

O'Neill's *Journey* is a long one, but Paragon presents it with integrity

By **Juliet Wittman**

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Details:

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Drive,
303-200-2210,
www.paragontheatre.org.

Truth is, I don't like Eugene O'Neill's work much, and I really loathe *Long Day's Journey Into Night*. I'm not proud of this. I remember once reading another critic who insisted that Shakespeare was overrated and thinking this said far more about the critic than about Shakespeare. O'Neill is one of the great names of American literature, the man credited with bringing realism and much else revolutionary to this country's stages, so who am I to criticize?

But no matter how well-informed, thoughtful and even-handed a critic tries to be, we all arrive at the theater as ourselves, not just in terms of gender and ethnicity, but also temperament. There's something in the

American psyche — at least large portions of it — that drives me nuts: the ever-present emotionality, the self-pity and self-involvement, the ponderousness, the lack of any hint of irony or self-mockery. This isn't universal, obviously, but it's sufficiently prevalent for eminent historian Richard Hofstadter to have written a book in the 1960s called *The Paranoid Style in American Politics*, in which he commented on the sense of rage and dispossession that fueled far-right politics at the time — as it still does today. Beneath the Tea Party's fury, there's intense self-pity: We wuz robbed; they're out to get us. O'Neill was a humanist, of course, but it isn't hard to find a strong sense of victimization on the left, as well.

Everybody in *Long Day's Journey Into Night* wuz robbed. Paterfamilias James Tyrone grew up dirt poor and uneducated, became a famous actor, lost his chance at a life of genuine artistry and sank into a grasping miserliness. According to family lore, it was his unwillingness to pay for proper medical care that condemned his wife, Mary, to a life of morphine addiction. Mary has her own grievances. As a girl, she wanted to be a nun or a concert pianist, but she ended up spending her life in lonely hotel rooms while James toured. Sometimes she wavers about the stage descanting on an idealized past; at other times she viperously attacks her husband and two sons. The eldest son, Jamie, is a drunken layabout, filled with anger toward his father and his consumptive younger brother, Edmund, whose difficult birth caused Mary's addiction. All these people deal with their own suffering by attempting to destroy each other, and their summer house becomes a cesspool of hatred and poisoned love.

There is a raw, bludgeoning power to the flood of words unleashed, but it's hard to care about any of the characters. In this Paragon production, perhaps the most sympathetic is James Tyrone: Jim Hunt gives the performance of a lifetime in the role. You can feel James's sorrow as he watches Mary's descent and his lost, helpless sons, and realizes that all the labors of his life have come to this. Kathryn Gray is a powerful Mary, and she has the guts to make the character as vicious as she is pathetic; you find yourself giving her the kind of fascinated, unwilling attention you'd give a car wreck.

Paragon Theatre has moved from Crossroads, and the new venue poses problems. *Long Day's Journey* is best suited for an intimate space, but here it's played in the round, and whenever a character has his back to you, you tend to lose the words. The intimate, last-act father-son card game took place close to where I was sitting, and I was able to watch every shift of expression —

which is probably why I found this scene the most moving. But the primal struggle between the sons happened a distance away, with the men's bodies obscured by shadow and furniture, and had no impact on me at all.

Paragon has staged this quintessentially American piece with integrity, and the production is a genuine achievement. By the end of the very long evening, I was simultaneously sensing the surge and pull of the text and longing to run out of the theater and gulp in lungfuls of evening air. "None ever wished it longer than it is," Dr. Johnson said of Milton's *Paradise Lost*, having first praised it lavishly. "Its perusal is a duty rather than a pleasure. We read Milton for instruction, retire harassed and overburdened." So it is with O'Neill.