

# PANDEMIC PIVOT: THE BIRTH OF TAO HOUSE FILMS

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## ABSTRACT

Prior to the pandemic, the magic of live performance at Tao House had been discovered. There has been a growing appreciation for the unique experience of producing O'Neill's plays where he created them. The pandemic demanded a dramatic reimaging of what the combination of play and place meant. As with many innovations, necessity demanded new thinking. Problems arose and solutions were needed to meet the moment. A new approach to celebrating the plays of Eugene O'Neill and their connection to Tao House was discovered. Filming the plays not only gave us a way to remain creative and productive, thus keeping the spirit of O'Neill alive, but it also established a new breadth of audience. As much as we hope for and look toward a COVID-free future, the Eugene O'Neill Foundation now looks toward a future of hybrid programming—a combination of live and filmed productions.

**KEYWORDS:** Eugene O'Neill, Tao House, directing, pandemic, filming

In early 2020 I completed an article on my previous seven years directing plays at Tao House, which would appear in the Fall 2021 issue of this journal.

I had come to fully embrace the unique experience of performing Eugene O'Neill's plays in his barn next to the house proper. I recognized the special synergy between the light of creativity possible in the barn and the literary beacon in O'Neill's study at Tao House.

Then the world went dark.

Our January 2020 live production of three of O'Neill's early one-acts was pushed back to April 2020 in the short-lived hope that COVID would blow over in a matter of weeks. Wishful thinking. By March the production was nixed altogether. In the spring of 2020 we were at a standstill, like most of the arts world. I started to wonder what to do next. As an artist, I feel compelled to find ways to create. The prospect of a world where audiences could not gather—where artists could not gather—was devastating. That spring many theater-makers turned to Zoom to put on plays. It was hard to watch. If there was ever an indicting demonstration that the acting community is underpaid, it was the glimpse into the living circumstances of the many actors viewed through Zoom theater in the early days of the pandemic. I learned more about kitchen walls and cramped apartments than I ever wanted to know (or care to remember).

For me, Zoom seemed to heighten the sense of disconnection we were all feeling. The heart of live theater is a sense of connection, actor to actor, actor to audience, audience to audience. I felt this wasn't happening over Zoom. COVID forced us to revisit the old improv adage, "yes and. . ." Creating in this new era would require reimagining storytelling with previously untemplated safety considerations. My conviction was that actors need to share a space to create the spark that made me fall in love with live theater in the first place many years ago.

## SALVAGING WHAT I ALREADY HAD

As summer 2020 approached, I decided to try filming the three early one-acts or "Lost Plays" we had intended to perform live: *The Web*, *Recklessness*, and *Abortion*. I reached out to the actors I had lined up and, with the pandemic grinding everything to a halt, I figured I had my casts already. To my thinking, actors would be hungry to perform. But, although most of the actors were game, a few bowed out for personal reasons. Understandably, many lived with family or partners and felt the need to protect others as well as themselves. In a couple of cases I learned about underlying health issues for the first time. The pandemic was changing the casting landscape. In seeking replacements I found it interesting, but ultimately predictable,

that the actors with whom I had no working history frequently turned down my offers despite my assurances of appropriate safety measures. Actors I had worked with previously almost always said “yes” before I could finish explaining my offer. Clearly, personal and professional trust goes a long way.

Having decided that we would film our one-acts, I went into editing mode to make sure each of the stories could be told without any physical contact: no kissing, no fighting, always maintaining the social distancing standard of six feet. These performances would be script-in-hand to minimize the amount of time we spent together and chance for exposure. I was taking my process of mounting a show in a few days and adding the elements of filming and social distancing. Usually with a script-in-hand performance I don’t use music stands, which add an unwelcome element of artifice. But in this new era, I opted for stands placed six feet apart. I wanted actors to hit their “safety” marks, and I wanted to signal to the viewing audience that the actors were staying safe so they could relax and enjoy the performance. To minimize the size of our company, roles were combined or eliminated, and actors assumed multiple characters. We functioned as a little rep company. Nine actors covered seventeen roles, with many performing in two plays and with Emily Keyishian, the workhorse, performing in all three. During late July and early August 2020, we gathered three times for each play. We read, blocked, and rehearsed during the first two meetings and shot on the third.

While the partially enclosed barn added a measure of safety, I soon learned that filming in open and partially open spaces can be challenging. Wind is the nemesis. Because I was concerned about hearing the actors, I had purchased a shotgun microphone, which was great at picking up the sound of the actors—and, unfortunately, of wind and everything else. Shooting between gusts of wind or reshooting for safety became common. I also learned about the challenges of uneven- or low-light shooting. My camera tended to go in and out of focus in low light. With my viewfinder so small and my eyesight not what it was, I often didn’t recognize the blurring until I reviewed the footage the next morning.

After shooting all three plays, I had to teach myself to edit film. I had shot and edited for a project in the early 2000s, but back then it was a matter of using tape, and, by 2020 everything was digital—another learning curve. I researched editing programs trying to find one I felt comfortable learning. Eventually, I chose an updated version of Cyberlink PowerDirector, a program I had first used years ago. I was comfortable with the interface, which had not changed much over the years. Like I was riding an old bicycle,

I found myself ready to edit again. The Lost Play films did not have as many close-ups as I would have liked, as I made the calculation that it was better to see a wide shot of all the actors than to cut to a close-up of an actor looking down at their script. At times it reminded me of the movies of the early 1930s, whose wide shots and minimal camera movement created the impression of a filmed play on stage.

The Lost Plays were rolled out in a series of online premieres in October 2020. Rewatching them I see lots of things I would change, but I mainly recall a sense of satisfaction that we were able to continue creating in a very uncertain time. The next time around I would seek to be more dynamic in my choice of shots.

### A NEW AND UNIQUE OPPORTUNITY

Despite my general rejection of Zoom theater, I regularly watched the work of Alex Roe and the Metropolitan Virtual Playhouse (MVP) in 2020. Many Saturday nights I would tune in to their weekly online offering of a one-act play. Besides producing O'Neill plays, which is how they came to my attention, I appreciated the MVP's use of illustrated or painted backgrounds. The art added a visual field that created a sense of place and vitality to the overall productions. After I struck up a dialogue with Roe, he approached me with an offer to direct O'Neill's *Shell Shock* for the MVP. This would have never happened had there not been the necessity for the exploration of virtual programming.

I directed the actors remotely—from three different locations, as I recall. The cast was a combination of West Coast and East Coast actors, which excited me. I love the idea of artists collaborating from faraway places. I particularly appreciated the dialogue I had with the visual artists who were creating the “scenery” for the play. Although *Shell Shock* appears to be written in a “realistic” style, the subject matter—PTSD—felt like an invitation to incorporate expressionistic features and techniques. The painted scenery suggested the work of Van Gogh and helped foster a subjective world. Additionally, as I worked on sound with Roe in his capacities as producer, artistic director, and technical director, it dawned on me how sound could enhance the contrast between the worlds of the traumatized Jack Arnold and everyone around him. “Shell shock,” or PTSD, is an individual psychological space, and the “sets” and sound helped explore it.

## RESCUING ANOTHER LOST PLAY

During the late summer of 2020, the National Park Service approached me about filming an O'Neill one-act to be used for educational purposes. They were open to having me pick the title. I chose O'Neill's early shipwreck play, *Fog*, because it requires only three actors, and I figured I could keep them at a safe social distance. I envisioned a twelve-foot boat with an actor at each end and one in the middle—always maintaining social distance. Again, we had to eliminate physical altercations. Most of our film featured the Businessman on one end of the boat, the Poet in the middle, and the “sleeping” woman with child at the other end of the boat. As with *The Web*, I reduced the child to a nonverbal (or in this case postverbal) bundled blanket, instead of the young child the script calls for. To further reduce the number of people on set, the “sleeping” woman was played by the same actor playing the rescuing sailor at the end of the play. For added safety, Willem Long, who played the two roles, wore a mask when he played the woman, whose face is never seen.

We rehearsed for a couple of weeks, and the actors were expected to memorize their lines. Besides seeking fully committed and believable performances, I wanted to be free to use more dynamic shots when I edited the film—again, the last thing I wanted to see was someone reading. By late fall we were ready to shoot, but as winter approached and COVID cases increased, we were forced to move to Zoom for what ended up being five months until the numbers decreased sufficiently that we all felt safe to gather. One unexpected benefit of these months of Zooming was that actors found a more conversational quality. There was less pressure to perform rehearsing on Zoom, and actors Charles Woodson Parker (Businessman) and William Brown III (Poet) started to sound natural and conversational. When we regrouped in person in March 2021, the potentially too-didactic dialogue on the nature of social obligation sounded more organic. The characters came off as two exhausted and disoriented men filling time as you would expect under their powerless circumstance. This enhanced the drama.

Although we rehearsed in the Old Barn at Tao House, I never thought of it as a suitable location for filming. I always saw us filming in a field. Initially we were going to film in late October and early November, and my chief concern was the color of the grass. Traditionally, November is a difficult month to predict weather in our area. Some years the rain comes, and the brown ground turns green. Some years it doesn't. I was worried that we would start filming in a brown field only to have it turn green mid-shoot. My idea was to

find an open patch of grass and film from a high angle, so the viewer only saw the patch of ground. I did not have a boat for the actors—and I was not likely to produce an iceberg, a large body of water, or a massive fogbank—so I knew that we would need to approach the production in a highly symbolic way. The field of grass would function as a symbolic “sea of sameness” fitting both the physical and psychological spaces of the characters. A “nowhere space” would remedy my potentially poor production values and match the feelings of isolation felt as the characters drift with no discernable visuals to anchor them.

After a couple of attempts to shoot in one of the fields adjacent to Tao House, we abandoned the strategy. The wind was again the culprit. We then tried to shoot using a patch of asphalt sheltered between two buildings as our “sea of sameness,” but again the wind would not cooperate. The constantly changing light outdoors presented another challenge. The play is meant to start in darkness, with the set continually lightening; we kept bumping up against the setting sun. We tried to shoot in reverse order, but that made things more complicated than I wanted.

Ultimately, with the help of the Park Service, I landed on the idea of returning to the interior of the barn and draping it with old paint tarps from the maintenance division. We borrowed everything we could from the four local NPS sites. Our “nowhere space” became reminiscent of the WonkaVision studio where little Mike Teevee becomes even littler in the original Willy Wonka film. Paint drops, two men, a bundled figure on the floor, and some benches arranged to suggest the shape of a boat became the world of the play. The final product felt like a filmed stage production, with us leaning heavily on the imagination of the actors and viewers to make it work.

## HUNTING FOR GHOSTS/THE PLAY AND THE PLACE

In what would become my last prepandemic live production, I directed *Long Day's Journey Into Night* at Tao House. For the first time I leaned into the O'Neill biography. Traditionally, I had resisted this, as I felt that the dominance of the biography had led to the perception that only the late, heavily autobiographical plays written at Tao House were worthy of production. Unfortunately, this way of thinking has characterized American productions over the last fifty years, and it has long been one of my stated purposes as a director of O'Neill to dispel this view. All this said, as I approached *Long Day's Journey* I sought to connect the play and the place of its creation. Early in the pandemic, I had an illuminating phone conversation with an artist/director as I sat at the picnic benches of Tao House. She observed that the pandemic had shrunk her creative life to the

confines of her one-room Manhattan apartment. As I listened, I looked around the Tao House grounds and the surrounding hills and thought, “My God, I am sitting on a thirteen-acre film lot!” I had all this space to create.

In early 2021 I proposed a series of short films called the “Ghosts of Tao House.” These films were collaborations between a single actor and myself—this seemed like the wise move, given the importance of minimizing the size of gatherings. The vaccine had arrived but was not yet widely available. The films became a way to place, site-specifically, a character from an O’Neill play somewhere on the grounds of Tao House. We could safely highlight the plays while showing off the beauty and history of Tao House at a time when the park was often closed to the public.

To date, I have shot seven of these films, or “Ghosts,” in and around Tao House. I initially envisioned each character appearing in a single location and delivering a single speech from a play. But as the process developed, I found it visually more interesting to have the character change locations. Some actors performed looking into the distance as if they were expressing “inner” thoughts while others speaking to another character spoke directly to the camera. With Ghost 3—Nora Melody from *A Touch of the Poet*—I promoted a more thematic approach by piecing together passages that expressed Nora’s love for her husband, Con. My intention was to demonstrate that with undying love come anxiety and uncertainty—and yet, no matter what, Nora’s love endures. For the fourth Ghost—Lazarus from *Lazarus Laughed*—I returned to the single-speech format. For the first time I attempted to make the camera actively embody a character, in this case Caligula, whom I see as the play’s primary character. I produced Ghost 5—Anna from “*Anna Christie*”—more in alignment with my original vision, but I moved the camera a few times to suggest the reactions of the two other characters who were listening in the scene.

In the sixth film, actor Jim Hiser and I decided to tackle the entire character arc of Yank in *The Hairy Ape*. This required a lot of back and forth on which text from which scenes would best exemplify the character’s journey. We sought to establish Yank’s confidence, then to move him through his fears and ultimately to a place of resignation and insight.

In the summer of 2022, I shot another “Ghost.” Having focused on the character of Eugene O’Neill for my work on William Davies King’s play *Into Night* earlier in the year, I decided to make O’Neill himself a character. He haunts Tao House as much as anyone else. The text comes from Edmund Tyrone’s recollections about his time at sea in *Long Day’s Journey Into Night*. Returning to the words from *Long Day’s Journey* represents a full circle for me. I find myself imagining that Edmund led us into the pandemic and hoping he was leading us out of it.

## BEYOND THE HORIZON

The most ambitious project I took on during the pandemic was filming O'Neill's *Beyond the Horizon*. With the tenuous nature of planning for live events in 2021—and, alas, beyond—I needed a safe alternative strategy. Additionally, the play is set on a farm and calls for multiple outdoor scenes, which I understand drove the producers of the initial production mad but worked beautifully at Tao House. With its historic barn, fields of gazing cattle, and the oak-covered rolling hills nearby, Tao House seemed like the ideal place to produce what I believe is the first film of this important play—and it's a good play as well! The three outdoor scenes were filmed in a field, on the dirt road, and along a dry creek bed near Tao House. The three interior scenes were filmed on a set inside the Old Barn. The combination of exterior and interior scenes—lamented by theater-makers and critics alike in 1920—resulted in a hybrid production that sometimes looks cinematic and sometimes looks like a filmed play. Although the actors were vaccinated, safety remained an important consideration. We gathered in small groups to work, and we were either outside or in the open-air barn for most of our time together.



FIG. 1  
Willem Long (Robert Mayo) and Adrian Deane (Ruth Mayo), on the set of *Beyond the Horizon*. Photograph by Eric Fraisher Hayes.



During the pandemic I have gotten into the habit of taking early morning walks. This became an asset to the production, as sunrise plays a crucial role in *Beyond the Horizon*. By the time we shot the climatic sunrise scene, I had studied the early morning light and knew how and where it would appear on the horizon. In an act of artistic leadership of which I am very proud, I succeeded in getting my three lead actors to meet me in the dark before dawn on multiple occasions. On one of our treks out into the large pasture to the south of Tao House, we set up in the dark only to realize that as the light started to creep along the horizon, we were surrounded by a herd of bedded down cattle. Since the cows never saw us coming and we seemed to just appear with the morning light (as the cows had for us) we apparently became a source of great curiosity. The large calves and adolescent cows walked right up to us. Poor Willem Long, who was playing the dying Robert Mayo, worried about being stepped on. One cow got so interested in our camera that I feared it would take a bite out of it.

As we approached the moment of sunrise, I set the actors in a tableau and told them to hold for the light. With the sun about to peek over the horizon at any moment, a large calf decided to walk right up to the actors, thus upstaging them. I found myself springing to action, charging the cow hooting and hollering! Generally, the last thing I want to do is scare an animal, but I had to get the shot! Having succeeded, I dashed back to the camera, but as soon as I turned back the actors, the calf decided it wanted to visit them again, so I turned berserker again and got her to retreat before sprinting back to my position. Failure would have meant more early mornings in a dark field waiting for the moment of sunrise. Our bovine companion still made it into the shot, and is probably owed residuals, but at least she didn't ruin the shot. You can get a cow to jump over the moon, but the sun is a lost cause!

A decrease in COVID case numbers allowed us to hold two live performances of *Beyond the Horizon* after our filming wrapped. It was an interesting process to adapt a play into a film and then back into a play. I set up a series of site-specific stations for each scene and took the action and the audience back and forth between exterior and interior locations. It wasn't reasonable to lead the audience to all the actual locations used in filming, so I kept everything close to the Old Barn. I know the actors hungered for a live audience, and I was happy to see them bask in the energy of a live performance for the first time in a year and a half. For me, the experience of performing a play in front of a camera and in front of a live audience affirmed the direction I want to take in my future work.

## ARTISTIC PROGRAMMING GOING FORWARD

Prior to the pandemic I had discovered the magic of live performance at Tao House. I grew to appreciate the unique experience of producing O'Neill's plays where he had created them. The pandemic demanded a dramatic re-imagining of what the combination of play and place meant. As with many creative innovations, necessity demanded new thinking. Problems arose and solutions were needed to meet the moment. I found a new approach to celebrating the plays of Eugene O'Neill and their connection to Tao House. Filming the plays not only gave us a way to remain creative and productive, thus keeping the spirit of O'Neill alive, but it also established a new breadth of audience. Viewers from thousands of miles away have been able to join us in appreciation of O'Neill's work. As much as I hope for and look toward a COVID-free future, I have become an advocate for hybrid programming—a combination of live and filmed productions. I want to retain our new audiences, and I want to make sure that our creativity isn't compromised if for whatever reason people aren't able to safely gather. By diversifying our production methods, we best ensure the light of Tao House continues to burn bright even in dark times.

ERIC FRAISHER HAYES is the artistic director of the Eugene O'Neill Foundation, Tao House. Under his tenure, EONF has become the leading producer of the plays of Eugene O'Neill in the United States. He has directed thirty-one of O'Neill's fifty-one plays. His productions of *Long Day's Journey Into Night*, *Hughie*, *Welded*, and *Shell Shock* have been performed at the Eugene O'Neill International Festival of Theatre in New Ross, Ireland. Eric's theatrical lecture "Eugene O'Neill: 51 Plays in 51 Minutes" was a featured event at the Eugene O'Neill International Conference in Boston in July 2022.