my imagined images of O'Neill industriously scratching out the words from his heart, I felt a new and profound connection among the plays, the Old Barn, and Tao House. I asked National Park Service Ranger Tad Shay, who was standing outside the barn with me, if he would consider going over to the dark house and turning on the light in O'Neill's second-floor study, which looked down at the barn radiating with the spirit of his imagination. Tad readily agreed; moments later, O'Neill was once again burning the midnight oil. Since that evening in 2012 I have felt a connection to the magic of performing O'Neill's words a mere two hundred feet from where they were written. The light of O'Neill's study has been on during every performance, and audiences have been encouraged to



FIG. 1
The light in O'Neill's study, Tao House, Danville, California. Photograph by Eric Fraisher Hayes.

imagine the synergy between the light of the study and the light of O'Neill's imagination as he wrote the plays being brought to life in his barn.

THEATER IN THE ROUGH

The Old Barn at Tao House is a wooden-slat 40×50-foot structure that dates to the 1890s. It was standing when the O'Neills bought the property in 1936. Two rows of four tall posts run east to west, effectively dividing the barn into three roughly equal spaces. Prior to 2013 the general configuration was to have the audience in the center section facing a performance taking place in the southern third of the barn, proscenium style. I was never satisfied with this arrangement, as the southern third of the barn has a lower ceiling than

the center third, and one of the rows of four posts stood directly between the audience and the performance. In 2013 the National Park Service purchased risers to enhance the play-going experience. Aware of the date and time the risers were to be delivered, I showed up at the barn that morning to lend a hand to the NPS rangers. To my surprise, when it came time to construct the risers, the rangers turned to me en masse and asked, "How do you want to set these up?" I saw a chance to make a change. I reimagined the barn as a black box theater like those from my storefront acting days in Chicago. Performances in the barn would now take place in the center section with the audience sitting on two sides, to the south and west. Performing in the center section presented fewer obstructed views, and the high ceilings made erecting sets possible for the first time.

The playing space is roughly 18 × 22 feet and offers the audience an intimate experience, with no seat more than 20 feet from the stage. I have grown to think of the corner of the stage nearest the gap between the two sections of seats as "the point." If there is a primary entrance, like the door to Harry Hope's saloon in *The Iceman Cometh*, or a moment when I want to create a more intimate relationship between a character and the audience, it is often at the "point." This spot is the downstage center tip of what is essentially a diamond-shaped thrust stage. Having an actor stand at the point not only allows the audience to join the character in seeing the "beyond" the character is seeing, but regularly serves as the place where a character steps out of the action of the play to speak his or her inner truth.

Due to Tao House's status as a National Historic Site, the barn is a protected structure. As our sets have become more elaborate, we have gotten more creative about how to construct them, so they do not negatively affect the barn. We can't drill holes or nail into the structure, so each set must support its own weight. If any part of the set needs to be fixed to a structural part of the barn, we use metal claps or devise creative methods to accomplish this, so it leaves no marks. Carlos Aceves, who has designed the sets over the past five years, has become an expert at this.

The floor of the Old Barn is paved with some form of grayish asphalt composite that has collected an abundance of oily stains. When I tried to scrub away some of these stains, I felt I was making things worse. With my first play in the barn, I tried to ignore the floor. I was directing a play in a barn in the middle of a field and had other fish to fry. By the second year's *The Iceman Cometh*, I was determined not to have the audience looking at what appeared to be a glorified garage floor. The solution came from the script, as, at one point in the stage directions, Joe Mott spreads sawdust on the bar-room floor to soak up lost swill. We covered the floor with sawdust for the

entire play. With *The Emperor Jones*, mulch became the jungle floor. I always hoped the audience would not question why there was mulch on the floor of the palace in scene 1. All other scenes were in the jungle and it worked fine. *Hughie* and *Long Day's Journey Into Night* were served by laying down vinyl flooring to look like old wooden floor boards, and we added area rugs to provide the appropriate run-down look that both plays needed.

Producing in a barn, we are constantly reminded of our relationship with our environment. The barn is surrounded by thirteen acres of orchards and grazing land. Additionally, the Tao House property backs up against miles and miles of the rolling hills of the Las Trampas Wilderness. On occasion, the nearby pastures feature lowing cattle. At night, in the dark, some of the louder bovine contributions to the pastoral conversation suggest dinosaurs wailing at the approach of some carnivorous danger. These sounds are “unearthly” and a little disturbing but have the effect of putting us on a heightened sense of alert, as does the sound of the howling coyotes. As in a good horror film, you hear something but can't see it, which leaves the imagination to run wild.

The nearby reservoir provides part of the soundtrack of each evening performance. Cackling flocks of geese have occasionally provided a natural laugh track for our performances. Usually, this avian cacophony occurs early in an evening performance, highlighting lighter moments; this adds to the charm of seeing theater in a remote and wild setting. As both the evening and the drama drive toward deeper and darker places, chirping crickets enhance the journey into the interior lives of the characters in an authentic and palpable way. One of the downsides of performing in the Old Barn is that airplanes are occasionally diverted over it. I cringe every time a plane flies over us, especially during important expository or highly dramatic moments when an actor nails something exactly as I hoped, but the audience risks missing it.

The barn has no doors; this extends our space. These gaping open spaces are primarily behind the audience on the west side of the barn. On a physical level, this can be a challenge, as the late-afternoon sun can bear down harshly on the stage and audience, or a cold evening breeze can blow down from the nearby hills. But theatrically, these large openings help the actors and the audience more viscerally connect to the “beyond” of each play. Whether they are playing Mary Tyrone longing for the return of the fog in *Long Day's Journey Into Night* or the drunks of *The Iceman Cometh* petrified at the prospect of what lies outside the door of Harry Hope's saloon, the actors at these moments have a heightened awareness of something beyond the circumstances of the moment on which to concentrate their energies. These moments are made more palpable by the audience's awareness of the space

outside the barn. The fluid relationship between the barn performances and the outdoors enhances the experience of the “beyond” that O’Neill’s characters often long for or fear.

Despite the popular perception of O’Neill as a globetrotting city slicker, many of his plays seem at home in an old barn surrounded by open wilderness. Besides O’Neill’s numerous plays set on a farm, many of his works touch on the lives of people on the periphery of society. O’Neill’s time-ravaged barn fits the external as well as the internal journeys of these characters. Over my seven years, I have grown to relish the challenges of directing in these rustic environs: I see them as opportunities. I believe O’Neill would view our struggle to meet these challenges as a chance to glimpse the creative best within ourselves. I am not sure he would like anything we produce, but I hope he would applaud our effort. Nothing could live up to his visions, but I think he would appreciate the act of seeking and the fragments of truth found along the way.

CHRIS CHRISTOPHERSEN (2013)

Chris Christophersen was the first full production I directed at Tao House. The rationale for what I understood to be the first full production of the play in over ninety years was its connection to its better-known sister play, “*Anna Christie*,” which George McGuire directed for the O’Neill Festival earlier in the 2013 season. I was fascinated at the prospect of exploring two vastly different versions of the story of the reuniting of the daughter Anna with her sailor father, Chris. Written within a couple years of each other, the two plays evidence sensibilities that feel a century apart. In production, my *Chris Christophersen* played like a nineteenth-century melodrama, and McGuire’s “*Anna Christie*” played like a twentieth-century psychological drama. Adding to the intrigue of our project was the use of the same ten actors to tell both versions of the story. In hindsight, I now recognize the challenge this presented for actor John Hale, who played father Chris Christophersen in both plays. While his character and his lines remain remarkably similar in both versions of the story, the context and cues for his lines radically changed when O’Neill rewrote and retitled *Chris Christophersen*. Like a character in Christopher Durang’s *The Actor’s Nightmare*, John must have been frequently asking himself which play he was in.

The set for *Chris Christophersen* was rudimentary, comprising platforms, simple set pieces, and furniture. The dive bar setting at the top of the play as well as the humble interior of Chris’s barge were well served by the worn

and wooden barn. The set was of secondary importance, as I felt I needed to focus on the worldview differences between *Chris Christophersen* and “*Anna Christie*.” *Chris Christophersen* is a funnier play, and I wanted to bring that out. The role of Captain Jessup is a true lost gem, and actor Tom Reilly played it to the hilt. There was one particularly theatrical challenge in the script: a shipwreck. How to represent *that* in a barn? *Chris Christophersen*, being melodramatic, calls for Chris’s barge to collide with the Londonderry, a steamship. (How else does a nice young woman meet a man in the nineteenth century!) The scene is high drama, straight out of the spectacular tradition of melodrama: “Anna, they are going to hit us! Hold on!” and so on Besides building tension through the sound of the steamship’s warning signals and the actors’ frantic behavior, we set up a light twelve feet off the ground outside the barn, and, at the moment of collision, we blasted the light through the wooden slats of the barn to powerful effect. With the sound of a crash, the lights went to black: intermission. This cliffhanger moment was the first time I felt we had spirited our audience away from their awareness of sitting in a barn in a field.

THE ICEMAN COMETH (2014)

For *The Iceman Cometh*, the first of the Tao House plays I directed on site, we had our first full set. The rustic barn functioned well as Harry Hope’s shambling saloon. The set designer, Paul Collins, who also played the bartender Rocky, constructed walls on the upstage right side of the set on the north side of the barn. In this production and many since, the large wooden wall on the east side of the barn served as a visual anchor for the set. We built the first of our many staircases for this production. Many O’Neill scripts call for stairs, and I often find they serve as a potent symbol of danger in his plays.¹

The set had a large L-shaped bar and shelves with the beginning of what would become our extensive collection of booze bottles. It was while working on this play that I learned what a schooner was and just how heavy a box with twenty of them could be; “small beer” or “short beer” they are not! The play not only calls for an army of actors but also for a set that has six or seven tables for the actors to plant themselves behind, around, and perhaps on occasion under. Helping the audience track who was saying what on the small and crowded stage was daunting. I grew to think of this challenge as a glorified game of Whack-a-Mole. I was constantly looking for reasons to justify one character standing up while another would flop down or pass out. It was like a gestalt game of coming into and falling out of consciousness for the drunks of *Iceman*. Exceptional kudos are due to



FIG. 2

The stage at the Old Barn, Tao House; Hickey (Aaron Murphy) and the ensemble in *The Iceman Cometh*. Photograph by John Carter.

Durand Garcia, who played Hugo. Many readers will be familiar with this role, but I suspect few have contemplated the challenge of playing it. Hugo spends stretches of thirty to forty minutes passed out with his head on a table or the bar and then, out of nowhere, comes to, rises, and sings his anthem before passing out again. Amazingly, Durand never missed a cue, even though his lines were often non-sequiturs. Furthermore, with his head down and his eyes closed, Durand had no visual cues to aid him. This was a tour-de-force of concentration, probably lost to the audience but not to the director.

DESIRE UNDER THE ELMS (2015)

Our barn was an appropriate setting for the farmhouse in *Desire Under the Elms*. It was not difficult for the audience to imagine Ephraim Cabot returning home after a night of sleeping among the animals. The opportunity to share an added playfulness with the audience was exemplified by the singing exit of the two brothers near the end of act 1. After thumbing their noses at the “old man,” the brothers skipped off “down the road” to seek their fortune in the gold fields of California, singing “Oh, Susanna” at the top of

their lungs. At Tao House, with acres of open space around the Old Barn, the actors could keep singing and laughing at the expense of their father long after their exit. The sound experience at Tao House is unlike that of a traditional theater. While we can't control the ambient sounds, we can play with the use of sound in ways that a traditional theater cannot. The literalness of the barn allows the audience to enjoy a metatheatrical experience. When the characters leave the building, the audience remains aware of the actors' presence outside the barn, making noise. Not only is the play the show, but the putting on of a play is part of the show as well. Our audiences, who lean toward the sophisticated, tend to enjoy their awareness of this duality during a performance at Tao House.

Desire Under the Elms represented our first attempt at using an expressionistic scenic element to bring the spirit of the play to life. Using a bendable wire mesh, Carlos Aceves constructed fourteen-foot-tall trees whose branches hung over the set from stage right and stage left. These trees were greatly enhanced by illumination from the base, the inspiration of lighting tech Jeff Beyer. The colors of the trees changed in concert with the highly volatile emotions of the play. This experiment with lighting demonstrated to me that expressionistic elements in barn productions were a possibility. The concreteness of the barn setting had often seemed a serious obstacle to using expressionism, but this notion was slowly dissipating for me. With the following season's *The Emperor Jones*, I took the plunge and fully embraced the expressionistic possibilities.

THE EMPEROR JONES (2016)

The Emperor Jones is the most challenging play we have produced at Tao House. For years the play had intrigued me, but I thought the limitations of the Old Barn at Tao House were too great. The play calls for six expressionistic scenes seen through the fever-dream of Brutus Jones. As with all our plays, necessity was truly the mother of invention, and a healthy dose of imagination was required. What we do not have in cash, we need to make up for in creativity. The set consisted of a raised platform upstage center and six large brown moveable columns that could double as pillars of a palace and a forest of tree trunks. The floor was covered with sixty cubic yards of our handy brown mulch. Keying in on the "formless fears" described by O'Neill's stage directions in scene 2, I decided to use these shadow figures to facilitate our journey through the series of terrifying visions that Jones encounters as he descends deeper and deeper into both the forest and his mind. Dressed in

black from head to toe, these faceless figures fluidly morphed from scene to scene, providing the energy and physical forms of the fear and oppression that Jones felt. Through extensive movement work with the choreographer, Tom Segal, our ensemble of fears went from quivering, shapeless forms staying low to the ground in scene 2 to the upright, anxiety-provoking human forms that Jones imagined in each scene during his descent into madness.

The Tao House grounds provided a unique opportunity to sonically emphasize Jones's impending doom. Late in scene 1 the script calls for the start of the distant drumming that continues throughout the play, coming ever closer. With the open-air nature of the Tao House performances, we were able to have our percussionist start her drumming hundreds of yards from the barn and gradually move closer to the barn and the audience. We set up a series of chairs at even intervals, so the drummer had a sense of where to end up at the completion of each scene. For the play's climax we surrounded the barn with drummers, each a matter of feet from the audience. This approach enabled us to build the intensity of Jones's fear of the pursuing war party as well as the sound of his racing heart.

A TOUCH OF THE POET (2017)

O'Neill's barn served as an appropriate backdrop once again when I directed *A Touch of the Poet*. The weather-beaten and time-worn space enhanced Con Melody's tavern and his crumbling sense of importance.

For the set I requested an extensive landing to serve as an important playing space for Con and his daughter, Sara. Stairs were particularly important to my thinking about Con and Sara. I blocked the show so that only Sara went up and down the stairs leading to the upper floor. Simon Harford's room was upstairs, and my goal was to make a physical association between Sara's ambition to rise in the world and her ascent of the stairs to the upper floor. The landing was also an important launch point for Con. I wanted to symbolically show Con's descent to commoner status at the end of the play by having him make his last impassioned speech from the landing and then physically descend as he left to take his place amongst the rabble at the bar.

The play's gunshot in the stable was approximated by having an actor fire a blank cartridge from a pistol into the night sky from behind the adjacent chicken coop. Having Con leave the performance space and hearing the firing gun moments later just outside the barn added an authenticity to the experience. The offstage scuffle in which Con's barflies rough up the lawyer

Gadsby benefited by the series of hoots and hollers that could be heard outside the barn as it would have been heard outside a tavern. Again, the audience was treated to the playful potential that performance in the Old Barn at Tao House provides.

HUGHIE (2018)

The barn's rustic environment was again an asset when we presented the tale of a late night in a third-rate hotel, but even more important to our production of *Hughie* was the barn's openness.² The darkness of night, always in view of the actors and audience, was crucial to our efforts to flesh out the character of the night clerk, Charlie Hughes. The imagined life of the city that Charlie, and the audience, envisioned beyond the lobby of the hotel was made more palpable by the deeper connection to the night afforded by the openness of the Old Barn. For evening performances, we opened a large hay door high up on the east wall of the set. At key moments, the large patch of night sky looming above the set emphasized the night that Charlie longed to join, or, at the climax, served to reinforce the sense of oblivion that Erie Smith feared. The open hay door revealed the night sky as a potent symbol according to the moment and the need.

Hughie's short performance length inspired me to augment the evening with a dramatic presentation of O'Neill's poetic tribute "The Last Will and Testament of Silverdene Emblem O'Neill." The grave of the O'Neills' beloved Dalmatian Silverdene Emblem O'Neill, or Blemie, is behind the Old Barn and is a point of interest to most visitors to Tao House. When I learned that Blemie was a proposed title for a short play that O'Neill intended to write and that it was to have a thematic link to *Hughie*, I grew to think of O'Neill's memorial as a fragment of an unfinished play, and I decided to put it on its feet, all four of them. Although we found the message of O'Neill's piece—that a dog loves its master as much as a master loves his dog—played well everywhere, it seemed particularly germane at Tao House, where both Eugene O'Neill and Blemie spent their last years.

LONG DAY'S JOURNEY INTO NIGHT (2019)

Directing *Long Day's Journey Into Night* at Tao House was when play and place really came together for me. For the first time I leaned into O'Neill's biography instead of away from it. I have often felt that O'Neill's biography

tends to eclipse his plays. But in this case I could not ignore the history of Tao House and O'Neill's life-long quest to make peace with his family and himself. As the story goes, Tao House enabled Eugene O'Neill to write the plays he needed to write. It has often fascinated me that many of those plays feature the recurring figure of Eugene O'Neill's brother, Jamie. Whether as Jamie Tyrone in *Long Day's Journey* or Jim Tyrone in *A Moon for the Misbegotten* or the Jamie-like figures of Erie Smith in *Hughie* or even Theodore Hickey, king of the drunks, in *The Iceman Cometh*, an embodiment of older brother Jamie continually surfaces in O'Neill's Tao House writing. The character of Jamie is clearly carrying a burden throughout *Long Day's Journey*, and I locked into the speech in act 2, in which Mary tells James that she blames the death of their baby on Jamie, whom she has never forgiven. This story is grounded in O'Neill family history, and I felt it was a pivot that informed not only the play but Eugene O'Neill's need to write it. In blocking the play I made sure that Mary never touched Jamie and that whenever she and Jamie were onstage at the same time, Jamie would banish himself from the family table, which sat centrally on the set, and find his "place" somewhere on the periphery of the stage. We tried to emphasize that Jamie was an outsider in his own family.

Additionally, I emphasized the status of young Edmund, the Eugene O'Neill figure, as an aspiring writer. The play's dialogue references Edmund's writing, but the script does not call for any demonstration of it. In one corner of the stage I created an area that was clearly Edmund's space. Along with his books, we had a writing desk with a journal on it. Throughout the performance Edmund would go to his corner and sit and write at his desk. In the climactic act 4, when Edmund reveals his deepest feelings to his father, I directed actor Ben Elie to go to Edmund's journal and share his feelings as if they were excerpts from a diary that would someday find their way into a play. This instance of metatheater was inspired by my drive to connect Eugene O'Neill the writer at Tao House to Edmund the writer in *Long Day's Journey Into Night*.

The rundown barn environment reinforced Mary Tyrone's constant admonishment that the space they lived in was not a "home." The dilapidated physical space was effective, but the real power of the location came from its proximity to the house where the play was written. Following *Long Day's Journey* with a production of *A Moon for the Misbegotten* would be a fascinating continuation of the exploration of the synergy between the play and the place.

THINGS THAT GO BUMP IN THE NIGHT

Over the years, we have had a good many uninvited guests at our rehearsals and performances. These visits usually come during evening rehearsals. The densely packed audiences during performances tend to keep most critters away from the barn, although sometimes we find scatological reminders of their presence the next day. I choose not to think of these little animal “forget-me-nots” as commentary on our work but do musingly wonder if the words “critter” and “critic” share the same root. Occasionally, during a performance a bat will dart into the barn, sweeping through one large open door only to find an exit through another. But rehearsals seem to be an entirely different affair. In the twilight we often have small families of black-tail deer prance and graze outside the barn. As it gets dark we hear coyotes howling to each other just out of our sight. Recently one of these coyotes has been sniffing around the picnic area adjacent to the barn in late afternoon. Most rehearsals have lone crickets hopping out from under the risers and onto our stage. This past August we found that a rattlesnake had joined us in the barn to watch a rehearsal. It was the first time I had seen a rattlesnake in the barn, but they have periodically appeared in the surrounding areas. I released the actors a few minutes early; by the next morning our reptilian critic had returned to the wild. Several years ago I had a lighting tech working late after rehearsal. He claimed that he looked outside the barn and saw a mountain lion staring back at him. The tech was by himself, so I can’t confirm the story, but I did notice that he no longer worked late nights at the barn after reporting this.

A HARDY CROWD

There are distinct advantages and disadvantages to producing a play at the Old Barn. The Eugene O’Neill National Historic Site is at the top of a hilly private road. The access is heavily restricted, and patrons must take shuttles to the play’s site. While this limits the number of patrons, the audience that does make it to Tao House is there, for the most part, because they want to be there—always a good sign for any theater maker. Additionally, Tao House is open prior to performances so patrons can get a sense of the man behind the playwright as well as the place where he crafted his art. By the time the audience takes their seats in the barn for the performance, they are ready to see a show. Caught up in the spiritual power of the place and its rustic charm,

audiences are very forgiving when we experience technical difficulties. In 2015, when I was directing *Desire Under the Elms*, we had a power problem on the day we were set to open. The now infamous Pacific Gas and Electric came out and worked on the problem the hour prior to curtain. There was a concern that the electrical system was overloaded and that the barn was not sufficiently grounded. Although we were told a little before show time that we were probably okay to run our electrical equipment, my technician was not comfortable with the situation and advised me to forgo the stage lighting that night. As a director with a vision that I had crafted for months, this was understandably disappointing, but as the adage tells us (and I find it to be true), “the show must go on.” I stepped out in front of the opening night audience and explained that, due to some difficulties, we would be simply throwing the house lights up and down for tonight’s show. I encouraged the audience to think of this as Theater Camp! I encouraged them to embrace being out in the wild, away from technology. “Onward,” I exalted, “Here we go!” To my surprise, my little speech garnered applause. Patrons primed to see O’Neill performed in this special place were quick to forgive any rough edges in their experience, whether due to technical limitations, battling the weather, or visiting critters. The power of this unique place and the authenticity of the experience carries the day.

GROWTH OF A FESTIVAL

In addition to producing a play at the Old Barn each fall, the Eugene O’Neill Foundation regularly produces work in downtown Danville, often pairing O’Neill’s plays with the works of other great American playwrights. By including productions of plays by the likes of Tennessee Williams, Arthur Miller, and Edward Albee, the Eugene O’Neill Festival has morphed from a celebration of O’Neill into a celebration of the rich legacy of America’s tragic dramatists. The model of producing two thematically linked dramas with supporting events such as staged readings, concerts, and lectures has resulted in the growth of the Eugene O’Neill Festival from a weekend event to a month-long festival with the O’Neill play at Tao House functioning as the centerpiece. I informally think of it as an assemblage of “Eugene O’Neill and Friends.”

MAGIC OF THE PLACE REVISITED

Eugene O'Neill's yearning for a theater as "temple" was lofty if, considering his implicit positioning of himself as a prophet, a bit self-serving and self-aggrandizing. Yet I admire his quest for a place for truth. It is a goal for which many theater makers aspire. My seven years of directing at Tao House have fostered in me a hands-on appreciation for O'Neill's creativity and the creativity he has inspired in others.

The house on the O'Neills' property was saved because O'Neill wrote some of his greatest plays there. The Old Barn was saved primarily because it was sitting on the property when Eugene O'Neill wrote his great plays. The barn just happened to be at the right place at the right time. I liken this to being in the background of a famous moment in history when the moment is recorded. Yet its ancillary status has perhaps allowed the Old Barn to continue to flourish as a place of living, breathing creativity. Tao House itself is a national treasure. The study where Eugene O'Neill created his final and most notable plays is a shrine that shines like a beacon, illuminating the American theater landscape. O'Neill's barn is a little wooden temple where on performance evenings the glowing light of his plays and the glow of the light in his study burn together and something magical happens.

ERIC FRAISHER HAYES is the artistic director of the Eugene O'Neill Foundation, Tao House. During his thirteen-year tenure, the Eugene O'Neill Foundation has become the leading producer of O'Neill in the United States. Eric has directed more than half of O'Neill's fifty-one-play canon, ranging from the well-known *Long Day's Journey Into Night*, *Desire Under the Elms*, and *The Iceman Cometh* to the rarely produced *All God's Chillun Got Wings*, *Chris Christophersen*, and *Days Without End*. His *Hughie* and *Long Day's Journey* were featured at the Eugene O'Neill International Festival of Theater in New Ross, Ireland, in 2018 and 2019, respectively.

.....
NOTES

1. See my "An Argument for the Third Voice: Reimagining Eugene O'Neill's *Hughie*," *Eugene O'Neill Review* 30, no. 1 (2019): 72.
2. For a fuller account of this production, see Hayes, "Argument," *passim*.