

Foundation Welcomes Michael O'Neill

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"I'm very excited about spending time at Tao House," O'Neill says, "and look forward to directing and participating in some talks and discussions."

He will direct Eugene O'Neill's "Before Breakfast" during his Tao House stay. An active playwright, O'Neill will be doing some research for his current play. The subject matter has to do with Irish-American identity.

On April 27, O'Neill, with Dan Cawthon, foundation program director, will take part in an "In Conversation" with the topic being "O'Neill's Connection to Theater in Ireland." The program will be at Rakestraw Books in Danville.

O'Neill, 53, was born and raised in Buffalo, New York. He graduated from Fordham University and received his doctorate degree from Purdue University. He majored in Modern Drama and his dissertation, *The Evolution of Form in Contemporary Drama*, was the first of many writings to follow on the subject.

Much of his teaching is at the graduate level. He has received many awards and honors including the Kennedy Center/American College Theater Festival Region II finalist and the Cordell Playwrighting Prize at Purdue and has done extensive directing, writing and workshops on the East Coast.

O'Neill is currently on sabbatical from his position as Director of Theater, Lafayette College in Easton, PA. He is also an adjunct Associate Professor at the Paul McGhee School of Continuing and Professional Studies at New York University.

When not immersed in academia, O'Neill enjoys attending plays, writing, travel, the beach and is "a huge fan of the Boston Red Sox." His last visit to California was with a graduate school roommate.

"We actually hitch-hiked from San Francisco to Los Angeles and lived to tell about it," he says. He admits to liking the Northwest because "it's green and rainy there, very much like Ireland, and often can put me in an O'Neill kind of mood."

The question had to be asked – is O'Neill related to O'Neill? There is no definite proof, but both Michael O'Neill's family and Eugene O'Neill's family can trace ancestry back to County Tyrone in Ireland. Both families immigrated to Canada before entering the United States. "Back in graduate school, when I sported a mustache, some people told me I looked like Eugene O'Neill," Michael O'Neill says.

He also recalls being astounded when he saw a picture of Jamie O'Neill as a young boy. "It could have been an exact match to a picture of my brother Kevin at that age," he says. With his many other interests and pursuits, perhaps in the future O'Neill can delve into genealogy.

(An interview with Michael O'Neill may be found on the foundation Web site: www.eugeneoneill.org)

Brewer Family Expresses Gratitude

A multi-page photo feature on the efforts to save Tao House has elicited the appreciation from the family of one of the women—Thalia Brewer—who led the effort to preserve the Eugene O'Neill estate, now a National Historic Site.

"The great interest, manner and talent of you and your staff, including your layout and design team, and your intern fact-checker, are clearly evident in the edifying, meaningful and attractive production of this article..." said Bill Brewer, Ms. Brewer's son, in a letter from Kansas City, MO. The letter was published in *Diablo* magazine, which published the article ("The House on the Hill") in its September 2004 issue.

Michael O'Neill on Irish Theater

Ireland has a rich playwriting history, much of it unknown in most parts of the world. However, as the Irish economy has taken off—the so-called "Celtic Tiger" that began to roar in the 1990s—Irish plays and playwrights seem to be getting a lot of exposure around the globe.

I am particularly impressed with the plays of Martin McDonagh, who was born to Irish immigrant parents in England and, although raised in South London, spent his summers with relatives in the west of Ireland. His plays, such as "The Cripple of Inishmaan" and "The Beauty Queen of Leenane," offer a post-modern critique of the stereotypical, St. Patrick's Day kind of Ireland, with the result that many audiences have begun to relate for the first time to Ireland as a real place populated not with leprechauns and genial drunks but with genuine, conflicted human beings in whom they recognize themselves. His newest play, "The Pillowman," which I saw last fall in London, is headed for Broadway in a few weeks.

Conor McPherson, whose most recent play, "Shining City," I saw last fall at the Dublin International Theater Festival, has reshaped the Irish tradition of story-telling into exciting theatrical narratives that connect with audiences on many levels. Of course, Brian Friel, who is probably Ireland's greatest living playwright, continues to explore new strategies in constructing his plays and, increasingly, echoes styles and themes of various playwrights from other countries, such as Anton Chekhov, thus giving his plays additional universal appeal.

And, let us not forget—and we often do—that perhaps the most dominant and influential playwright of the last century was an Irishman named Samuel Beckett. The past few years have seen a rise in important criticism of his work as the writing of an Irishman. The increasing popularity of Irish playwrights who came after Beckett and have been influenced by him can in some ways be linked to the continuing pervasiveness of Beckett's aesthetic in the theater and elsewhere in the arts.

Tao House Group Tours Are Fun –and Free

Group tours of Tao House are free, available and make for a fun, interesting, educational outing for book clubs, social groups, alumni organizations, Red Hats and others.

Advance reservations and arrangements must be made with the National Park Service at the Eugene O'Neill Historical Site/Tao House (925) 838-0249.

A park service van picks up groups at the Sycamore Valley Park and Ride and take them to the house high in the Las Trampas Hills with an outstanding view of Mt. Diablo and the San Ramon Valley. The Yale Club of San Francisco made the trip after EON Foundation board member Larry Chang suggested it to the alumni group. "There were six of us, and we had a wonderful time," Chang said. Docent Jim Kantor led the tour "and his expertise and sense of humor really made the tour," Chang said.

"We've had groups as large as 40," says Park Ranger Christine Rotzinger, "but that takes a lot of advance planning." Groups ranging in size from 18 to 32 are easier for the park service to handle. Groups should plan on three hours, including transportation and tour.

Junior League-East Bay made a day of it and included lunch for their retreat. "That was a special event arranged for through the EON Foundation," Rotzinger said.