

The Theatre of Eugene O'Neill: American Modernism on the World Stage

The Theatre of Eugene O'Neill: American Modernism on the World Stage. Kurt Eisen. Methuen Drama Critical Companions Series. London: Methuen Drama, 2017; Pp 242 + xiv.

Kurt Eisen's excellent *The Theatre of Eugene O'Neill: American Modernism on the World Stage* appears as part of the Methuen Drama Critical Companions series, a series that "covers playwrights, theatre makers, movements and periods of international theatre and performance" and gives "attention to both text and performance" in critical surveys of the work of individual authors. Other contributions to the series include books on Beckett and Tennessee Williams and on the American stage musical and twentieth-century verse drama in England. Eisen here gives a succinct but rich account of O'Neill's plays, captures well the breadth and range of O'Neill's achievement, outlines key thematic concerns, and opens up interesting questions for both established scholars and those new to O'Neill's vast, endlessly intriguing body of work. Essays by William Davies King, Alexander Pettit, Katie Johnson and Sheila Hickey Garvey offer additional and complementary critical perspectives. A comprehensive bibliography identifies all the major critical works and also points towards useful further reading. In other words, the book is a fine addition to the large volume of material in print on O'Neill as well as a suitable beginning point for students and scholars.

From the beginning, Eugene O'Neill took himself and the American theatre seriously: one is struck, in placing O'Neill in the company of other Modernists, by how little mischief there is in O'Neill and how lacking the work is in frivolity. Every play appears to have been mined from the earth through earnest labor and is presented with the utmost sincerity, and it is this purposeful determination to shape a modern American theatre from the ground up, play by play, that defines his contribution. Even O'Neill's apprentice works, many of them terrible, show serious intent. These early failures (such as *Thirst*, *Fog*, *A Wife for a Life*, *Ile*) were attempts to "sort out themes and situations that interested him dramatically" (25), says Eisen in an exemplary examination of O'Neill's work to 1920 and, to some extent, these themes and situations interested him throughout his career. Revisiting the early plays having read Eisen, one is struck by how much of the master-works (*The Iceman Cometh*, *Long Day's Journey into Night*, *A Moon for the Misbegotten*) are contained within these trial pieces. Eisen convincingly frames a consideration of these lifelong themes and situations around a distinction between "modernity" and "modernism", the latter "both an expression and critique" of the former. O'Neill's restless experimentation was part of his search for "a unifying principle in the absence of a guiding theology or traditional values adequate to prevailing conditions of American modernity." In the end, O'Neill "affirmed the American theatre as a heterotopian counter-site where one can more powerfully imagine other lives and the otherness of one's own life" (69), defining through his will alone the modern American stage as something more than the "hateful theatre of my father," as he famously described the nineteenth-century American stage.

We follow this "modernity-modernism" thread through a series of linked, themed essays, an approach that allows the reader to draw from disparate and separate phases in O'Neill's work very profitably. The themes—they may be summarised as: America, gender, race, family—are helpful in identifying all sorts of possibilities for more detailed conversation and research. In the chapter called "New Women, Male Destinies: the 'Woman Plays'", Eisen gives careful consideration to, amongst others, *Anna Christie*,

Strange Interlude, and *A Moon for the Misbegotten* and notes some of O'Neill's limitations as an artist. O'Neill's final works seems to concede "his inability to fully represent women on stage": over his career, O'Neill "creates a powerful if distorting lens into the lives of women in modern America, rooted equally in O'Neill's personal emotional mythology and the gender typology of an American theatre tradition he could never completely experiment beyond" (92). In "'Souls under Skins': Masks, Race, and the Divided American Self," Eisen offers very interesting reflections on O'Neill's use of masks in the context of race. Eisen's insightful comments on *A Touch of the Poet* and *Irishness* are of particular interest to this reader and prompt a reconsideration of O'Neill as an Irish playwright. Eisen is persuasive in "Transience and Tradition: O'Neill's Modern Families" in his remarks on *Beyond the Horizon* (a critical play for O'Neill) and rightly argues for the Tyrones in *Long Day's Journey* as O'Neill's "consummate representation of an American family as both fully exposed and forever concealed, tragic in their confrontation with and retreat from American modernity" (140).

The complementary essays are terrific. King considers the construction of the notion of "O'Neill" and an "O'Neill play" as a kind of spontaneous "personal branding." Pettit in his look at O'Neill as a literary—as much as a dramatic—artist concludes that "O'Neill found a text-bound, literary model of drama that allowed him to exercise the sort of control whose elusiveness all playwrights must to some degree lament" (172). Johnson's essay on *The Emperor Jones* teases out some aspects of the early productions and complements Eisen's own treatment of the play in suggesting that Paul Robeson in his performance "embodied the modernist tensions inscribed onto black men" (182). Garvey offers an interesting consideration of Tony Kushner's productive and lifelong "dialogue" with "the greatest of all America's playwrights" (197).

Omissions are minor. Eisen says nothing about Hollywood as both expression and vehicle of American modernism and of O'Neill's relationship with the movies. He is good on Ireland and the Irish in his relatively brief but solid consideration of *A Touch of the Poet* mentioned above, as well as in relation to other plays, but says very little about the influence of the Abbey players on O'Neill – O'Neill's experience of the Abbey on tour in 1911 has been acknowledged as instrumental in shaping his aesthetic. More too could have been said about Kenneth McGowan and the "triumvirate." But this is to quibble. There is much to recommend this book. Tragically it is to be Kurt Eisen's last; he died prematurely (aged just 61) in 2019. A former President of the Eugene O'Neill Society, he made an important contribution to O'Neill studies and to the study of modern American theatre and this book adds to and strengthens that legacy. It is a terrific introduction to O'Neill, will be accessible to undergraduate students coming to O'Neill fresh and still raises new questions for those more familiar with this great playwright's work.

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