

AN UNEXPECTED  
ARC OF AGENCY:  
A CONVERSATION

.....  
*Beth Wynstra*  
*Babson College*

*Eric Fraisher Hayes*  
*Eugene O'Neill Foundation*

ABSTRACT

Between 2021 and 2024, director Eric Fraisher Hayes and dramaturg Beth Wynstra teamed up for a series of productions of Eugene O'Neill's early and lesser-known plays under the auspices of the Eugene O'Neill Foundation. The following dialogue revisits some of the discoveries made during their joint creative exploration of these plays in production.

KEYWORDS: Eugene O'Neill, theater, gender, dramaturgy

Between 2021 and 2024, director Eric Fraisher Hayes and dramaturg Beth Wynstra teamed up for a series of productions of Eugene O'Neill's early and lesser-known plays under the auspices of the Eugene O'Neill Foundation. These were *Beyond the Horizon* (2021), *Welded* (2022), *The First Man* (2023), and *Warnings Before Breakfast*, Hayes's mash-up of O'Neill's *Warnings* and *Before Breakfast* (2024). Although Hayes and Wynstra entered the process for these productions with an awareness that certain relationship dynamics would play a role in the storytelling, it wasn't until a reflective conversation in early 2024 when they noticed thematic patterns emerging, notably those focused on women's

autonomy, communication breakdowns, and societal expectations. Analysis of O'Neill's early works tends to focus on their artistic flaws or biographical elements while little attention is paid to his willingness to delve into the challenges of relationships. As a unit, these plays demonstrate consistent interests of O'Neill. Hayes and Wynstra see these early plays as pivotal stepping stones in the playwright's evolution toward crafting some of the most iconic roles for women in American theater. The following dialogue revisits some of the discoveries made during their creative exploration of these plays in production.

**BETH:** If we think about the recent productions we have collaborated on in reverse order, we begin with *Warnings Before Breakfast*, which was produced in January 2024. How is that production connected to *Beyond the Horizon*, *Welded*, and *The First Man* that preceded it?

**ERIC:** With the film of *Beyond the Horizon*, we were exploring ideas about what society expected of a young person and the dynamics within relationships, particularly marriage. Ruth Mayo being in the social position she was, namely the farmer's wife, had almost no say as to what happens in her life in the early twentieth century. We looked at communication breakdowns in the play. But I think that a lot of our work, Beth, focused on the idea of lack of self-knowledge, lack of self-awareness. If you don't understand yourself, you don't understand other people either and don't understand the lines between what is my responsibility and what is your responsibility and what is our responsibility. So, I really feel like that self-knowledge thing is an important part of that play.

Responsibility and your expected role in a relationship are important for the other plays we worked on together as well. In *Welded*, Eleanor suddenly has this epiphany that something's not right, that she was losing herself in her husband's ideas about their marriage. Everything is being defined for her without her having her say. Her sense that something is not right is another example of that self-knowledge idea. She was trying to break out of expectations and find a place to have an individual identity that coexists, or could get along with, and might survive the more systemic dynamics of her relationship with her husband Michael. And then *The First Man* has a couple in conflict over their desires and choices within their marriage. There's a husband and wife, Curt and Martha, who have made an agreement to not have any more children after the pain of losing the children they had, and then Martha changes her mind, sending the relationship into turmoil. I am really struck by how in all three plays, the women have ideas about themselves or ideas about how they want things to be, but are still trying to stay within the

system or the marriage. They're trying to change the marriage. They're not trying to run away from it. They're trying to find themselves within the marriage. Unlike Nora in *A Doll's House* or characters in contemporary American plays who choose divorce, O'Neill's Eleanor and Martha both honor the commitment of marriage, choosing to embrace the malleability of such a partnership.

When we get to *Warnings Before Breakfast*, we explored what happens when the schism in a relationship is so bad that communication completely shuts down. So, it's not the man or the woman trying to work within the relationship to somehow define it the way they want it to be. The relationship has completely broken down, and the man and the woman are on their own. In their respective isolation, their worst fears and anxieties dominate their thinking and show what happens when the relationship goes off the tracks and the two individuals must figure out on their own what to do next.

**BETH:** As I listen to the way that you've unpacked these major themes and describe common through lines, I am remembering our endearing interest in context. I know we had many conversations about the self in context, meaning that we were focused on those forces or systems that impact these characters. As your dramaturg, I could dig into these contexts and think about them from a historic or sociologic standpoint to reveal what the characters were up against. Our approach is different than others and, I think, more compassionate in the way we attempt to understand the societal forces and bring them to the stage. We have talked a lot about past scholarship or even productions where characters, particularly women, get short shrift or a demeaning appraisal despite these characters having to manage huge expectations by society, family, or spouse. Before we could think about the characters' sense of self within a marriage or domestic sphere, we had to account for context. I am curious what you remember of these discussions and what you think about this idea of self in context from a directorial standpoint.

**ERIC:** What comes to mind is how context and these societal expectations are really an invisible force. You can't see expectations, and they are not overtly written into the play. Yet the characters really feel them. These expectations are like invisible fences that you recognize when you run into one. Usually, you anticipate these obstacles and try your best to guess where that boundary is, but you don't ever know exactly where that expectation line is. I would say that Ruth runs into the fence, feels the fence, and stares at the horizon beyond but has no idea how to climb over, go around, or move that fence in any way.

**BETH:** I am going to layer on to this idea of the invisible fence. What makes the plays we have worked on together all the more complicated is you have these invisible fences coupled with that inability to communicate. I have shared with you, Eric, that the element my college students love to discuss from your brilliant film of *Beyond the Horizon* are the strict parental expectations. You do such a terrific job with the moments of the Mayo parents and Ruth's mom to highlight the rigid expectations the parents hold but cannot fully explain or communicate effectively. Thus, it seems that the children inherit a similar behavior; they all have a sense of their expectations for themselves and for others but cannot adequately voice these things. So, the characters in *Beyond the Horizon*, and really in all the plays we have worked on together, may have a good sense of what they want in a partnership but are not always good at vocalizing these wants and just keep coming up against those invisible fences they cannot climb over.

**ERIC:** I remember now that element of parental expectation in *Beyond the Horizon* that your students wanted to discuss. It reminds me of the farm in the play. How it stands for a bedrock of tradition. On a farm, the way we did this thing yesterday is the way we will do it tomorrow. We plant these crops at this time of year, and we will do it again next year. On a farm there's certain boundaries and assumptions and because of this people don't have to talk about them. The parents assume the children will model their behavior without question. And I even think about particular couples in this day and age: that old couple who doesn't have to verbalize what they are doing at 7:00 p.m. They just know that is when they will be watching *Jeopardy!* This is a couple who can read each other, even without verbalizing needs and wants. There is a shared understanding here. Problems arise when someone gets a new idea about what they want.

A lot of unhappiness and pain in *Beyond the Horizon* is set into motion by the parents believing that their assumptions and expectations will be passed down easily through osmosis to their children. Yet when the world changes or when adults forget what it is like to be young and topics are not addressed or communicated, even the most well-intended people find themselves hurting each other. I think everyone in the play just made assumptions about each other. To challenge those assumptions would risk discomfort. Avoiding discussion or argument was the path of least resistance. This is the way it will be. This is how it always is, you know, whether it's the farm or the marriage or life or our roles. In contrast, the January plays we worked on together (*Welded*, *The*

*First Man*, and *Warnings Before Breakfast*) are these fumbling plays. In *Welded*, Eleanor is fumbling to describe the things she is feeling. She has hit that invisible fence, and she wants to say something about it because she feels it. I don't know if she knows what she wants. She just knows she doesn't want the status quo. The attempts at communication lead to confusion, pain, but also a chance for growth. In *The First Man*, Martha beautifully articulates her point of view, but the world around her, Curt and his family, aren't ready to hear it or refuse to hear it. With *Warnings Before Breakfast*, everything seems to have broken down, and we have two characters stuck in the mud, spinning their wheels, unable to connect and left to their worst imaginings. All of these plays have moments when communication fails, and no one knows what to think or say next. *Warnings Before Breakfast* is an effort to take a moment of failed communication and explore the idea that there is an entire play contained within that moment of breakdown.

**BETH:** I like this idea of evolving forms of communicative breakdowns throughout these plays. And it really seems that everything comes to a head in *Warnings Before Breakfast* where we have a man and woman whose partners are largely absent. These characters must confront and reckon with expectations and anxieties without a partner present. Talk about an invisible fence!

**ERIC:** Right. I incorporated moments of dance in *Warnings Before Breakfast*. I was trying to show that the partners are isolated and left to try to dance with their own anxiety and fears about the other person. Although they don't have a partner present, they still manifest their partner, but it's always in the confines of their own anxieties. They're still doing a dance but they're dancing with themselves . . . as Billy Idol would say.

**BETH:** Haha! We are absolutely including that reference.

**ERIC:** I will say one more thing about this dance concept with *Warnings Before Breakfast*. I started the play with a dance of unity and joy that was a celebration of a relationship because I wanted the audience to know that this was a couple. I felt if I started the play with two isolated figures, then the audience wouldn't know they had anything to do with each other necessarily. And I wanted the audience to think, "Oh, look at them. They used to be happy." They met each other at some point, they danced, there was some joy, there was some laughter. And then something broke it apart and now they're isolated and out of that isolation comes fear. And from this comes the manifestations of those fears in the form of little vignettes being played out. It goes back to that dance for me. That dance was to show togetherness. Without a togetherness, you

couldn't really appreciate that something has been lost, is yearned for. It's hard to appreciate the impact of something breaking if you never had a sense of it as a whole.

**BETH:** When you say togetherness, are you also thinking of two different things, two different stories happening at the same time? I'm wondering if you are also seeing this togetherness as also commenting on the fact that the problems explored in this one room or this one world are similar or connected to what is happening in the other room.

**ERIC:** Yeah, absolutely. I was trying to convey that when we were focused on the woman's side of the stage and her story, it was registering on the man's side of the stage and vice versa. I wanted to maintain a sense of interconnectedness between the characters. No matter whose world we were focused on, the other person, at least in the audience's experience, never disappeared. There was always a figure in shadow listening. In the half light, the other member of the couple was like an apparition. They were sort of like each other's shadow. The weight of the other was always present. They were on each other's mind the entire play, even when they engaged in a scene with other characters.

**BETH:** I am thinking about your devout following in Danville and the people who were there for all those different, experimental January productions. I bet some of them were imagining that if you had a big enough stage, and maybe one with multiple floors, you could have had *Welded* going on in one room and *The First Man* going on in another, given the common through lines we find in all these plays.

I do want to go back to that invisible fence idea, and I'm thinking a lot about *The First Man*. I believe a large part of the tragedy in that play is Martha feeling secure and feeling like she knows the boundaries. She understands her husband, can deal with his family, and generally has a good sense of things. Martha then really does have that rug ripped out from under her given Curt's reaction to her pregnancy. It is just so utterly tragic for a character to think they know where that invisible fence is only to be shocked by the electricity when confronted by it.

**ERIC:** Yes. And in addition to expectations within marriage, what stood out to me in the production of *The First Man* were familial expectations. I had the extended family, Curt's very judgmental family, positioned as a kind of Greek chorus, with lines spoken in unison as if the family was speaking like the Oracle at Delphi or something. One authoritative voice. The family speaks! In this play there was the issue of individual versus group expectation. I wanted to explore what happens when the individual goes against the group and how that individual copes with

rejection and continues to fight to define the self in the face of resistance. In the first half of the play, Curt goes against the wishes or ideas of his family with his unconventional partnership with Martha. After she dies, he tries to keep a part of Martha with him much to the consternation of his family. At the play's end, she is ever-present in his thoughts. To reinforce her presence for him I chose to have him repeat some of her lines from the first half of the play before his final exit. I wanted to make sure the audience knew she was still with him and, perhaps, exerting an influence on his thinking more strongly than when she was physically present. Her spirit was guiding him in certain ways.

**BETH:** If we think about the January productions, do you see yourself rewriting O'Neill or are you just kind of unearthing or putting a flashlight on elements that were always there but maybe were hidden? Or a combination of both?

**ERIC:** I personally dance with Eugene O'Neill. I think of him as a collaborator, or I'm his collaborator. I'm the director he didn't know he wanted or needed. I think that O'Neill is seen as very tragic, but he does give us instances of hope and I aspire to highlight these moments. I think it's in keeping with his spirit. His life was not a happy one, but he experienced moments of joy and hope. I seek to bring these out in his plays. Along with flashes of his ironic wit. Alex Pettit gave me some language to describe what I endeavor to do in a review of one of my productions years ago. He described my process as an act of "enlightened hint-following." When I saw that phrase, I said that is exactly what I am trying to do. Take hints from the script and run with them. Many of O'Neill's early plays have rough edges, flaws. But I also see their vitality. I am drawn to their delicious dramatic desperation. There is spirit in them, imperfect as they may be, and I want to see them brought to life. I want to find a way to make them work. With *Warnings Before Breakfast*, I felt for the first time a comfort or compulsion to write additional dialogue. I would say the play is 90 percent O'Neill and 10 percent me trying to fill in the gaps to help further the characters O'Neill created. O'Neill made the ball, I inflated the ball, and I ran with it.

**BETH:** I definitely see the hope in your productions, Eric. Although, now that I think about it, "potential" seems a better word, especially if I think about the endings you have created in your productions. There is always this feeling of potential or anything can happen.

**ERIC:** Yes, moments of potential. I like the word "potential" as it does not imply good or bad, just the possibility of something new, which is exciting. Whether it's at the end of *Beyond the Horizon*, with Ruth looking

to the horizon as if there is something else out there for her, it's a kind of potential. In *Welded* with Eleanor asking Michael to come down the stairs to join her at the end of the play, also potential. Potential in *The First Man*, when Curt revisits some of the beauty and wisdom of what Martha said to him. Martha was with him in an active sense as he walked off the stage. She may have changed him in some way. In *Warnings Before Breakfast*, after the swirling series of anxious and fearful episodes, the two people finally directly engage with one another. The man steps onto "her" side of the stage, her space, and sheepishly says "Coffee?" almost as if he is asking for a truce; he is ready to talk. After a beat, she fills a mug and offers it to him repeating the word "coffee," mirroring his state of being. As she reaches toward him to hand him the mug, he clasps his hands around hers, and for a moment they both hold the same mug together. A moment of potential.

**BETH:** Looking ahead, I know that *Mourning Becomes Electra* is your next directing project. I also know that actor Adrian Deane has been in every one of the productions we have discussed. Can you talk about her journey?

**ERIC:** It started with her playing Ruth in *Beyond the Horizon*, where we examined the idea of what this woman was feeling. Although O'Neill did not give her a lot of lines, he gave her some huge emotional situations to struggle with. We tried to show this visually in the film. With the camera you could see what she was feeling at crucial moments when she had no lines. Visually we were able to tell her story, allowing the audience more opportunity to empathize with her plight. Witnessing her journey despite a lack of text. There was as much going on with her as the others, just fewer words. Deane then played Eleanor, a character who has something to say but doesn't know how to say it or what it should be, but she has the impulse to speak and makes efforts to articulate her needs and feelings. In between the projects you and I have worked on, Deane also played Anna in "*Anna Christie*." Anna represents another step in the direction of self-realization initiated by Eleanor. Anna not only speaks but declares, when pushed to it, that she is going to define herself. Looking forward there are only two actors precast in our upcoming Tao House production of *Mourning Becomes Electra*. Deane is one of them. She is going to play Lavinia. I told Deane that Lavinia is the person who has power from the start and must figure out what to do with it. So, I think it's an interesting trajectory to go from Ruth with no power to Anna, who finds her power, to Lavinia who must decide what she is going to do with her power.

**BETH:** It will be wonderful to see Deane take on another one of O’Neill’s women. I can’t wait for your production of *Mourning!* Any final words before we stop?

**ERIC:** When I think about going from *Beyond the Horizon* to *Welded* to *The First Man*, and squeezing *A Moon for the Misbegotten* in there, and then “*Anna Christie*” and *Warnings Before Breakfast* and looking toward *Mourning Becomes Electra*, I am thinking—and I give you, Beth, a lot of credit for this—but for lack of a better term, it’s kind of a feminist cycle. I do think that in our partnership and, of course, what you’ve been working on with your recent writings and with this emphasis on women and society and relationships, we have created an arc about women and their place in the world with these productions. This arc starts with *Beyond the Horizon* and a woman who has no choices and ends with a woman, namely Lavinia, who has full power over her choices and what she does with it. It’s a discovery of agency.

**BETH:** Oh, I love that: A discovery of agency. Can we make t-shirts with that phrase? I must thank you, Eric. While being immersed in research for my book these last many years, it was a gift to be working concurrently as the dramaturg for your productions. I love how you show that caring about the woman’s experience in performance does not mean neglecting or dismissing the male experience. Rather, an attention to context, expectations, or societal constraints means a care for all the characters on stage. The ripple effects of mistreatment are felt by all. I will always remember your beautiful final moment of *Welded*, which exemplified a full humanity. It was not man against woman. It was a moment of potential and ultimately about the human experience.

BETH WYNSTRA is associate professor of English and faculty director of the Center for Engaged Learning and Teaching at Babson College. Beth teaches courses in dramatic literature, theater history, acting, and public speaking, and she regularly directs plays and musicals. Her book *Vows, Veils, and Masks: The Performance of Marriage in the Plays of Eugene O’Neill* (University of Iowa Press, Theater History and Culture Series) was published in 2023. Beth is proud to serve on the board of the Eugene O’Neill Society.

ERIC FRAISHER HAYES is the artistic director for the Eugene O’Neill Foundation, Tao House, where he specializes in reimagining and adapting O’Neill’s works. He has directed thirty-four of O’Neill’s fifty-one plays, including a feature film of *Beyond the Horizon*. His productions of “*Anna Christie*,” *Long Day’s Journey Into Night*, *Shell Shock*, *Welded*, and *Hughie* have been showcased at the Eugene O’Neill International Festival of Theatre in New Ross, Ireland. Eric holds an MFA in acting from the Theatre School, DePaul University, and has been a member of AEA since 2001.