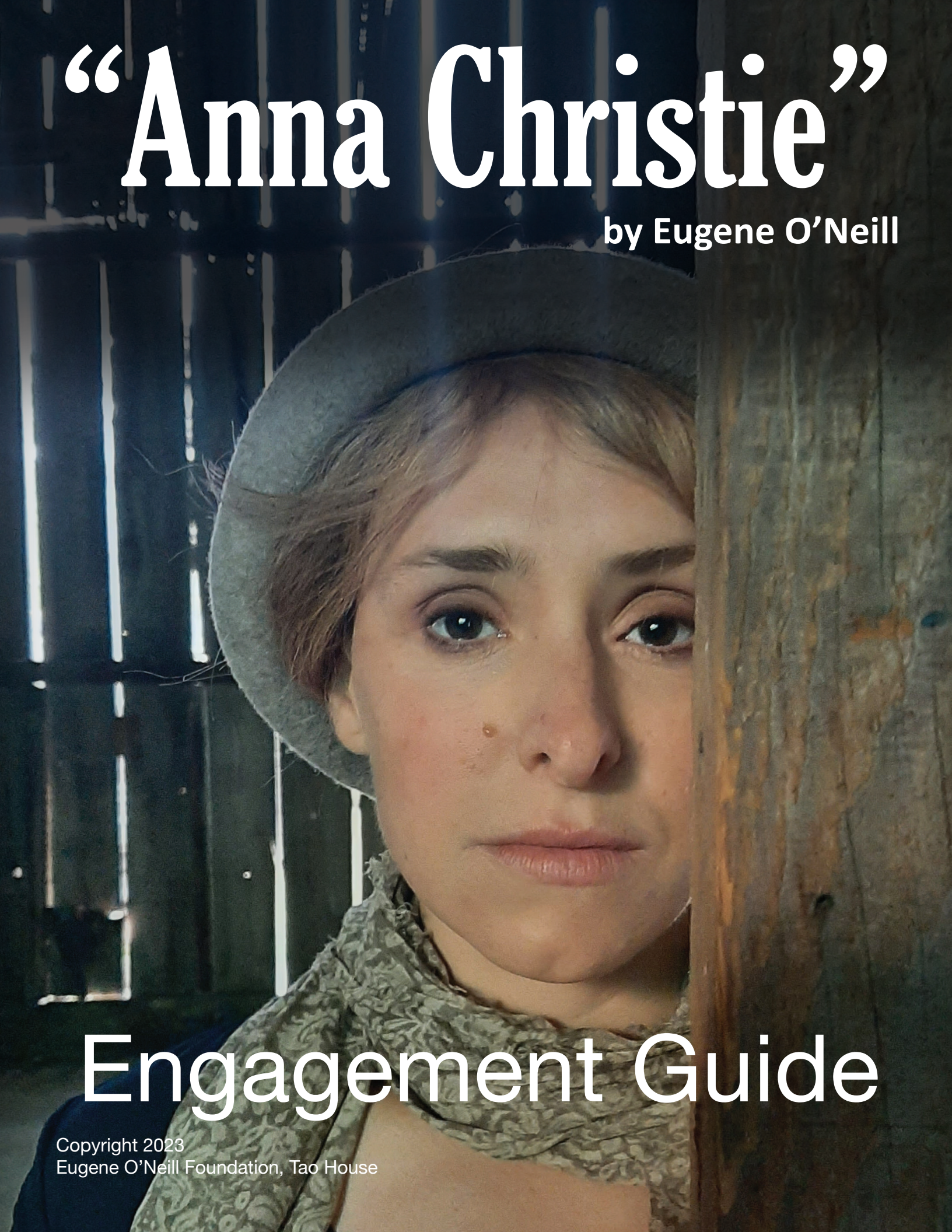

“Anna Christie”

by Eugene O’Neill

Engagement Guide

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Director's Note

Lost and Found in the Fog

by Eric Fraisher Hayes

Fog features prominently in many of Eugene O'Neill's plays. In his early work, fog represents danger and disorientation. To be detached from the visual world means threats can sneak up on you. In his one-act *Fog*, the survivors of a shipwreck find themselves adrift in the arctic fog fearing they will be rammed by an unseen steamer or crash against an undetectable iceberg. The fog elevates their anxieties. It arouses fears of physical danger.

In the playwright's late Tao House masterpiece *Long Day's Journey Into Night*, fog heightens the emotional experiences of the Tyrone family. As day turns to night, the fog rolls in stirring a multitude of reactions. For the men of the family, the approaching fog means another night of mother and wife Mary lost to drug addiction. For Mary, the coming fog is seen as release from her physical pain and the guilt she feels over a lost child. For the youngest son Edmund, disappearing in the fog provides a moment of relief, a chance to be unshackled from the reality of his excruciating life.

But O'Neill's most profound and transformative use of fog is in his 1922 Pulitzer Prize-winning play *"Anna Christie"*. His titular character Anna Christopherson (aka "Anna Christie") has known nothing but hardship in her young life. She lost her mother at an early age, was abandoned by her sailor father, treated like a servant by her relatives, and was sexually abused as a teenager. She runs away from her abusers only to find a world all to ready to continue her exploitation. Ultimately, Anna turns to prostitution as her best option to make a living. She hates the world, and the world seems to hate her.

In an act of desperation, she seeks out her estranged father to see if he can offer her a respite from her traumatic and troubled life. Aboard his coal barge, out on the open water, surrounded by the fog, Anna has an awakening. The world that has treated her so harshly melts away and she is allowed to imagine herself and the world anew. A chance for a fresh beginning is created. One in which she can find love for herself and others, and new possibilities for her life. Enveloped in the fog, Anna loses her past, loses her pain, and finds herself.

Eric Fraisher Hayes
Artistic Director, Eugene O'Neill Foundation, Tao House
efhayes65@yahoo.com

Cover photo: Adrian Deane as Anna in 2023 Eugene O'Neill Festival production of *"Anna Christie."*
Photo credit: Eric Fraisher Hayes

Dramaturg's Note

O'Neill's Innovation in Portraying Prostitution in *"Anna Christie"*

By Katie N. Johnson

Representations of prostitutes have long fascinated audiences in theatre, opera, and film. As a signifier of the gritty modern moment, the prostitute was relentlessly staged in a genre that I have called "brothel drama." There were so many plays about prostitution during the Progressive Era (1900-1920) that critics complained about their prevalence. One way of understanding the obsession of portraying prostitutes is to turn to its historical context: as a way of negotiating anxieties regarding sexuality, gender roles, and women's rights during fervent antiprostitution reform.

Since the nineteenth century, the stage was obsessed with hookers with hearts of gold, who were plagued with tuberculosis (a dramaturgical consequence of their sexual immorality), epitomized by Marguerite Gautier of Alexandre Dumas *fils*'s *La dame aux camélias*, known to English audiences as *Camille*. *Camille* fit the prevailing "fallen woman" sexual ideology by conjuring sympathy for the good-hearted (and, consumptive) Marguerite, while also dramatizing her sacrificial and imminent death.[1] Even though Marguerite denounces her courtesan lifestyle, dutiful "penitent whores,"[2] as Lesley Ferris has put it, cannot be allowed to survive, for their very existence damages their lovers' futures (which are deemed more worthy than their demimondaine lives); nor can they be allowed to infiltrate bourgeois society more broadly.

Greta Garbo and Robert Taylor in a publicity still for *Camille* (1936). Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer.

We find the fallen woman figure in American literature of this time period as well: in *Maggie, a Girl of the Streets* (Stephen Crane, 1900); *Sister Carrie* (Theodore Dreiser, 1900); and *The House of Mirth* (Edith Wharton, 1905). Early twentieth-century theatre also staged the 'fall' into prostitution in plays like *Zaza* (Berton & Simon, 1898)*, Mrs. Warren's Profession* (George Bernard Shaw, 1893)*; The Easiest Way* (Eugene Walter, 1909); *My Little Sister* (Elizabeth Robins, 1913); *The House of Bondage (Joseph Byron Totten); The Fight* (Bayard Veiller1913); and *Lulu Belle* (Charles MacArthur & Edward Sheldon, 1926), to name just a few.

O'Neill broke with the repentant courtesan prototype to portray a fresh character who stands up for her rights and holds accountable the people who had abused and abandoned her. More remarkably, Anna *lives*, thus ending nearly eighty years of consumptive, and doomed, hookers-with-hearts-of-gold characters on the stage. While O'Neill had featured prostitutes in several plays throughout his career (14 in total, according to O'Neill biographers Arthur and Barbara Gelb), Anna stands out as the most intriguing and complex. Most telling is that "Anna Christie" (the name is in quotes because it is Anna's hooker moniker) garnered the Pulitzer Prize in 1922, earning an unexpected endorsement of respectability, whereas previous brothel plays were embroiled in controversies, obscenity cases, arrests, and bans.

"The theme of *"Anna Christie"* is an inversion of that old French thing, the repentant courtesan. Ever since the promising playwrights Augier and Dumas fils has had his whack at it so that it comes into twentieth-century drama like a tin can kicked down the street by a parcel of vigorous schoolboys, and bearing the dints made by individual legs."

—James Agate, *Saturday Review,* April 21, 1923

O'Neill changed the trajectory for prostitutes on the stage. His innovation gave us a new "working girl" who changes her life for the better and stands her own ground.

This essay has drawn from Johnson's *Sisters in Sin: Brothel Drama in America, 1900-1920* (Cambridge UP 2006), and from an essay in a forthcoming volume on the *History of Prostitution in the Visual and Performing Arts*, published by Bloomsbury, 2024.

[1] See Sheila Hickey Garvey, "'Anna Christie' and the 'Fallen Woman Genre'." *Eugene O'Neill Review* 19, no. 1/2 (1995): 66-80.
[2] Lesley Ferris, *Acting Women: Images of Women in Theatre.* Hampshire and London: Macmillan Education Ltd. 1990: 79-95.

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Engagement Guide designed by Ali Bodden
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Nicole Kidman as the consumptive Satine (a Camille-like character) from Baz Luhrmann's 2001 film, *Moulin Rouge!*
Screenshot by Katie N. Johnson

From *Chris Christophersen* to *"Anna Christie"*

By Katie N. Johnson

Eugene O'Neill worked on three versions of what would become *"Anna Christie"* for nearly three years. He was never fully satisfied with the first version, *Chris Christophersen*, which he began in the summer of 1918 with notes and an outline. *Chris Christophersen* was copyrighted June 5, 1919.[1] At one point he used the title *"The Ole Davil."*

He put aside the play for some time, but took it up again in the summer of 1920, writing a 4-act version of *Chris Christopherson*, changing the last name to the correct Swedish spelling. It was produced by George C. Tyler under the title of *Chris* with an out-of-town tryout in Atlantic City, opening March 8, 1920.

Chris "was in trouble from the first," observes Travis Bogard.[2] Sick with the flu, O'Neill was unable to attend rehearsals and shape the play as he would have liked. Then he got word that his father was ill with intestinal cancer and his wife, Agnes, was also very sick shortly before the opening, requiring that Gene race back to Provincetown. Director George Tyler did what he could to whip the play in shape, "cutting its sprawling length so sharply that the curtain rang down before 10:30," writes Bogard.

O'Neill on an unidentified boat. Billy Rose Theatre Division, The New York Public Library. "Eugene O'Neill" New York Public Library Digital Collections. Accessed September 3, 2023. https://digitalcollections.nypl.org/items/510d47e2-b00c-a3d9-e040-e00a18064a9

O'Neill based his characterization on a real-life Chris Christopherson, a deep-water sailor whom he met in his days on the waterfront saloons. Chris despised the sea and was trying to leave the life of a sailor. Bogard observes: "Yet knowing no other life, he was forced to accept a job as a barge captain, sailing the coastal waterways at the edge of the ocean. He spent his time ashore at Jimmy-the-Priest's saloon, drinking nickel whiskey and razzing the sea. One night in October 1917, he fell overboard and drowned in New York Harbor."[3]

O'Neill eventually rewrote the entire play in 1921, and switched the focus from Chris to Anna-- renaming it for a third time as *"Anna Christie."* In *Chris Christopherson* Anna was "a respectable British typist," as Bogard notes, "whose greatest oath was 'By jimminy,' and who eagerly refreshed herself after the fatigues of an Atlantic crossing with a cup of her father's tea." In the change "from typist to trollop" in the development of the script, "Anna's decline and fall was as rapid as it was remarkable."[4]

In locating the character on this side of the Atlantic and the other side of the underworld, O'Neill not only creates a compelling character, but also does so by using the gritty Tenderloin—like many writers of the day—to authenticate her.

[1] Eugene O'Neill, *Collected Plays*, 1913-1921, edited by Travis Bogard (New York: Library of America, 1988), 1091.
[2] Travis Bogard, *Contour in Time: the Plays of Eugene O'Neill,* rev. ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988): 152.
[3] Bogard, 154.
[4] Bogard 152.

"Chris" Production History

Chris **(premiere)**

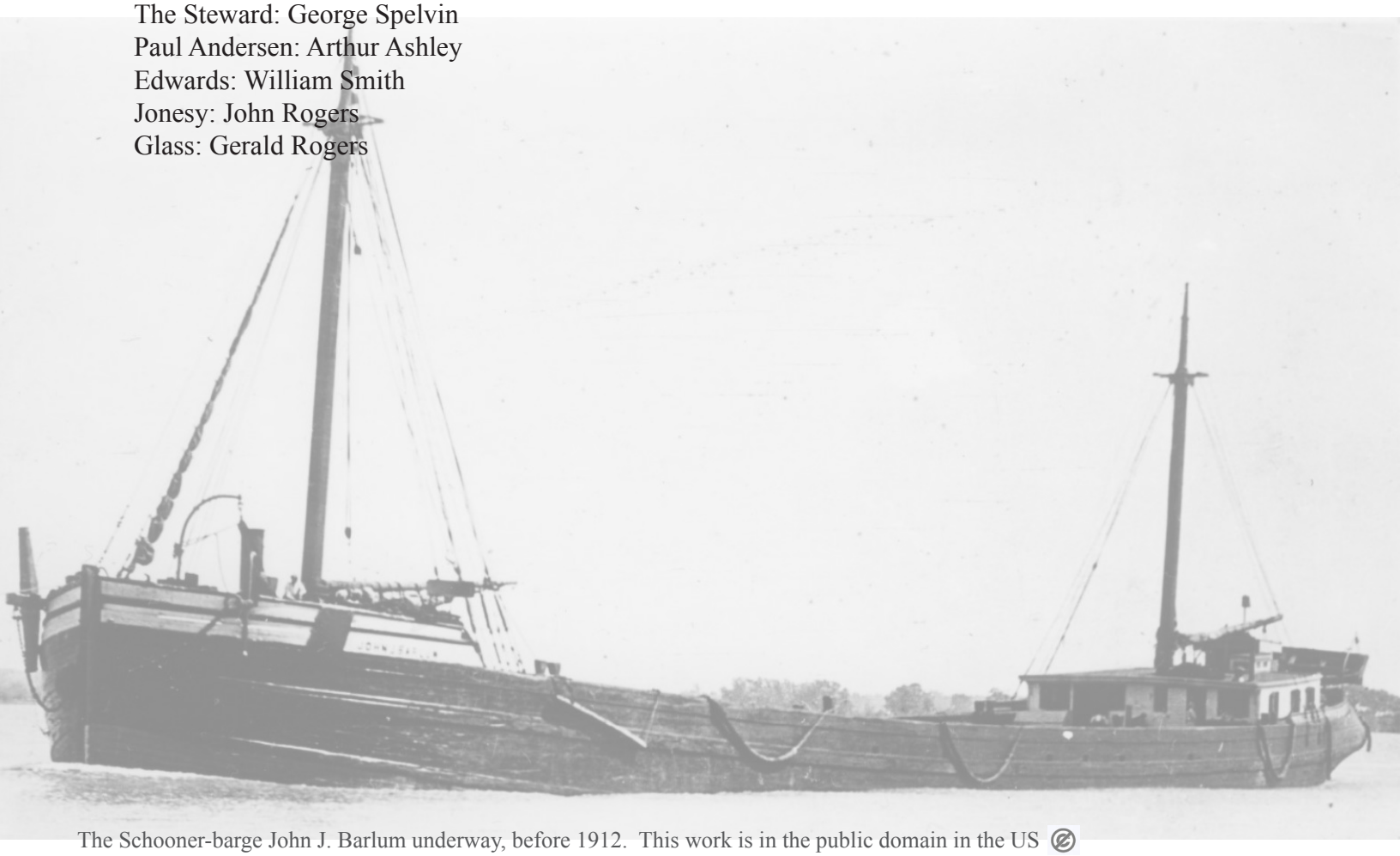
Apollo Theatre, Atlantic City, New Jersey
March 8, 1920
1 week
Director: Frederick Stanhope

Cast

Johnny "the Priest": James C. Mack
Jack Burns: Claude Gourand
Adams: Max L. Schrade
Longshoreman: Frank Devlin
Larry: William E. Hallman
A Postman: Harry MacFayden
Chris Christophersen: Emmett Corrigan
Mickey: Dan Moyles
Devlin: George A. Lawrence
Marthy Owen: Mary Hampton
Anna Christophersen: Lynn Fontanne
Captain Jessup: Roy Cochrane
The Steward: George Spelvin
Paul Andersen: Arthur Ashley
Edwards: William Smith
Jonesy: John Rogers
Glass: Gerald Rogers

A week from Monday, also, Mr. Tyler will begin rehearsals of "Chris," with two well-known players as co-stars. "Chris," like so many of O'Neill's plays, is a tale of the sea, being the story of an old captain who is unable to resist its lure. It will be produced out of town in about a month.

"What News on the Rialto?" *New York Times*, January 25, 1920, 74.



The Schooner-barge John J. Barlum underway, before 1912. This work is in the public domain in the US

"Anna Christie" Production History

Written 1919-1920
Premiered in 1921
Won the Pulitzer in 1922

***"Anna Christie"* (premiere)**

Vanderbilt Theatre, New York City
November 2, 1921 – April 1922
177 performances
Director: Arthur Hopkins
Designer: Robert Edmond Jones

Cast

Johnny-the-Priest: James C. Mack
First Longshoreman: G. O. Taylor
Second Longshoreman: John Hanley
Postman: William Augustin
Chris Christopherson: George Marion
Marthy Owen: Eugenie Blair
Anna Christopherson: Pauline Lord
Mat Burke: Frank Shannon
Johnson (a deckhand): Ole Anderson
Larry: Unknown
Three Sailors: Messrs. Reilly, Hansen, and Kennedy

Billy Rose Theatre Division, The New York Public Library. "Pauline Lord in the stage production Anna Christie" *The New York Public Library Digital Collections*. 1921. https://digitalcollections.nypl.org/items/14149d20-77db-0131-bd8f-58d385a7bbd0

Photo of the 1923 silent film version of *"Anna Christie"* with Blanche Sweet and George Marion.
Credit: John Griffith Wray, Public domain, via Wikimedia Commons

https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Blanche_Sweet_in_Anna_Christie.jpg

Silent Film version, 1923

First National Studios
Adapted by Bradley King
Directed by John Griffith

Cast

Anna Christie: Blanche Sweet
Mat Burke: William Russell
Chris Christopherson: George F. Marion
Marthy Owen: Eugenie Besserer
The Brutal Cousin: Ralph Yearsley
Tommy: Chester Conklin
Anna's Uncle: George Siegmann

[Anna Christie's] Success will depend upon whether the public is prepared to accept a heroine who is a graduate from a brothel."

-- '*Anna Christie'* review, *Variety*, November 11, 1921

Again Wins the Pulitzer Prize!

The award of the Pulitzer Prize for the best American play ("*Anna Christie*") to

EUGENE O'NEILL

for the *second time* in three years, makes his position as the most distinguished American playwright seem indisputably secure.

We have published the following volumes of his plays in uniform bindings:

THE EMPEROR JONES (in eight scenes, unanimously proclaimed one of the most powerful expositions of the psychology of fear ever portrayed in dramatic form); DIFF'RENT (in two acts, a tense drama depicting the devastating consequences of repressions—the story of a sex-starved woman); THE STRAW (in three acts, in locale and treatment unlike anything else Mr. O'Neill has written). *All three plays in one volume.* $2.00

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B&L

BONI & LIVERIGHT, *publishers* - 105 West 40th St. - New York

Display Ad, *New York Times,* June 4, 1922, 54.

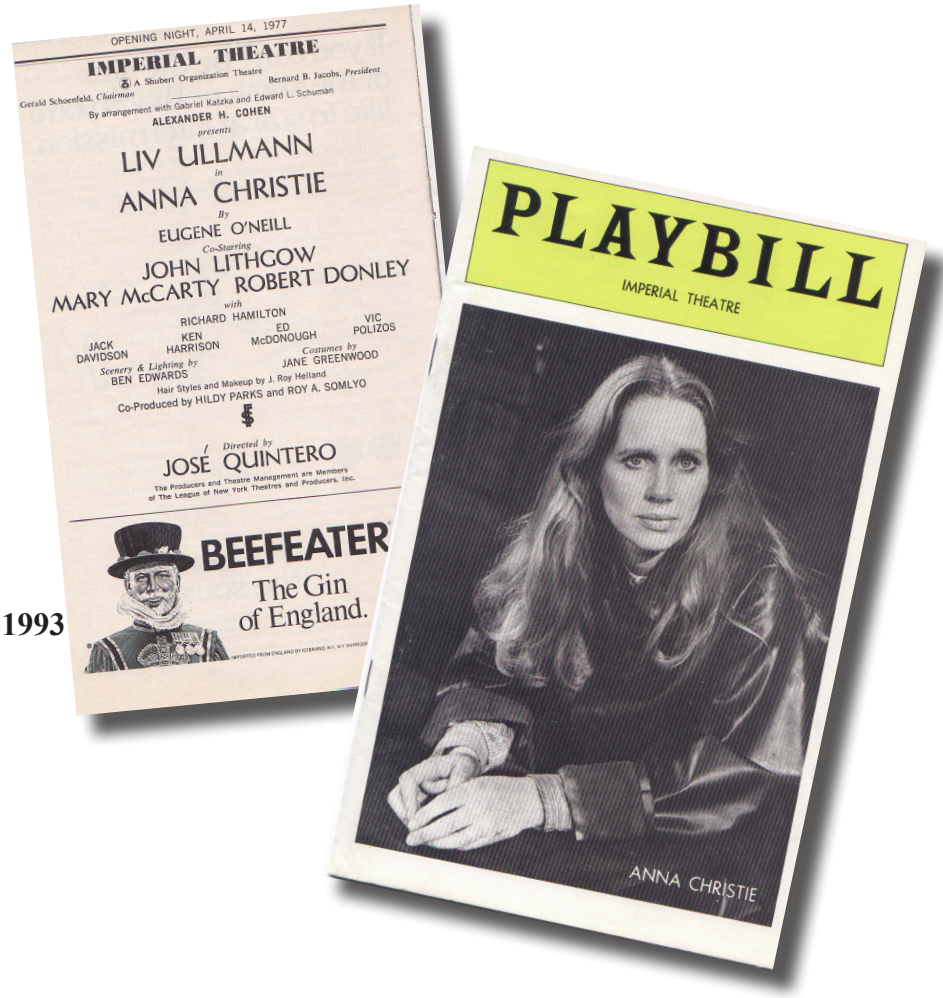
Black and White Talkie, 1930 (Garbo's first spoken lines!)
Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer
Director and Producer: Clarence Brown

Cast
Anna Christie: Greta Garbo
Mat Burke: George F. Marion
Marthy Owen: Marie Dressler
Johnny the Harp: James T. Mack
Larry: Lee Phelps

New Girl in Town (musical adaptation), 1957
Forty-Sixth Street Theatre
Director: George Abbott
431 Performances

Cast (Partial)
Chris: Cameron Prud'Homme
Anna: Gwen Verdon
Mat: George Wallace
Marthy: Thelma Ritter

Revival at the Imperial Theatre, 1977
Directed by José Quintero
124 Performances



Cast
Johnny-the-Priest: Richard Hamilton
First Longshoreman: Edwin McDonough
Second Longshoreman: Vic Polizos
Larry: Ken Harris
Chris Christopherson: Robert Donley
Marthy Owen: Mary McCarty`
Anna Christie: Liv Ullmann
Johnson & Postman: Jack Davidson
Mat Burke: John Lithgow

Revival by Roundabout Theatre Company, 1993
Director: David Leveaux
53 performances

Cast
Johnny-the-Priest: Christopher Synkoop
Anna Christie: Natasha Richardson
Chris Christopherson: Rip Torn
Marthy Owen: Anne Meara
Mat Burke: Liam Neeson
Larry: Barton Tinapp

Pauline Lord's *"Anna Christie"*

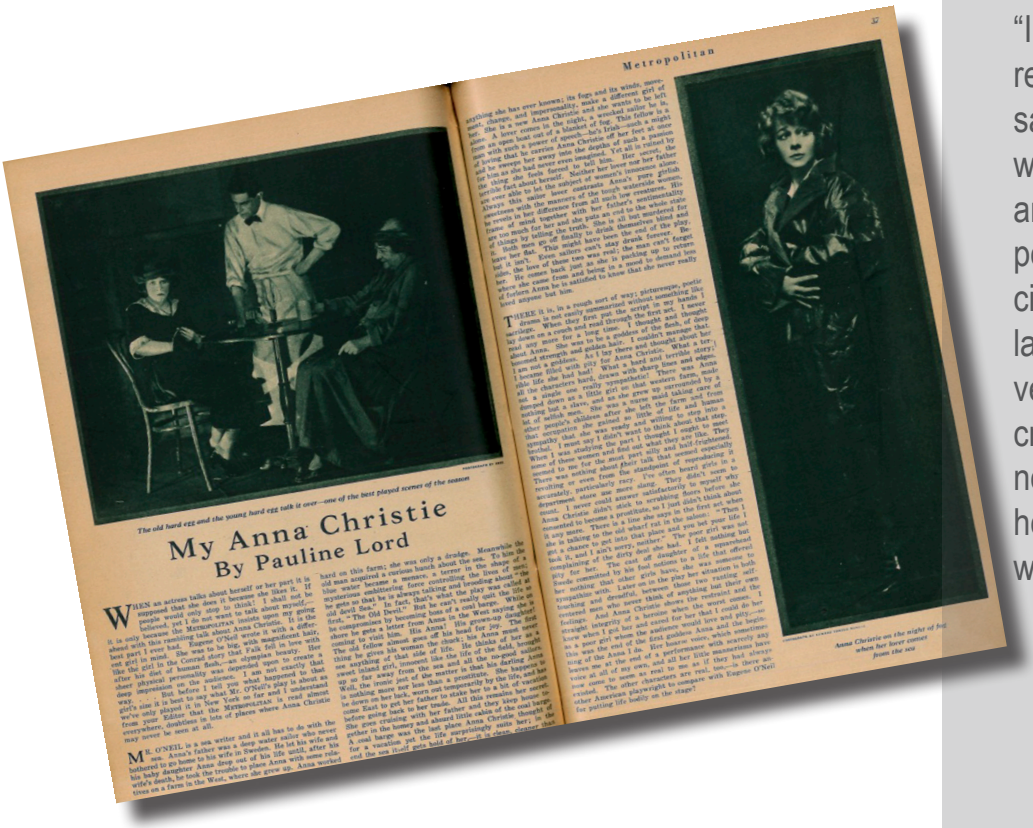
By Katie N. Johnson

Portraying a prostitute was a risky choice for an actress in 1921. Actresses were often associated with their roles, and portraying a disreputable character could forever damage a female performer's status. Pauline Lord, who originated the role of Anna, wrote a defense of her portrayal of a prostitute with her article "My *'Anna Christie,'*" which appeared in *Metropolitan Magazine* in June 1922. She wrote: "It is the best part I've ever had."

Lord's deep empathy for the character is apparent here: "As I thought about her I became filled with pity for Anna Christie. What a terrible life she had had! . . . There was Anna dumped down as a little girl on that western farm, made nothing but a slave, and as she grew up surrounded by a lot of selfish men. She was a nurse maid taking care of other people's children after she left the farm and from that occupation she gained so little of life and human sympathy that she was ready and willing to step into a brothel."

But more significantly, Lord also interviewed prostitutes as part of her research! Talking with sex workers was not only unconventional, but also considered risky for one's reputation. But Lorde did it anyway. Here's how Lord describes it: "When I was studying the part I thought I ought to meet some of these women and find out what they are like. . . There was nothing about their talk that seemed especially revolting or even from the standpoint of reproducing it, very racy."

Rather than see sex workers as "The Social Evil," as they were called in the Progressive Era, Lord was deeply empathetic, writing: "Anna Christie shows the restraint and the straight integrity of a heroine when the worst comes. I knew when I got her and cared for her that I could do her as a poor girl whom the audience would love and pity."



Metropolitan

The old hard egg and the young hard egg talk it over—one of the best played scenes of the season

My Anna Christie
By Pauline Lord

WHEN an actress talks about herself or her part it is to be supposed that she does it because she likes it. If people would only stop to think! I shall not, I believed, yet I do not want to talk about myself. . . .

"I was quite shocked when I first read *'Anna Christie,'* [Pauline Lord] said, "and even now there are times when I feel I must run into a corner and hide my face at the thought of portraying such a character. Especially when I see some venerable lady in the stalls. Then I notice the venerable lady is having a little cry, and I know that the essential nobility of Anna's nature has 'got her as it has 'got' me, and won her whole-hearted sympathy."

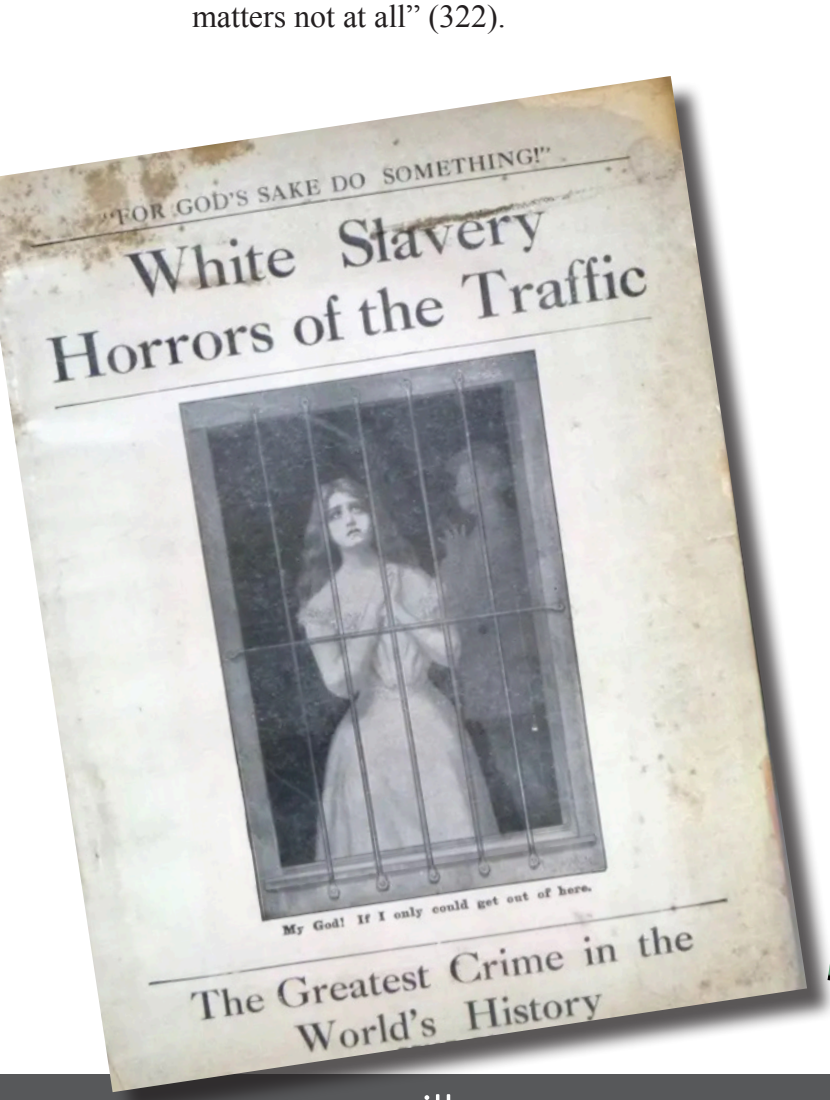
--'The Creator of 'Anna Christie': the Picture Show Meets Pauline Lord," Picture Show, August 4, 1923

In Their Own Words: Prostitutes' Stories

From *Madeleine: an Autobiography*, originally published in 1919 by Harper & Brothers. It was reprinted with an introduction by Marcia Carlisle (New York: Persea Books, 1986).

As Marcia Carlisle observes in her introduction, "When it was published in 1919, it achieved a short-lived notoriety because of efforts to suppress it. Descriptions of sexual transactions between prostitutes and their customers did not alarm censors, for there are few . . . Instead it was the author's failure to be humbled by her experiences and her critical attitude toward Christian reformers that were offended" (v).

> "I know all there is to be known about prostitution. I know it in all its hideousness; and I know it to be one of the greatest plagues that afflict mankind. But well as I know the underworld, I know more of the hearts and lives of the individual women of which it is comprised." (321).
>
> "Society has decreed for them punishment more cruel than it has decreed for the greatest criminals. It has taken no account of the suffering and atonement of their daily lives" (321 -22).
>
> "Through the countless ages, and on down into our own times, the scarlet woman has been looked upon as one who in sheer wantonness had chosen her evil mode of life. 'Very well,' said society, 'she has made her bed, now let her lie in it.' That countless thousands of its fairest and best come to lie in it also matters not at all" (322).



Photograph of Pauline Lord as Anna Christopherson, James T. Mack as Johnny-the-Priest, and Eugenie Blair as Marthy Owen in the Broadway production of *Anna Christie.* Current Literature Publishing Company, photograph by Abbe - *Current Opinion*, Volume 72 Number 1 (page 63). Public Domain.

"Is there, you will ask as you leave the Vanderbilt, better acting in New York than that of Miss Pauline Lord. Lord as the weary ex-prostitute, or that of Mr. George Marion, as her pitiable old parent? Perhaps there is, but you will find none more satisfactory."

--Percy Hammond, "Anna Christie by the Aerid Mr. O'Neill, Is Presented at the Vanderbilt," *New York Tribune*, November 3, 1921

George Marion and Pauline Lord in *"Anna Christie"* at the Vanderbilt Theatre (NY) 1921. Photo by Abbe Studio (New York, NY). Eugene O'Neill Papers. Yale Collection of American Literature, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library.

Women's Work: Working Girls
By Katie N. Johnson

At the time that O'Neill was writing *"Anna Christie"* there was a shift regarding women entering the workforce, especially in urban areas of Progressive Era America (1900 – 1920).

Tellingly, of all the occupations women had *before* they turned to prostitution, the most prominent was Domestic Work (38%). This is what Anna was doing in Minnesota before she begins sex work.

Though there were more women than ever working in the early twentieth century, there was a significant disparity between the number of women and men working. According to the U.S. Census of 1900, 20.6% of women worked, comprising 18% of the workforce, while 90.5% of men worked. Note that these figures do not count unpaid housework that women do.

Wages were moreover insufficient for what we would now call a "living wage." The average weekly pay in 1900 was about $6—well below the projected expenses of frugal living. The problem is well summarized by one vice commission report:

> "The life of an unprotected girl who tries to make a living in a great city is full of torturing temptations. First, she faces the problem of living on an inadequate wage. . . Hundreds, if not thousands, of girls from country towns, and those born in the city but who has been thrown on their own resources, are compelled to live in cheap boarding or rooming houses on the average wage of six dollars. How do they exist on this sum? . . . Is it any wonder that a tempted girl who receives only six dollars per week working with her hands sells her body for twenty-five dollars per week when she learns there is a demand for it and men are willing to pay the price?" (*The Social Evil in Chicago*, 1911)

It was also not uncommon for women to *temporarily* work in prostitution to augment their wages for short periods of time.

DANGEROUS AMUSEMENTS—THE BRILLIANT ENTRANCE TO HELL ITSELF
Young girls who have danced at home a little are attracted by the blazing lights, gaiety and apparent happiness of the "dance halls," which in many instances lead to their downfall.

"Dangerous Amusements" from *War on the White Slave Trade* by Ernest Bell. Artist unknown; Public domain, via Wikimedia Commons.

O'Neill's Sonnet "The Haymarket"

The Haymarket was a former variety theatre that had been converted to dancing, drinking, French peep shows, and a space that facilitated solicitations from prostitutes. It was in the heart of the Tenderloin (red-light district) in New York City.

This poem was published in the *New London Telegraph* on November 21, 1912.

"The Haymarket"
A sonnet by Eugene O'Neill

The music blares into a rag-time tune—
The dancers whirl around the polished floor;
Each powdered face a set expression wore
Of dull satiety, and wan smiles swoon
On rouged lips at sallies opportune
Of maudlin youths whose sodden spirits soar
On drunken wings; while through the opening door
A chilly blast sweeps like the breath of doom.

In sleek dress suit an old man sits and leers
With vulture mouth and blood-shot, beady eyes
At the young girl beside him. Drunken tears
Fall down her painted face, and choking sighs
Shake her, as into his familiar ears
She sobs her sad, sad history—and lies!

When John Sloan's painting *The Haymarket, Sixth Avenue* was shown in a 1908 exhibition in New York, it prompted controversy. The Brooklyn Museum describes the painting as follows: "*The Haymarket* was especially provocative because it showed lavishly dressed women entering a well-known dance hall unaccompanied by male companions. These women were independent and pleasure-seeking, defying society's expectations. This type of realism in art shocked many viewers who were accustomed to idealizing and genteel subjects."

John Sloan (American, 1871-1951). *The Haymarket, Sixth Avenue*, 1907. Oil on canvas, 26 1/8 x 34 13/16 in. (66.3 x 88.5 cm). Brooklyn Museum, Gift of Mrs. Harry Payne Whitney, 23.60 (Photo: Brooklyn Museum, 23.60_SL1.jpg)

John Sloan, *Hell Hole*, 1917, etching and aquatint on paper, plate: 8 x 10 in. (20.3 x 25.3 cm), Smithsonian American Art Museum, Bequest of Frank McClure, 1979.98.208 https://americanart.si.edu/artwork/hell-hole-22496

John Sloan's etching of The Hell Hole, officially known as the Golden Swan, portrays one of O'Neill's favorite watering holes in the early 1910s. As Doris Alexander describes this dive bar, it "was visibly a broken-down saloon on the corner of Fourth Street and Sixth Avenue, but was 'truly,' as Mary Heaton Vorse has pointed out, 'a hell hole and that was the fascination for Gene.'"

From: Doris Alexander, "Eugene O'Neill, 'The Hound of Heaven,' and the 'Hell Hole'" *Modern Language Quarterly* 20, no. 4 (1959): 307.

Musical Contexts in *"Anna Christie"*: "My Yosephine"

By Katie N. Johnson

Audiences my wonder what the source is for the tune "My Yosephine" that Chris sings four times in the stage version of *"Anna Christie"* (and also in the film version with Greta Garbo). The song, observes Travis Bogard, "was composed by 'Lefty' Louis, a bartender at one of O'Neill's early hangouts, The Golden Swan Saloon, nicknamed 'The Hell Hole' by its patrons."[1]

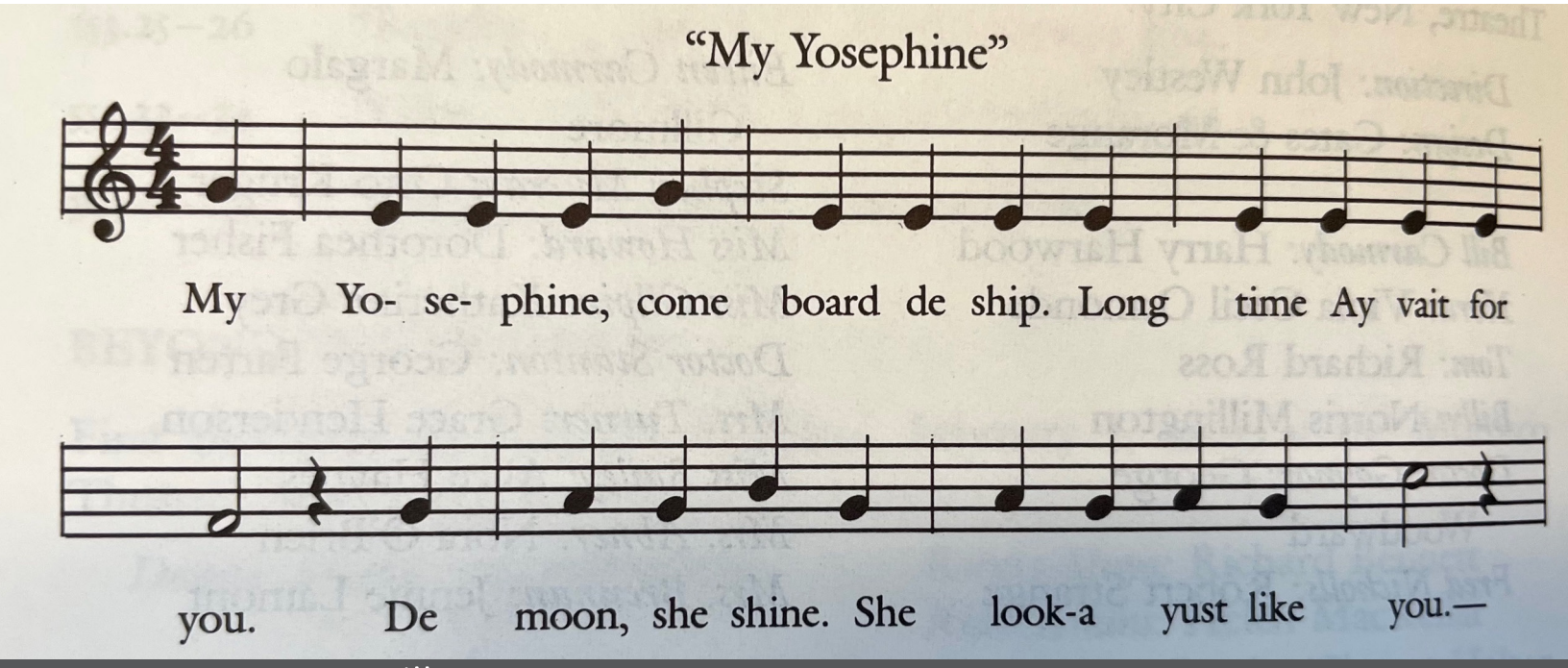
In a 1919 letter to his second wife Agnes Boulton, O'Neill wrote that Lefty was "elated" that the song was used in *Chris Christopherson* (the earlier version of *"Anna Christie"*). He wrote: "Also, to my astonishment, he [Lefty] swears—(and I believe him)—that Josephine is his own stuff, a song he made up when he was winging in a tough Wop [sic] cabaret—'my own bull sh—t,' he explains proudly. . . . It sounds rock-bottom and I think all the hours seemingly wasted in the H[ell] H[ole] would be justified if they had resulted in only this."[2]

> CHRIS: "My Yosephine, come board de ship---
>
> De moon, she shi-i-i-ine. She looks yust like you.
>
> Tche-tchee, tchee-tchee, tchee-tchee, tchee-tchee . . .
>
> Ay'm good singer, yes?"
>
> *("Anna Christie,"* Act 1, O'Neill, *Collected Plays*, 977).

From *Eugene O'Neill, Complete Plays, 1913-1920*, ed. Travis Bogard (New York: Library of America, 1988), 1102.

[1] Travis Bogard, *The Eugene O'Neill Songbook* (Berkeley: East Bay Books, 1993).

[2] Eugene O'Neill, *Selected Letters*, ed. by Travis Bogard (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1988): 100. See also Robert J. Dowling, *Eugene O'Neill: A Life in Four Acts* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2014), 191.



Happy Ending? The Controversy over the Ending of *"Anna Christie"*

By Katie N. Johnson

There has been much debate about the ending of Eugene O'Neill's *"Anna Christie"*. While praising the rest of the play, most critics from the 1920s viewed the last act as "full of bogus things" (Alexander Woollcott of the *New York Times*) or "inexcusably banal" (Maida Castellum of the *New York Call*). Still another critic (yours truly) claims that the play recycles the repentant courtesan theme that was quite common in the nineteenth century.

But O'Neill defended the ending of his play, writing in a letter to George Jean Nathan, "the happy ending is merely the comma at the end of a gaudy introductory clause, with the body of the sentence still unwritten. (In Fact, I once thought of calling the play Comma)'." (qtd. in Travis Bogard, *Contour in Time*, 163). O'Neill believed the ending was much more complex than audiences thought.

In response to the critics, O'Neill composed the following letter to the dramatic editor the *New York Times* to defend his play. It was published on December 18, 1921. Do you agree with the critics of the day? Or, with O'Neill?

> From Eugene G. O'Neill
>
> *To the Dramatic Editor*
>
> So many people — critics professional and volunteer — have taken exception to what they allege it the compromising happy ending to my *"Anna Christie"* that I feel called upon to make not a defense but an explanation. Evidently — to me at least — these people have ears but are slightly hard of hearing.
>
> First of all, is the ending to *"Anna Christie"* an ending in the accepted sense at all? Is it not rather a new beginning, with a whole new play, as full of the same preordained human conflict as the last, just starting at the final curtain. Such was my intention. In this type of naturalistic play, which attempts to translate life into its own terms, I am a denier of all endings. Things happen in life, run their course as the incidental, accidental, the fated, then pause to give their inevitable consequences time to mobilize for the next attack. In the last few minutes of *"Anna Christie"* I tried to show that dramatic gathering of new forces out of the old. I wanted to have the audience leave with a deep feeling of life flowing on, of the past which is never the past but always the birth of the future, of a problem solved for the moment but by the very nature of its solution involving new problems.
>
> Since the last act of *"Anna Christie"* seems to have been generally misunderstood, I must have failed in this attempt. And I was afraid I would, for I knew what I was up against. A kiss in the last act, a word about marriage, and the audience grow blind and deaf to what follows. Also, I surmise, the critics begin to itch for their typewriters to damn this happy ending — which hasn't ended. No one hears old Chris when he makes his gloomy, foreboding comment on the new set of coincidences, which to him reveal the old davil, sea – (fate) – up to her old tricks again. More importantly, no one hears Burke, when for the first time in the play, overcome by a superstitious dread himself, he agrees with the old man. And more importantly still, no one listens to Anna when she shows how significant she feels this to be by her alarmed protest: "Aw, you ain't agreeing with him, are you, Mat?" She follows this by quickly urging him to "be a sport and drink to the sea, no matter what." And the play ends with the father staring out of the door into the fog. "Fog, fog, fog, all bloody time. You can't see where you was going, no. But dat ole' davil sea, she knows."

But few of the critics have ever heard any of these things. At least I must conclude they have not, for not even the most adversely prejudiced could call this a "happy ending" Meaning that I wish it understood as unhappy? Meaning nothing of the kind. Meaning what I have said before, that the play has no ending. Three characters have been revealed in all their intrinsic verity, under the acid test of a fateful crisis in their lives. They have solved this crisis for the moment as best they may, in accordance with the will that is in each of them. The curtain falls. Behind it their lives go on.

It may be objected by some stickler for dramatic technique that, after all, the last speeches in the play form an anti-climax, and that, the psychology of audiences being what it is, I have no right to expect anything but a general inattention. This point, I grant, is well taken. Nevertheless, those last speeches, properly understood, are as full of drama as anything in the play. They are not of the stuff of anti-climax. It is only the kiss-marriage-happily-ever-after tradition that makes them so. And it is my business — and that of every playwright worth his or her salt — to drop such doddering old traditions down the manhole — if only to see what happens. In this case the old tradition seems to have bounded back and "beaned" the playwright.

But granting for the moment the absurdity that the ending is happy, why the objections to it raised on all sides? Have I not been told constantly that gloom is my failing, that I should see the brighter side, that I should grant my helpless human beings their 100 per cent right to happiness. Well, in *"Anna Christie,"* haven't I? You claim I have and yet you will have none of it. You say it is unconvincing. Why? Is it, as I suspect, on moral grounds? — Does the idea that two such "disreputable" folk as Anna and Burke are, as you think, going to be happy, disturb your sense of the proper fitness of things in this best of all possible worlds? Or is your reason, as I more than suspect, simply that you prefer the obvious to the inevitable? It would have been so obvious and easy — in the case of this play, conventional even — to have made my last act a tragic one. It could have been done in ten different ways, any one of them superficially right. But looking deep into the hearts of my people, I saw it couldn't be done. It would not have been true. They were not that kind. They would act in just the silly, immature, compromising way that I have made them act; and I thought that they would appear to others as they do to me, a bit tragically humorous in their vacillating weakness. But evidently not. Evidently they are all happy — and unconvincing! Their groping clutch at happiness is taken as a deadly finality.

But how about those sentimental ones to whom the Boy on the Burning Deck represents the last word in the heroic spirit our drama should strive to express — the American Oedipus Rex? Surely they must read something into my ending besides mere eternal happiness. But they don't. And yet there never was a more sentimental gesture of defiance at fate than that of Burke and Anna agreeing to wed.

I can't please anyone with my happy-unhappy, unhappy-happy, ending that doesn't end.

Lastly, to those who think I deliberately distorted my last act because a "happy ending" would be calculated to make the play more of a popular success I have only this to say: The sad truth is that you have precedents enough and to spare in the history of our drama for such a suspicion. But, on the other hand, you have every reason not to believe it of me.

Eugene G. O'Neill

The Mail Bag

From Eugene G. O'Neill.

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EUGENE G. O'NEILL.
Provincetown, Mass., Dec. 12, 1921.

Pauline Lord, George Marion & Frank Shannon featured in *The Illustrated Sporting and Dramatic News* [London] May 12, 1923.

Eugene G. O'Neill,
Eugene O'Neill Foundation Archive, Danville, California

"A few skeptics hereabouts are pleased to observe whimsically that Mr. Pulitzer would upheave his sarcophagus if he knew that a heroine of Anna Christie's type had won his $1,000. But I feel sure that, living, Mr. Pulitzer would amend his ordinances and sanction the decree which bestows upon 'Anna Christie' the scepter as monarch of the season's American dramas."

--Percy Hammond, "The Theaters," *New York Tribune*, May 28, 1922

Conflicting Marriage Scripts

In American popular culture, it was common to receive conflicting messages about marriage and expected gender roles for women.

As Beth Wynstra observes, "in Kenneth Macgowan's review of *"Anna Christie"* in *Vogue Magazine* (January 1922), he, like O'Neill, says the wedding is just a blip, and not a big deal. But then there is the big Palmolive advertisement right next to it arguing that weddings are the most important moment in a woman's life."

The juxtaposition of an article which celebrates Anna's autonomy with an advertisement that compels women to "keep that wedding complexion" signals the complexity of expectations for women regarding marriage during the 1920s.

VOGUE

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SEEN *on the* STAGE

Out of the Welter of the Good and Bad

Plays of a Season in Full Swing Emerge

Two Arresting Plays by Eugene O'Neill

By KENNETH MACGOWAN

"ANNA CHRISTIE"

Keep That Wedding Day Complexion

PALMOLIVE

Eugene O'Neill.
Foundation, Tao House

Photo courtesy of the National Park Service (Eugene O'Neill National Historic Site)

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Eugene O'Neill.
Foundation, Tao House