



The O'Neill Zeitgeist

Twenty-twenty was a difficult and challenging year for all arts organizations. But the Eugene O'Neill Foundation found a way to flourish in spite of the pandemic. Flourish, learn, and plan for the future.

Among the Foundation's accomplishments were successfully streaming recorded productions of three early one-act plays, the "Lost Plays," and the launch of "Virtual Gene," short videos about the playwright and his beloved Tao House. These and other projects supplanted the Annual Eugene O'Neill Festival and enabled the Foundation to break new ground in theatrical delivery. We are grateful for the sponsorship of the Chevron Corporation and the Irish Consulate of San Francisco, as well as the donations from our audiences, whose support helped fund the Lost Plays productions. The plays remain on our YouTube channel, accessed through www.eugeneoneill.org.

We look forward to next year, with these and other projects in the works:

Ghosts of Tao House. All of O'Neill's characters came from his imagination. What better way to give voice to these characters than a series of monologues from O'Neill's plays? The monologues will be videotaped in site-specific locations around the Tao House property and highlight the imagination and language of Eugene O'Neill while also showing off aspects of Tao House. The videos will be released one at a time and, eventually, as a collection. A further goal is to create a live immersive experience.

Scholarly Presentations. We are exploring bringing to you more recordings from O'Neill scholars discussing a favorite O'Neill play, O'Neill themes, or other scholarship of note.

Beyond the Horizon. If circumstances permit a production of a full-length play, *Beyond the Horizon* is a perfect candidate. In light of the successful, serial presentation of the Lost Plays, the Foundation is exploring presentation of *Horizon* episodically, in three parts, one for each act. Set on a farm, the play has many exterior scenes that could use the grounds at Tao House for a unique theatrical experience—*Eric Fraisher Hayes and John Barry*



Photo: Altman Studeny, NPS

Join Us!

Think about the talents and skills you could bring to the Eugene O'Neill Foundation, a unique arts organization reaching out to theatre audiences, high-school drama students, and artists and scholars bringing their projects to fruition at Tao House. Our mission is to promote the legacy and vision of America's foremost playwright, Eugene O'Neill. To learn more about service on our board, go to www.eugeneoneill.org/about-the-foundation/ or email us at taohouse.eonf@gmail.com.



From Directing in the Barn to Online at the O'Neill: An Artistic Journey



As an artist and director, I credit a lot of my artistic journey and initial enthusiasm for theatre to my experiences at the Eugene O'Neill Studio Retreat. From the summers of 2016 to 2019, I attended the ten-day intensive as an actor (and later a director) and found a passion for collaboration and creativity I hadn't experienced before. My summers spent in the Old Barn provided some of the most fun, creative, and fast-paced projects I worked on in high school, and they later pushed me to pursue my love of story-telling elsewhere.

I found it this summer as a director in the Theatermakers Summer Intensive at the National Theater Institute. Although Theatermakers is normally held at the Eugene O'Neill Theater Center in Connecticut, I attended virtually, from home. I quickly found that directing others through a computer screen provided its own set of challenges because we could not be in the same physical space together. I embraced the new playing space of Zoom because it forced me to get creative with how I wanted to tell these stories. With each play I used tricks like computer backgrounds, lighting, props, and camera angles to create theatre that pushed the boundaries of what was possible. In a month, I directed several student-written projects (including an American Realism play and a Flat Earth musical), took directing classes, and talked with artists such as Rachel Chavkin, Lileana Blain-Cruz, and Samuel Hunter.

I learned more about myself and my artistic process, and that I can direct a 30-minute play in one weekend, every weekend. At NTI I found the same enthusiasm and fast-paced work that I loved while at Studio Retreat. Theatermakers changed me as an artist. It challenged me, brought me new friends and collaborators, and taught me the power of theatre and connection even through the computer. —*Brooke Cox*

Travis Bogard Artist In Residence News

“There are as many ways (of writing) as playwrights. You’ll find your own.” (Eugene O’Neill in a letter to an aspiring playwright, Mr. Maxwell, May 8, 1945)

Playwrights Tira Palmquist, Paul Kruse, and Erin Considine all had works in progress when they came to Tao House as Artists in Residence this summer. They created plays that inspired and challenged, all written in their own differing styles.

Tira Palmquist from Irvine, California, arrived with a draft of her play, *The Body’s Midnight*, but found that she was “stuck in the germination of the idea.” Her central character Ann (based on her mother) was battling dementia, but Tira also wanted to write about living in a perplexing, sometimes terrifying, landscape. Researching in the Foundation library, Tira realized that O’Neill’s Tao House plays were “deeply personal, but the expressionist theatrical core which began his career was still there.” She wanted this in her writing. After re-reading *The Emperor Jones* she decided to use the sound effect of an MRI machine for transitions. *Anna Christie* also inspired her to use fog to describe the decline of Ann’s mind.

After finding the O’Neill quote above, Tira discarded the draft and started writing. At a salon, she read excerpts from her completed play. The use of choruses and special “found” articles drew the audience into the woman’s foggy mind as it dealt with real and imaginary situations during a campervan trip. Tira used the telephone as an important link to the real world for the mother and her pregnant daughter. (For more on Tira’s career: www.tirapalmquist.com)

Playwright **Paul Kruse** arrived at Tao House intending to work on his solo play, *Somewhere Else*. Due to the limitations of the pandemic, Paul said, “It went from a piece that I perform live to a work over a telephone conference call. Much of my work at Tao House was focused on adaptation and experiment. The result was something unexpected and interesting.” Foundation members and friends from all over the country listened with rapt attention to the reworked 90-minute play. Many likened the experience to enjoying plays over the radio.

Paul’s work “flows from his queer identity, Catholic roots, and ever-evolving experience of family.” The play, renamed *Somewhere Else: A Play for Plagues*, is Paul’s coming-out story, linked to his search for information about his mother’s cousin, Jeff, who had died from AIDS at age 31. It is also a story of that other pandemic. Paul said he was delighted “at the instant nostalgia and mystery that the phone lends to a performance.” In the play Paul comments that “the need to be somewhere else never goes away.” After his stay, he returned to the Midwest to be near his family and to confront his own story. (For information about Paul: www.paulwkruse.com)

Erin Considine from Atlanta, Georgia, is the Foundation’s first Carey Perloff Fellow. An actor for two decades, she has rededicated herself to a life of the written word. Because of her experience as an actor, Erin says as she writes a play she hears the dialogue in her head like music and can picture complete scenes. Her plays are “truth-telling. I put a light on small moments between hopeful humans and let the play unfurl itself.”

Erin came to Tao House to complete her cycle, *The Firefly Plays*. She says, “The scripts are all small family experiences about explosive or difficult large-scale problems. I follow in O’Neill’s dark, brooding Irish footsteps; optimism is not always on the menu.” The Cycle began with *Twenty Two*, which was work-shopped on Zoom during Erin’s time at Tao House. Foundation members watched the heartrending drama set in Georgia and named for the loss of 22 soldiers a day to suicide. Other plays are set in New Orleans and Texas. When she began her residency, Erin had an outline for the final play, *Family Trees and Spanish Guitar*. Set in California, the completed play features a half-Latino family dealing with their mother’s slow descent into Alzheimer’s.

(For information about Erin: newplayexchange.org/users/erin-considine) —Wendy Cooper

Bay Area Artists in Inaugural Year of Day-Use Program

The Travis Bogard Day-Use Program has brought to Tao House this fall two additional artists who have, in different ways, been inspired by O’Neill’s work.

Rick Pyle places his play in a downtown bar, with something of the tone of *Iceman*, and incorporating local myths and legends of Antioch, his hometown.

Lori Cassels’ play of parallel stories, titled *Enough/Died of a Tuesday*, uses a “split stage or exterior/interior for simultaneous action,” as in *Desire Under the Elms*. Lori lives in Alameda. Four fellows have been able to work alone at Tao House during 2020. Applications for 2021 day-use fellowships are due Jan. 31, 2021, for 1st session and June 30 for 2nd session. Guidelines and applications at www.eugeneoneill.org/artist-in-residence-program/

National Park Service News: Superintendent’s Message



As 2020 comes to an end, we had a brief opportunity to welcome people back to Tao House on a limited basis. In October, tours and shuttle service resumed, allowing family groups to make reservations by phone or email and visit the house Wednesday through Sunday at 10:00 am or 2:00 pm. Unfortunately, an uptick in cases has required us in mid-November to close the house to tours again. This is a good reminder to folks to check our website for the most current information about our operating status.

Over the summer and early fall we have completed several projects at the site. First was a project in the Tao House courtyard, replacing all the decorative redwood borders in the formal garden courtyard, including the removal of dry-rotted and damaged wood. Most of the maintenance staff, and some volunteers, worked together to install the new 2- by 6-inch pieces, matching existing historic wood border appearance, angle cuts, and lengths. The project was completed in late September and it looks great! The second big project was the conservation of Eugene O’Neill’s phonograph collection. Following O’Neill’s death, his phonograph record collection was given by Carlotta to her grandson, Gerald Eugene Stram. In 1999 Mr. Stram donated the full collection to the Eugene O’Neill Foundation, which donated it to the National Park Service in 2016. Staff and contractors worked to catalog, rehouse in new archival sleeves and boxes, and photograph 681 singles and 210 album sets. O’Neill’s musical tastes were varied and included titles in a range of genres: jazz, classical, opera, blues, dixie, ragtime, and folk. Combined with previously cataloged phonographs, O’Neill’s personal collection totals over 1,000 records.

We hope that in the near future you will be able to join us for a tour of Tao House—and make sure you check out the new wood borders as you wind your way through the courtyard to the front door. —Tom Leatherman, Superintendent

Please check www.nps.gov/euon for updates about access to the Eugene O’Neill National Historic Site.

Thanks to Our Donors, Theatre Patrons, and Volunteers

Invest in the future of our theatre, education, and artist in residence programs.

Your donation helps cover production costs and enables us to continue bringing performances and programs that promote the legacy and vision of America’s greatest playwright. Thank you for supporting the Foundation!

To make a donation to the Foundation, go to www.eugeneoneill.org/join-us/ or send your check to Eugene O’Neill Foundation, Tao House, P.O. Box 402, Danville, CA 94526-0402

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