

theater

Images from Paragon's "Long Day's Journey Into Night," by Erin Tyler; and the opening night of their company's new space, by John Moore.

Paragon's "Journey" is right at (new) home

O'Neill's solid if safe classic benefits from cavernous space

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Gore Vidal equated the 1957 opening night of Eugene O'Neill's "Long Day's Journey into Night" to nothing less than a state funeral "with black plumes waving" for America's foremost dramatist, who died three years earlier.

He didn't see O'Neill's take-no-prisoners autobiographical tell-all as an American masterpiece so much as a self-indulgent eulogy to, and written by, O'Neill himself.

The passage of time certainly plays with the mind and the memory. Because now O'Neill is largely credited with bringing the American theater back to life after a dry spell critic George Jean Nathan equated to "so much damp tissue

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paper."

Saturday felt nothing like a funeral. It was opening night for both Paragon Theatre's "Long Day's Journey" and its funky new home in a massive old furniture showroom on South Santa Fe Drive. The atmosphere was electric.

And from the first spoken word, it was clear this was the perfect setting for O'Neill's boozy look back at one (*loooong*) day's journey at his parents' dilapidated seaside home in 1912 Connecticut.

Even if it was perfect by accident.

The massive showroom is split in half by a hanging black curtain. Behind it is the small, square stage, circled by 100 chairs. The dialogue echoes here as if traveling through the years and into our ears, making it seem as if this haunted house, and its long-dead residents, have been transported right before our feet. The effect of the space on the sound couldn't work better if it had been planned. (It wasn't).

David LaFont's sleek, wall-less set is dominated by cheap wicker furniture and sporadic floor slats that indicate a house, and a family, that's falling apart. Jen Orf's lights surge upward from the floor, casting all these walking dead in ghostly shadows.

The play was completed in 1940, but O'Neill decreed it never to be performed (his wife gave it away after his death). It's a powerful portrait

of a destructive, dysfunctional family where the line between civility and savagery is one readily available gulp of whiskey.

They're all in the throes of some sickness or other. O'Neill is Edmund, a sickly 24-year-old poet who will be sent in the morning to a sanitarium for treatment of consumption. His much-older brother, Jamey, is a self-destructive drunk who lacks ambition — but not a cruel streak. Mother Mary is this very day slipping back into a morphine addiction she had nearly beaten. Our patriarch is a melodramatic, itinerant actor with violent mood swings. Daggers are flung, tears are shed, apologies are made and delusions are defended . . . until secrets start to flow as freely as an ocean of booze.

This play is, to quote itself, "a long talk on the infinite sorrows of life."

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Jim Hunt and Kathryn Gray, as James and Mary Tyrone, embark upon a "Long Day's Journey Into Night." (Erin Tyler)

It's not a quick or easy ride — at 3 1/2 hours — but well worth the trip. It's capably driven by Jim Hunt as the bombastic father and a haunting Kathryn Gray, who plays poor Mary as if a young girl trapped in an old woman's body. The most visceral scenes come between the brothers, well-played by Brandon Krum (as Edmund) and a particularly ferocious Michael Stricker.

These are gifted actors all, but they are just at the start of their own journey. We're in safe hands, but this is one play when we should never feel remotely safe. It's deeper; scarier than that. There's more raw pain to be mined, more bait to be snatched. There should be more movement, and faster pacing.

When the consequences of the skinflint patriarch's cheapness are finally and fully

revealed, there should not be an undropped jaw in the house.

Director Jared Holbrook's nearly-great production is often riveting but only intermittently so. This is an eviscerating play that, when done just right, should leave audiences emotionally spent, cut open, their guts on the floor.

For now, at the start of the run at least, the audience's butts are made sore but their guts, for the most part, are left intact.

Regardless, I, for one, will be circling back around again in a few weeks. For two reasons: "Long Day's Journey" almost never gets produced, so who knows when any of us might ever get the chance to see it again? And because I want to see just how far this production comes.

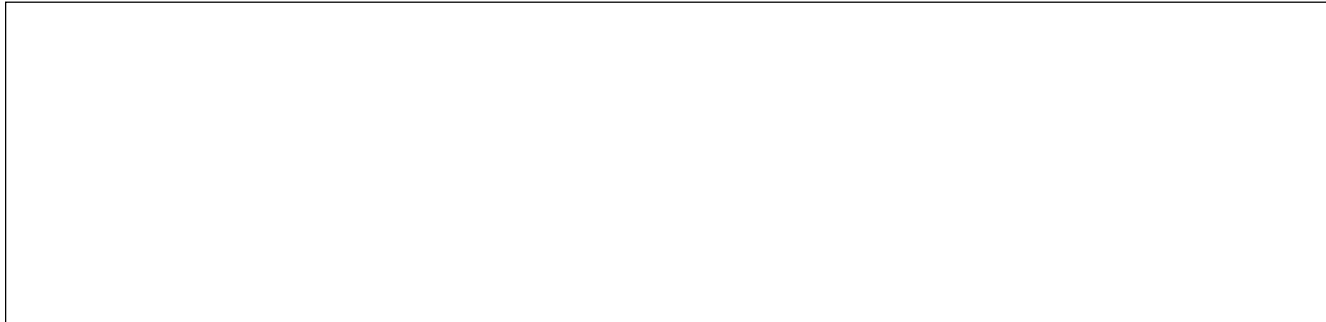
My suspicion - and hope - is that when it comes to the aforementioned guts ... I won't be so lucky the next time around. Given the quality of this creative team, it stands to reason the emotional impact will only get stronger as the cast gets more performances under their belts.

This "Journey" has only just begun.

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"Long Day's Journey Into Night" * (out of four stars)**

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Classic family drama. Presented by Paragon Theatre. Note new address: 1385 S. Santa Fe Drive. Written by Eugene O'Neill. Directed by Jarrod Holbrook. Through March 13. 3 hours, 30 minutes. 7:30 p.m. Thursdays-Saturdays. \$17-\$21 (2 for 1 Thursdays). 303-300-2210 or paragontheatre.org

This weekend's theater openings

"Bug" Tracy Letts ("August: Osage County") pits two lost souls — a crack-addicted divorcee and a troubled young military veteran — against a vast conspiracy of increasingly scary, and possibly imaginary, enemies. A comic psycho-thriller. Through March 20. *Presented by OpenStage Theatre at the Lincoln Center, 417 W. Magnolia St., Fort Collins, 970-221-6730 or openstage.com*

"Chicago" Boulder's Dinner Theatre brings back its popular musical about the infamous dame Roxie Hart, who murders a faithless lover and persuades her hapless husband to take the rap. Through May 8. *5501 Arapahoe Ave., 303-449-6000 or bouldersdinnertheatre.com*

"The Honeymoon Period is Officially Over" Gemma Wilcox portrays 20 characters in this humorous and poignant one-woman show on love and letting go. Through Sunday. *Manitou Art Theatre, 1367 Pecan St., Colorado Springs, 719-685-4729 or themat.org*

"Richard II" Shakespeare's history octology begins with the king's decision to banish the

feuding Bolingbroke and Mowbray from England, which proves to be the first in a series of mistakes that lead to his overthrow and death. Through March 6. *Presented by Upstart Crow at the Dairy Center, 2590 Walnut St., Boulder, 303-444-7328 or serve.com/upstart*

"Zora" Laurence Holder's dramatic biography of Zora Neale Hurston, the famed novelist, anthropologist and folklorist who came to fame at the height of the Harlem Renaissance. Through March 14. *Aurora Fox Studio Theatre, 9900 E. Colfax Ave., Aurora, 303-739-1970 or aurorafox.org*

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