

T H E A T E R

Concealing While Revealing: O'Neill's Way With Truth

"I do not think that you can write anything of value or understanding about the present. You can only write about life if it is far enough in the past. The present is too much mixed up with superficial values; you can't know which thing is important and which is not."

— Eugene O'Neill, as "The Iceman Cometh" was about to open on Broadway in 1946, commenting on why he wrote a play about a long-forgotten time and place.

By BARBARA GELB

IN the spring of 1912, Eugene O'Neill, soul-scarred and weary with searching at 24, made a failed, half-hearted attempt at suicide by swallowing Veronal (a barbiturate available at the time without prescription). Later that same year, he contracted tuberculosis and, having recovered, he concluded that he was destined to live. It was then that he determined to become a playwright.

Clearly, it is no coincidence that he set the two greatest of his 49 plays — "Long Day's Journey Into Night" and "The Iceman Cometh" — in 1912, proclaiming for posterity the significance of that year in his life.

There is ample evidence that the plays were linked in his mind, for he noted the idea for each in his work diary on the same day in 1939, when he was steeped in memories of his tragic youth. Although all of his plays had dwelled in some degree on the past, he had, since the early 1830's, been completely submerged in it.

While the two plays, on the surface, seem utterly disparate, they are thematically

similar, both of them fueled by O'Neill's preoccupation with illusion and destiny. What is more, they follow the chronology of his youthful years, with "Iceman" (written first) set in "summer, 1912," and "Long Day's Journey" (its sequel) on "a day in August, 1912."

Both plays bare the state of O'Neill's mind at the time, although it is more diffi-

Under close scrutiny, 'The Iceman Cometh' offers an elaborately coded encyclopedia of personal references to a crucial year in the playwright's life.

cult to penetrate the autobiographical references in "Iceman"; unlike the realistic revelations of "Long Day's Journey," the references to his own life in "Iceman" are swathed in symbolism. The revival of "The Iceman Cometh," opening on Thursday at the Brooks Atkinson Theater on Broadway and starring Kevin Spacey, provides an opportunity to see how O'Neill concealed the truth while revealing it at the same time.

In "Long Day's Journey Into Night," for example, Edmund Tyrone, who realistically represents O'Neill, discloses the fact of his recent suicide attempt. In "The Iceman Cometh," however, O'Neill's suicide attempt is depicted in code. Here, he attributes the deed to a young turncoat anarchist, Don Parritt (portrayed by Robert Sean Leonard), who, instead of trying to overdose on Veronal (as O'Neill did in real life), jumps from a window to his death.

The most broadly personal aspect of "The Iceman Cometh" is its discourse on political radicalism. It pervades the play's dialogue

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Above, Clarence Darrow, right, and James B. McNamara, a union agitator Darrow defended. Top right, William J. Burns, who hunted down McNamara and his brother John. Left, Emma Goldman, who published the anarchist magazine Mother Earth, which was avidly read by Eugene O'Neill for a while.

and forms its subplot, which revolves around Parritt and Larry Slade (Tim Pigott-Smith), a "one-time Syndicalist-Anarchist," who regards himself as having retired from life.

The year 1912 was a time of blossoming for the socialist idea in America. Rebels of all stripes were suiting their actions to their convictions — from aging philosophical anarchists like Terry Carlin, who strongly influenced O'Neill's thinking and on whom he based Larry Slade, to bomb-throwers like Alexander Berkman, who had spent 14 years in jail for trying to assassinate the industrialist Henry Clay Frick.

While a freshman at Princeton, O'Neill became a habitué of the Unique Book Shop on Sixth Avenue near 30th Street, a cluttered establishment owned by an icon of the intellectual anarchist movement named Benjamin R. Tucker. It was there that O'Neill discovered Emma Goldman, who had recently begun publishing her anarchist monthly, Mother Earth. O'Neill, for a time an avid subscriber to the magazine, partly

modeled the offstage character of Rosa Parritt, Don's mother, on Goldman.

At Tucker's shop O'Neill's radical consciousness was fully awakened. Always an eclectic reader, he had already devoured large doses of Schopenhauer, Emerson, Zola and Tolstoy; now he discovered the French social theorist Pierre Joseph Proudhon, the philosopher Max Stirner and — to his lasting joy — Nietzsche.

He had long been seeking a substitute belief for the Roman Catholicism he had abandoned at 14, when he discovered his mother's morphine addiction. After a wasted, drunken year at Princeton, a forced marriage at 20 to a young woman he did not love, and several years of seafaring and dereliction, he settled somewhat uneasily into a job as a newspaper reporter in New London, Conn., where his parents had a summer home.

There, in August 1912, he began to express his radical ideas in satiric poetry. And he predictably espoused the Presidential candidacy of the Socialist Party's Eugene V.

Debs — undeterred that Debs had received a paltry 96,000 votes in his first try, in 1900.

This was the background against which O'Neill ranged the passive, pipe-dreaming drunks of Harry Hope's, to whom Hickey (Mr. Spacey), the manic salesman of death, peddles his deluded notion of salvation.

Like most of O'Neill's works, "The Iceman Cometh" was drawn from many sources and written on several levels, all of them so skillfully blended by the indefinable catalyst of his genius, that even he at times was unaware of where one level merged with another.

His description of the setting for Parritt's suicide applies almost literally to the seedy waterfront saloon on Fulton Street called Jimmy the Priest's where, in his down-and-out days, O'Neill had tried to do away with himself. In "Iceman," he disguised the name of the saloon, calling it Harry Hope's and characterizing it with deadly accuracy as "a cheap gin mill of the five-cent whisky, last-resort variety."

While acknowledging in letters to friends



that Harry Hope's saloon, with its upstairs sleeping cubicles, "physically resembled" Jimmy the Priest's, O'Neill said its atmosphere was actually a composite. "The dump in the play," he explained, "is no one place but a combination of three in which I once hung out."

The other two were a saloon in Greenwich Village called the Golden Swan and a somewhat more upscale if raffish bar in the Garden Hotel, across 27th Street from the old Madison Square Garden.

It was at the Golden Swan, nicknamed the Hell Hole by its clientele, that O'Neill met most of the assorted gamblers, gangsters, ex-cops, former Tammany politicians, failed journalists and streetwalkers with whom he peopled Harry Hope's saloon. And it was the Hell Hole's proprietor, Tom Wallace, on whom O'Neill modeled Harry Hope himself (played by James Hazeldine in the current revival).

An ex-prizefighter, Wallace never left his establishment, but emerged every evening from his upstairs quarters to join his regular customers in the bar, all of them, like O'Neill himself, awash in whisky.

"All of the characters [in "Iceman"] are drawn from life, more or less, although not one of them is an exact portrait of an actual person," O'Neill told the critic George Jean Nathan.

Don Parritt is among the more complex characters O'Neill drew. He is based partly on a 24-year-old man who figured in a sensational newspaper story of the period — treacherous Donald Vose, son of Gertie Vose, who was a member of the anarchist Home Colony near Tacoma, Wash., which advocated the violent overthrow of capitalism and all governmental restriction of individual freedom.

The story of Vose's villainy, which O'Neill had followed, began in 1910 — the result of a continuing enmity between the Structural Iron Workers Union of America and the employers' coalition known as the National Erectors Association.

THE iron workers had been planting bombs on the West Coast in retaliation for the employers' anti-union tactics, such as fierce opposition to the closed shop and the dismissal of union sympathizers. The outcome was a bitter class struggle, with the Los Angeles Times relentlessly attacking the union in its editorials.

On Oct. 1, 1910, at 1:07 A.M., a suitcase containing 16 sticks of dynamite exploded in a narrow space, known as Ink Alley, behind the Los Angeles Times building; it started a fire that trapped 21 machinists and other workers, who died of suffocation. The Times accused members of the iron workers union of having set the charge.

The city of Los Angeles hired the private detective William J. Burns to hunt down two union agitators, brothers named James B. and John J. McNamara. During a trial in which they were defended by Clarence Darrow, the McNamaras pleaded guilty, as part of a bargain to avoid the gallows, and were sent to San Quentin — James for life and his younger brother for 15 years.

Detective Burns believed that two other men — Matthew A. Schmidt and David Caplan — were as culpable as the McNamaras. For three years he hunted them, but they eluded him.

Among his surveillance targets was the anarchist colony in Tacoma, where he

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In Chicago, my father knew Matt Schmidt and introduced me to him after he got out of jail!

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Sara Krulwich/The New York Times

Robert Sean Leonard, left, portrays an informer and Tim Pigott-Smith is a dispirited, failed anarchist in "The Iceman Cometh."

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marked Gertie Vose's son, Donald, as weak and disaffected, and offered him \$2,500 to turn spy. Donald accepted the bribe and, on Burns's instructions, asked his mother to write to her old friend Emma Goldman, saying she was sending him to work for the movement in New York.

Burns and Goldman had long been sworn enemies. She had disparaged him in her magazine as "a sneak" who "could not apprehend a flea." Burns, in turn, had denounced Mother Earth as "the central power station" of the anarchist movement. He would have liked nothing better than to trap Goldman — along with Schmidt and Caplan.

Goldman mistrusted Donald Vose on sight, later recalling (in *Mother Earth*) her dislike of his "high-pitched, thin voice and shifting eyes." Echoing her words, O'Neill described Don Parritt in "The Iceman Cometh" as having an "unpleasant" personality, due to "a shifting defiance and ingratiation in his light blue eyes."

Emma stifled her aversion, however, because "he was Gertie's son, out of work, wretchedly clad, unhealthy in appearance," and she offered him shelter.

Schmidt finally turned up and Vose led him into the trap prepared by Burns. He was arrested, as was Caplan, a few days later.

"At once we realized that Donald Vose was the Judas Iscariot," wrote Goldman. "It was Donald Vose who cold-bloodedly, deliberately betrayed the two men." Goldman was

especially incensed, she wrote, "because of the mother of that cur; terrible because he had grown up in a radical atmosphere."

O'Neill, imaginatively carrying the Vose story beyond the facts, created in Don Parritt a man who has betrayed his mother (rather than her comrades) to "the Burns dicks," as he describes them in "Iceman."

Something in Vose's circumstances and personality happened to resonate with O'Neill's own background, and it is not difficult to find emblematic traces of O'Neill's younger self in the character.

In the play, Parritt turns up at Harry Hope's, apparently seeking absolution from his mother's former lover, Larry Slade. He finally confesses that he betrayed his mother out of a long-suppressed rancor toward her, a rancor not unlike the submerged hostility O'Neill bore his own withdrawn and neglectful mother — and upon which he dwelt in "Long Day's Journey Into Night."

There is a discernible parallel between Parritt's betrayal (to the law) of his mother's radical activity, and O'Neill's betrayal (to the public) of his mother's secret drug addiction.

"She used to spoil me and make a pet of me," Parritt whines in the play. "Once in a great while, I mean. When she remembered me." This was the sort of self-pitying remark that accurately expressed O'Neill's feelings about his own mother.

In the end, it is Parritt's remorse over his treachery that impels him to commit suicide, an act that O'Neill himself — forever unable to escape his Catholic conscience — could only attempt half-heartedly. □