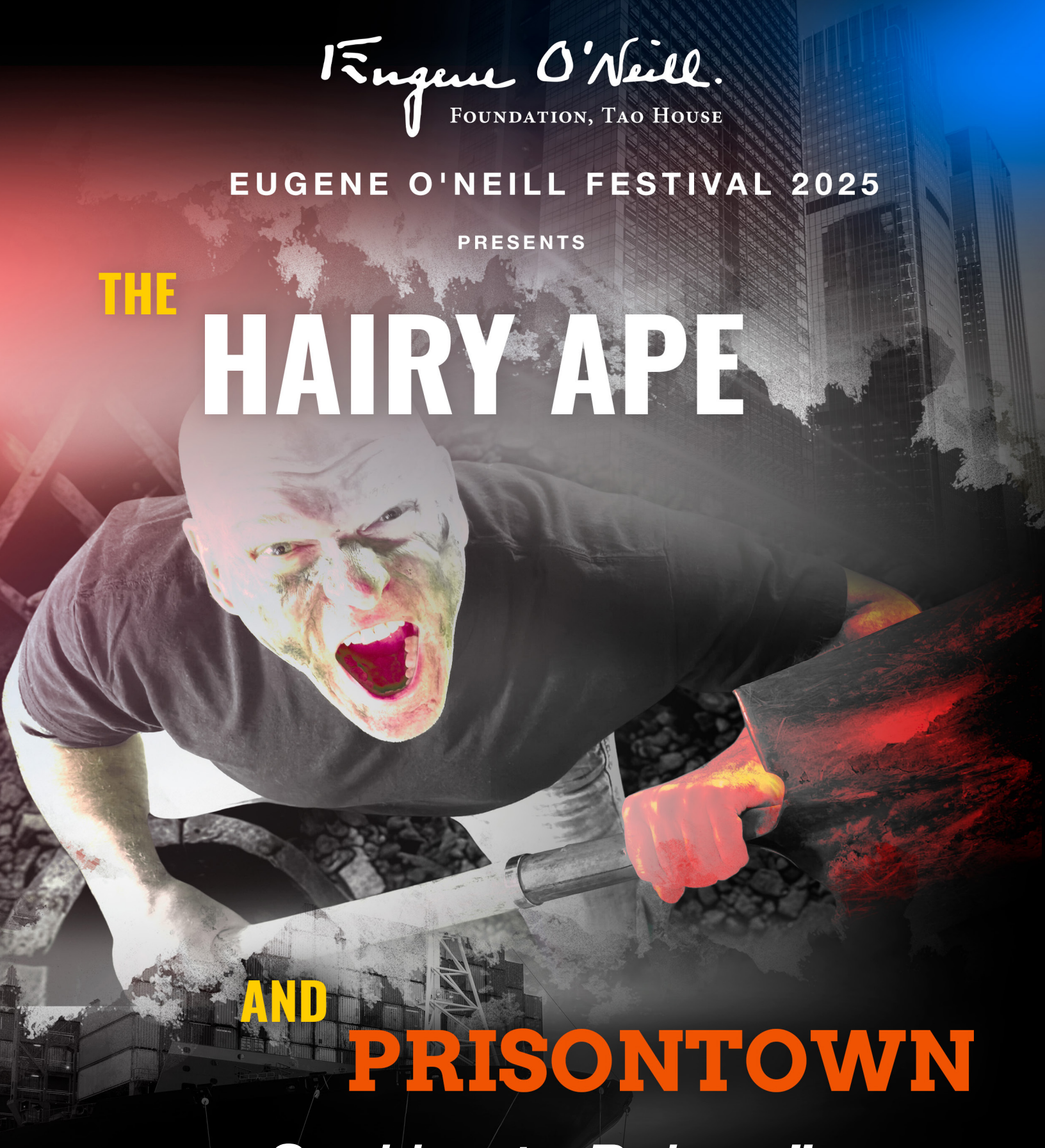
Eugene O'Neill.
Foundation, Tao House

EUGENE O'NEILL FESTIVAL 2025

PRESENTS

THE HAIRY APE



AND PRISONTOWN

"Seeking to Belong"

Engagement Guide

Table of Contents

O'Neill at sea, 1912

Director's Note

The Hide and Seek Playwright's Greatest Seeker

The game of hide and seek involves both securing safety for the self, out of the sight of others, and hunting others everywhere your imagination takes you. Thus, in the hills above Danville, CA, Eugene O'Neill played his own game of "hide and seek." At Tao House, the playwright hid from the world, creating a space where he could seek truths about himself through the stories of others. O'Neill, like his characters, struggled to find his place in the world. Only through his writing did he find empathy for others and himself.

A large part of the underlying power of Eugene O'Neill's plays is rooted in a perpetual sense of restlessness. Like the playwright himself, O'Neill's characters are plagued by doubts, fears and a desire to find relief. Many of these fictional figures feel they do not belong and because O'Neill is a good dramatist, he sends his characters out into the worlds of their plays to wrestle and reckon with what is amiss. Often these characters, after reflection, choose retreat. Edmund Tyrone in *Long Day's Journey Into Night* wishes he was a seagull or a fish. Anna Christophersen in *"Anna Christie"* washes away the world and sees herself anew in the fog surrounding her father's coal barge. Deborah Harford of *More Stately Mansions* fantasizes about escaping the harshness of the world through a magical garden door. All want to escape a painful existence by disengaging from the world around them. But one of O'Neill's desperate misfits takes a different tack. Robert "Yank" Smith in *The Hairy Ape* finds himself equally out of place and in pain, but instead of manufacturing a private refuge, he barrels headfirst into the world around him seeking to prove how he fits, not how to escape the world. Driven by an unmatched desire to find where he belongs, Yank is O'Neill's ultimate seeker. Although Tao House signaled a retreat for Eugene O'Neill, through his work, he never stopped seeking.

-Eric Fraisher Hayes,
Artistic Director, Eugene O'Neill Foundation, Tao House
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Dramaturg's Note

Welcome to the Eugene O'Neill Festival! At first glance, the two productions of this festival, *Prisontown* and *The Hairy Ape*, could not be more different. These dramatic works differ wildly in terms of plot, characters, and setting. Yet, there are significant and compelling bridges between the two works. I hope this engagement guide can help illuminate such bridges along with offering helpful context, thought provoking questions, and different portals into the dramatic works of this year's Festival.

I am grateful to scholar Robert Richter for contributing his essay "Sail Versus Steam or Sailor Versus Stoker in *The Hairy Ape*" to this guide. Thank you also to *Prisontown* playwright Lee Osorio for the interview you will find here.

As you watch the powerful productions of this year's Festival, we invite you to consider how notions of belonging shape your experiences, your community, and your hopes for the future.

-Beth Wynstra, Dramaturg
Associate Professor of English, Babson College

Sail Versus Steam or Sailor Versus Stoker in *The Hairy Ape*

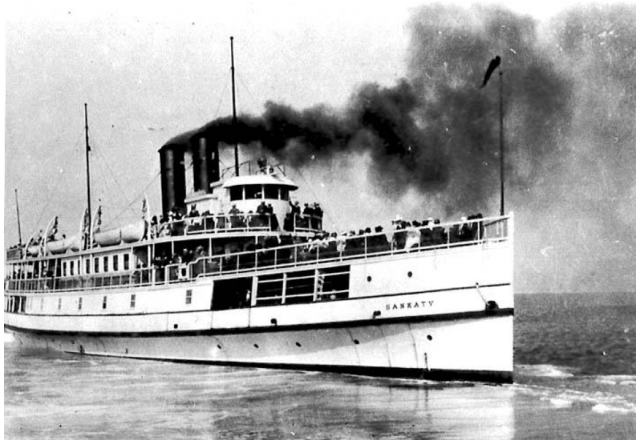
By Robert A. Richter

In writing *The Hairy Ape*, Eugene O'Neill drew on his own knowledge and experience of the maritime world to create the characters, settings and conflicts between the men on board ship and ashore. It is important to note that O'Neill spent about two years living and working amongst sailors from 1910 to 1912. The maritime world was in a period of transition, moving from the age of sail to the age of steam, beginning in the last quarter of the nineteenth century and through the first quarter of the twentieth century.

In 1910, at the age of 21, O'Neill became immersed in shipboard life when he sailed on the square-rigged sailing ship the CHARLES RACINE from Boston to Buenos Aires. He was a passenger on the RACINE, but had the opportunity to learn the ways of a sailing ship. He disembarked in Buenos Aires where he lived in the sailortown for six months before signing on to the steamship S.S. IKALA to New York City. In New York he lived at Jimmy the Priest's, a sailor's flophouse, before signing on the American Line's steamship the S.S. NEW YORK. The NEW YORK brought him to Southampton, England. He left Southampton on the American Line's S.S. PHILADELPHIA for the return trip to New York and that marked the end of his career aboard ships.

Square Rigged Sail Boat

His time in Southampton was brief, but influential. It was in Southampton where O'Neill had the opportunity to solidify relationships with stokers from the American Line ships, some of whom he might have met at Jimmy the Priest's. One of those stokers was O'Neill's friend Driscoll, who is the inspiration for Yank in *The Hairy Ape.* O'Neill's job on the ships was as a sailor and it was rare for sailors and stokers to fraternize. But during his time in Southampton there was the Great Labor Strike of 1911 and the different factions in the maritime trades put aside their differences and joined together in solidarity.



1911 steamship, Martha's Vineyard

There was a significant distinction between sailor's work on a square-rigged ship from their work on a steamship. Square-rigged ships were designed to travel distances, crossing oceans and taking advantage of the trade winds. They carried large sails that crossed the keel or backbone of the ship. They required strong winds to push them through the water. The peak of square-rigged ship design were the famed clipper ships of the mid-nineteenth century, of which O'Neill was enamored and of which he had a romanticized view. They were known as the greyhounds of the sea; they had long sleek hulls that sliced through the water, setting numerous speed records. Square-rigged ships required sailors with skill to work on deck or aloft in the rigging to handle the sails. The sailors also took their turn at the wheel of the ship and had to understand some navigation. The CHARLES RACINE and other square-rigged ships of O'Neill's time were not built for speed, but built to carry large bulk cargos, carrying capacity was more important at that time than speed.

Steamships during this period were rigged with rudimentary sails as an alternate means of propulsion in the event that the steam engines went down. Therefore, they also needed sailors as part of the crew. But it was the stokers in the stokehold, feeding coal into the boilers, that generated the power to propel the ship. The stokers' work did not require skill; it required strength and stamina. While they were in the stokehold, stokers responded to commands for more or less steam, which were communicated via bells or whistles coming from the bridge.

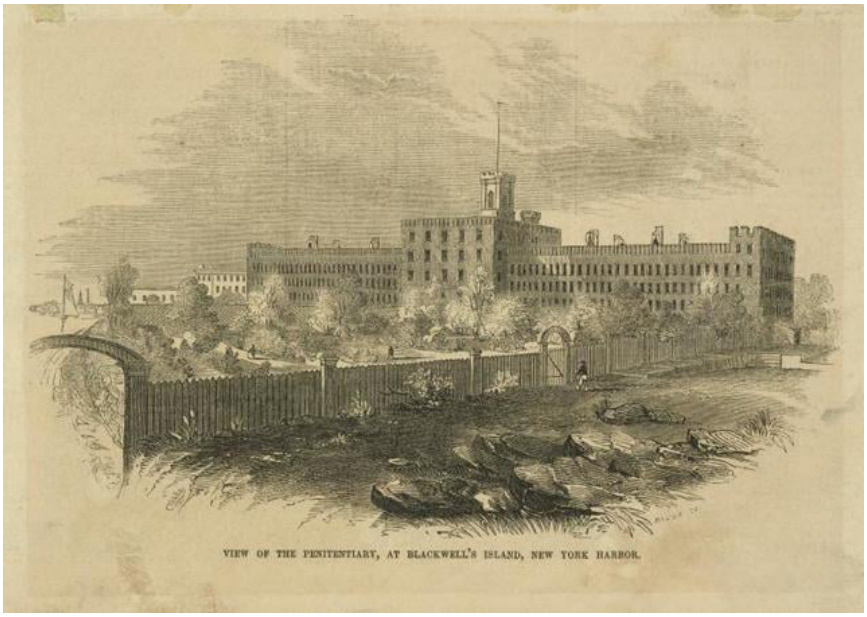
In *The Hairy Ape* Paddy had been a sailor on square-rigged ships and is now a stoker. Square-riggers were in decline for a number of reasons and there was more work available on steamships. Paddy laments the days of sailing ships when men worked in the open air and their work required knowledge and skill. While based in truth, his view is somewhat romanticized. O'Neill shared the same romanticized view as Paddy. Yank is a stoker through and through. He has stamina and strength. Due to his brute strength, he can rule the stokehold. Whereas, Paddy is older and not as strong.

The conflict between Paddy and Yank arises when Paddy is lamenting the days of his youth and the great age of sail and Yank chastises him as being something of the past and does not belong in the new age of steam. Throughout the play Yank is striving to find a place where he belongs, and he has found that in the stokehold. But Paddy challenges him and questions why he would want to be part of this dark world in the stokehold; becoming a part of the machine that makes the ship move and losing his humanness. These are and were common issues as the world turned to mechanization; moving from the artisan creating something from start to finish to workers being one part of an assembly line. O'Neill uses Paddy to express his own lament, romantic view of the age of sail and the mechanization of the world.

Blackwell's Island

Prisons form a connecting thread between Eugene O'Neill's *The Hairy Ape* and Lee Osorio's *Prisontown*. In both plays, this setting operates as a literal location for captivity but also as a more metaphorical element representing isolation, detachment, and a hunger for belonging.

In Scene VI of *The Hairy Ape*, Yank finds himself locked in the prison on Blackwell's Island after his violent outburst on Fifth Avenue leads to a thirty-day sentence. This grim location is far more than a plot backdrop. O'Neill's use of Blackwell Island carries heavy historical and symbolic resonance, especially for audiences in the early 1920s.



View of the Penitentiary, Blackwell Island, New York Harbor, 1800
Contributors
Eno, Amos F. (1836-1915), Collector
Wade, William (fl. 1844-1852), Artist

Blackwell's Island (renamed Roosevelt Island later) was infamous in New York City's history as the site of both a notorious penitentiary and the city's "Lunatic Asylum." By the time *The Hairy Ape* was written, Blackwell's Island had long been a byword for society's discarded and mistreated souls. Investigative journalist Nellie Bly's famous exposé *Ten Days in a Mad-House* (1887) had revealed the harrowing conditions at the Blackwell's Island asylum decades earlier, and the island's prison was equally emblematic of misery.

The mention of Blackwell's Island would have evoked a world of suffering and hopelessness for audiences in 1922. It was a place where the poor, the mad, and the criminal were literally cast away from society. This historical context deepens the impact of Yank's fate. His personal collapse is not happening in an abstract or fictional space but in Blackwell's Island, a tangible symbol of isolation and despair in the modern city.

Ultimately, Blackwell Island's importance in *The Hairy Ape* lies in how it encapsulates the play's darkest truths. It is the concrete hell of alienation, where Yank is denied any shred of dignity or identity. And historically, it grounds the drama in a real institution notorious for despair, reinforcing O'Neill's indictment of a society that

consigns its outcasts to such grim corners. In just one expressionistic scene, O'Neill illustrates how the machinery of civilization can reduce a person to a caged "ape," without a sense of belonging or hope.

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Credit: Blackwell's Island Penitentiary, New York: (left) prisoners are walking in a long file leaving spoons in a bowl as they go past; (right) prisoners stand in line to receive a loaf of bread. Wood engraving by W.J. Palmer, 1876, after F. Régamay. Wellcome Collection. Source: Wellcome Collection. New York Public Library.

Below you will find an interview with *Prisontown* playwright Lee Osorio that explores the literal and metaphorical ideas of prisons, amongst other topics, in his play. Certainly, O'Neill and Osorio's work both examine the significant ramifications of systems that judge some worthy of participation in a society and others not.

An Interview with Lee Osorio

Lee Osorio, playwright, actor, and EONF Artist in Residence, in the first production of Prisontown (world premiere at Savannah Rep, 2024. Photo: Malcolm Tully.)

On July 9, 2025, festival dramaturg Beth Wynstra had the following conversation with Prisontown playwright Lee Osorio.

Beth
Lee, my 1st question, can you talk about the process of writing *Prisontown*? How did the play begin to form in your head? And did you always think of it as a solo show?

Lee
So, the genesis of the play is actually in the play. It's this text that I got from my brother, that, you know, asked me, mostly jokingly, if I'd be willing to marry one of his clients, who was about to be deported. And luckily, the

person was not deported and was able to stay in the States. This was back in 2016 or 2017. The client had received a DUI but had lived here since he was a child. My brother got him off because of some paperwork mess up. So, I didn't actually have to answer my brother's question for myself, but it definitely got the wheels on my head turning in a couple of different ways.

My brother had asked me, "How much of an activist are you?" This happened in a time of heightened protests in the U.S. We were coming off of the protests from Michael Brown's murder in 2014/ 2015 and then sort of the ongoing police brutality and police violence protests over the following summers, the protests after the Pulse massacre in Orlando, so there was a big, you know, question in society of what does it mean to be an activist? Is it just marching? Is it just posting on Facebook? What can I do that can actually make an impact? And so of course my brain was like, well, if you married someone who's about to be deported, that would be a big impact. Should I do that? I'm single, I have the ability to. If I can do something, should I do that? But it also got the wheels turning in my brain about our hometown that my brother and I had grown up in. And I was only there until I was about five or six years old. My brother was there from about three years until nine years, but I have a lot of clear memories about that place. But I hadn't thought about it in a while and I didn't know what it had become in the 30 years since I had left. So, I got really curious about it. Especially given that most of the news I could find about the town was about this immigration detention center, which really seemed to be a big hub of activity in the town.

It's such a great question: was it always a solo show? No. There is a draft out there, a very bad, bad draft where I thought this might be, like a family drama of these people who lived in the town. Several people that had, you know, sort of worked with me on this asked, "What is the story that you're interested in? What's your part in this?" And so that's when it really just focused back on my relationship to this town.

Beth
I am so glad to learn the origin story of this work and how closely the play aligns with your own experiences.

Lee
It's almost too much for one play in some ways, but this town is so fascinating. The play probably needs to be a series or, you know, a trilogy of plays.

Stewart Detention Center, Lumpkin, Georgia

Beth
I think the subject matter is overwhelming, and so the play, in a way, responds to that overwhelming-ness. That was my sense with my dramaturgical eye on *Prisontown*. I believe the play should feel like too much because this moment in which we are living is too much. *Prisontown* explores so many significant elements, one being the everlasting impact of one's hometown or upbringing. Can you talk about this element and how it often conflicts with the American Dream notion of rising above from whence you came?

Lee
One of the first people that I spoke to who worked for the detention center...this is going to sound so small town...but this person was married to my kindergarten teacher, and I went to school with his daughter, who was in my kindergarten class. Of course, we went to private schools because the system, the school system, was very segregated. You know, we can talk about public education and

it all being integrated, but in 1971 across the country, not just in the south, there were a lot more private schools started because Brown vs. Board of Education was finally being put into place, and all of the white families fled, and they went to start the schools.

Originally, I went to Greenland Academy, and then I went to a school called Southland Academy, very subtle name. At Greenland, my kindergarten teacher was named Mrs. Moye and her husband was Mac. The Moyes have lived in that part of the country for over a century. Mac was deeply involved in the running of Westville *[a living history museum featured in the play. Its motto was Westville, Where It's Always 1850]* and then he was employed at the detention center as a sort of manager of the guards. So, he had had a foot in both of those worlds and continues to be a huge champion for Lumpkin. He's a complicated person, you know like he has such a deep love for this place. It's interesting, his daughter Annie, who I went to school with, left Lumpkin. She's the only of his four children who have gotten completely out. Annie got out and she works for Kennesaw State University. What's fascinating about her is she's still deeply invested in this town, like her father is. She understands all the problems and she now can see Lumpkin with perspective. She runs a program that brings the arts to Lumpkin, like a dance company and a muralist.

Beth
Interesting. So, in this family is the dynamic of a child leaving and making a successful life elsewhere, yet still with lingering ties to where she was raised.

Lee
You know, maybe this is getting into nostalgia territory that isn't really based on a reality, but it feels like there was a time where people could stay where they were and really put down roots. Maybe, I don't know, maybe I'm readjusting my thinking...maybe it's never really been possible to stay where we are and set down roots, but that part of the American Dream is the ability to.

Beth
Wow, so well said. I am really interested in the tenets of the American Dream and what is promised by living here. But you are pointing out something that we are trained to believe could happen, namely being able to settle down and put down roots, is hard and maybe impossible.

Lee
It is so impossible right now. More and more people are being driven to urban centers where they can find jobs. I think we have to point towards capitalism in the sense that if you are not growing, you are dying. So, it's not enough to be stable and to sort of find peace in what you have and to think about what is enough, you have to always want more and more and more.

Beth
As you are talking, Lee, I am thinking about the undergraduate students I teach. They are very much guided by an idea that it is not a good idea to stay put anywhere. It is better for your LinkedIn profile if you can show several different jobs in several different companies.

Lee
It's better for capitalism if you are a cog in a wheel that can fit in a machine in New Jersey or in a machine in San

Jose, California or in a machine in Seattle, Washington or a machine in New York City. The less personality you have, the better worker you are. The cost of that, I think, is what we are seeing all over the place: the loneliness that is endemic in so many corners of our society. As much as technology connects us, we're losing the one-on-one connection and those personal connections.

Beth
Wow, "cogs in wheel," technology, and loneliness. You are making such powerful bridges to O'Neill's *The Hairy Ape*, which will be produced alongside *Prisontown*. Can you talk about this year's theme of the The Eugene O'Neill Festival, "Seeking to Belong"?

Lee
I think it's such a provocative prompt and I am struck by the seeking to belong part. I think we all have this innate desire to want to feel safe in a group and seen by this group and respected for who we are. The scary thing about seeking to belong is that there are a lot of people who really have felt welcomed and a sense of belonging in this new, political movement that is based on excluding. The sense of belonging can mean excluding. So, I think that's where my brain goes...how do we seek to belong in a way that is welcoming to others?

Beth
And this welcoming aspect, or the attempt at the welcoming, is something your play explores and interrogates in such powerful ways. I am struck by this idea that once we do belong not to forget about the seeking. It is a lesson we teach our children: once you belong in a certain group, not to forget how it felt not to belong. So, make the tent bigger for others to join in. There is a connection to that idea that we were all once new to a place or a group at one time. Yet, it is convenient to forget that once you feel safe and secure.

Lee
I like what you said about once we belong, we stop seeking. I think we always need to ask: what does belonging look like to you today and where do you feel it? And is that where you want to feel it and where do you want to belong, but you don't yet belong? And what is at the root of that desire? Such questions can help us on a daily basis evaluate where we are and where we want to be and who we want to be. A lot of us are butting up against the reality that this country is NO longer feeling like a place where we belong and what can we do with that?

Beth
Along with the elements we have already discussed, *Prisontown* is also an immigrant story. How do you see theater as an effective vehicle to tell stories of immigration?

Lee
I think the people that go to theater are thoughtful people who want to do good in the world generally who want to create a more just world and who are willing to engage in big, complex questions and wrestle with them. They often have extra income, so theaters can be good vessels to reach those people who want to and can make a difference.

I also equate theater with a sermon. Why theater? Because it's as close to church as I can get for people who don't go to church. I started doing theater in church, and so there's always been this idea of stories used to inspire people with hope, to challenge them with creating more justice in the world, to find ways to nourish the people that need food, and to prompt those with extra to give.

Beth
I love that, Lee. To extend this church metaphor, there is definitely a communion of sorts in a solo piece, where you are taking on the "body and blood" of so many different characters you inhabit. Can you say more about the immigrant story in your play and its significance for this moment in history?

Lee
Obviously, the issues about immigration have only gotten so much worse. The overcrowding in detentions centers that is mentioned in the play and the way that detainees are treated is so much worse. The statistic about 98 % of asylum cases are denied in Stewart and then they're approved in New York, well that's NO longer the case. So, things have gotten worse and that's where the play feels a bit dated. The ending of the play however does not feel dated. I think all along I was pretty conscious that this is a play about whiteness for white people in a lot of ways. I myself straddle the line between being Latino and being white. There is the privilege that comes with passing. There's the privilege that comes with having gotten out of Lumpkin and then being able to distance myself from these problems. I mean, I am not going to be abducted on the street simply because of the way that I look as other people who are US citizens are experiencing right now. When I say it's a play about whiteness, I am thinking about the fact that a lot of us are doing a lot of good work but how do we continue to question ourselves as whites about what we are actively or unconsciously choosing not to see and choosing to ignore? How does vilifying at a distance makes us as a country more and more divided and more and more us versus them?

Beth
Before we end, can you talk about your experience as a Travis Bogard Artist in Residence at Tao House?

Lee
It was such a gift, so I'm so grateful for that time and being in Eugene O'Neill's home. I went on the tour a few different times! Danville is a beautiful part of the country, especially up in the hills and away from everyone. The ability to just focus on writing is so rare.

I met with a priest recently and he said every priest has one sermon and I think it might be true for playwrights too; we've all got one play that we keep rewriting and rewriting and rewriting and rewriting. I don't know if that's true for Eugene O'Neill. I don't know all of his plays enough to know if there's like a central core idea that he keeps sort of interrogating. But I am inspired to realize that with O'Neill, writing about your childhood trauma can actually still lead to good art. So often it doesn't, but it was very affirming to see that O'Neill did it and won a Nobel Prize for literature! But there's something about getting those childhood stories out and that childhood trauma out and those questions that, you know, are in us from childhood. If there's one story that is at the heart of all of my plays, it really is just this question of, are you aware of the stories that you were telling yourself as you go throughout the day? Are they serving you or are they not serving you? How many legacy stories are we burdening ourselves with that ultimately don't serve us?

Beth
It's been such a pleasure speaking with you, Lee. I'd like to end where our conversation began—with that powerful question from your play: "How much of an activist are you?" Activism is deeply connected to the idea of belonging, and your work so beautifully challenges us to reflect on this: once we've found our own sense of belonging, what will we do to help others feel the same?

Lee
Yes, the thing that I always come back to, particularly in talkbacks about my plays, is in the face of feeling so overwhelmed by everything, what can you do now in the space that you occupy? Even in this virtual space with you, Beth, I have felt so welcomed and seen. The two of us who've never met, who are on opposite sides of the east coast, and who come from very different backgrounds can find common ground and find comfort and nourishment in this community that we have just created. This is what we can do right now.

Creator: Daxus Credit: Getty Images
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Credit: Fast Company/BabyBjorn

Masculinity

In recent years, cultural commentators and social scientists have turned a spotlight on the elements of masculinity, both positive and destructive. Books like *Of Boys and Men* highlight how shifts in the economy and gender roles have left many struggling for identity and purpose. Meanwhile, series like *Adolescence* dramatize how online manosphere communities can distort masculine ideals among impressionable youth. Individuals like Daniel Principe advocate for healthier models of masculinity grounded in kindness, discipline, and emotional intelligence. At the same time, male leaders, politicians, athletes, and artists have demonstrated a model based on aggression, intimidation, and violent tendencies, devoid of empathy or understanding. Such behavior is often excused or even celebrated. Masculinity is indeed a multifaceted and complex idea in today's society.

In this context, O'Neill's protagonist Yank embodies a raw, archetypal form of masculinity, and one deeply rooted in physical dominance and primal identity. His encounter with Mildred in the play, however, forces him

and, perhaps the audience, to reexamine what masculinity can mean in a changing world. In *Prisontown*, the character of The Writer considers his own masculinity in contrast to those with whom he grew up. The element of survival-driven masculinity in Osorio's play, which is stoic, emotionally guarded, and disciplined in the language of "flow" and "order," parallels Yank's physical, work-bound self-definition. At the same time, *Prisontown* exposes the fragility and contradictions beneath that posture. The men in this play are shaped not just by individual temperament, but by the structures—economic, geographic, and political—that dictate what kinds of masculinity are possible in a place like Lumpkin, Georgia.

In *The Hairy Ape*, O'Neill explores the depths of existential crisis, but he also interrogates the primitive nature of *Man*. His protagonist is almost every facet of classical masculinity in one figure: strong, brutish, relentless, and unforgiving. Yank is depicted repeatedly as a Neanderthal-like force—barging around, barking orders, swearing—his frame hunched like Rodin's *The Thinker* as he contemplates his own elemental existence. But when he meets Mildred, his narrow world expands. Suddenly, he confronts a class of people who do not see him as worthy and are repulsed by his uncultured presence.

Mildred becomes a symbol of the upper class against which Yank defines himself. O'Neill sets the muscular, origin-type man as a foil to the "modern" upper-class male, who is soft, conflict-averse, and bland. In the cultural moment that O'Neill portrays, the idealization of lower-class masculinity is rampant, and Yank is emblematic of this type of masculinity. His heroism is rooted in his physical supremacy: he lives and dies by his labor, by the sweat of his hands. The affinity with the masculine has long been central to storytelling, but in the twentieth century, as technology reshapes life and labor, that affinity takes on new urgency.

In *Prisontown*, the narrator considers the various paths his life could have taken; these possibilities offer a haunting visual of masculinity in flux. The possible parallel lives underscore that male identity is neither fixed nor inevitable; it is shaped by choices, structures, and the willingness—or unwillingness—to witness and change. Just as Yank's journey with Mildred prompts questions about the future of manhood, *Prisontown* asks what kind of masculinity can sustain in a community without extracting the community's humanity in the process.

Today's discussions about masculinity reveal that Yank's kind of primal, blue-collar maleness may be a fading archetype, one increasingly unsuited to a world that values emotional nuance, collaboration, and intellectual agility. Critics of "toxic masculinity" challenge simplistic notions of brute force, while emerging models of "prosocial masculinity" encourage empathy, care, and emotional self-awareness as essential male virtues. The rise of the affectionate "gentle man" in media and politics, in contrast to aggressive, adolescent masculinity, signals a broader cultural shift.

Both plays ask us: what is truly masculine today? How do the characters reflect, extend, or contradict the ways we think about maleness today? What traits of masculinity are fixed? Which are in flux?

I.W.W. (Industrial Workers of the World)

The I.W.W., also known as the "Wobblies," was founded in Chicago on June 27, 1905, at the Continental Congress of the Working Class. Its founders—radical labor organizers, socialists, and anarchists—rejected the exclusionary policies of the American Federation of Labor, which admitted only skilled workers and sidelined the growing population of unskilled laborers. The I.W.W. aimed to unite all workers, regardless of race, gender, nationality, or skill, into "one big union" to oppose capitalism and exploitation.

Their motto, "An injury to one is an injury to all," reflected their call for solidarity across industries and identities. Members included prominent figures like Eugene V. Debs, Mother Jones, "Big Bill" Haywood, and Lucy Parsons. While socialists within the I.W.W. favored electoral politics, anarchists pushed for "direct action" such as strikes, demonstrations, and even violent sabotage.

Despite internal tensions, the I.W.W. adopted a bold constitution in 1908 declaring the working and employing classes to be in irreconcilable conflict. Their vision: a global movement of workers reclaiming control of labor and production to abolish the wage system altogether.

When silk workers in Paterson, New Jersey, went on strike in 1913, the I.W.W. quickly stepped in to support the strikers in their demands for better and safer working conditions. Fresh off a major labor victory in Lawrence, Massachusetts, the Wobblies hoped to replicate their success. The Paterson strike included several powerful and symbolic moments, such as a Flag Day demonstration where workers stretched a massive American flag—woven in Paterson—across Main Street with the inscription: "We weave the flag. We live under the flag. We die under the flag. But damn'd if we'll starve under the flag." The strike also saw the tragic death of an innocent bystander, and strikers placing their children in the care of I.W.W. members to keep them safe during the unrest. With local newspapers—often owned by allies of the silk mill owners—largely unsympathetic to the strike, journalist John Reed sought a new way to amplify the workers' voices. Along with socialite Mabel Dodge and scenic designer Robert Edmond Jones, Reed organized the *Pageant of the Paterson Strike*, in which 1,200 strikers reenacted key events of the strike for nearly 15,000 spectators at Madison Square Garden. The building was dramatically lit with the letters "I.W.W." in red on all four sides of the main tower. In attendance that night were George Cram Cook and Susan Glaspell, who would cite the pageant as a major inspiration when they founded the Provincetown Players the following year, a company that would go on to launch the career of Eugene O'Neill and first produce *The Hairy Ape.*

Though the I.W.W. once posed a significant challenge to capitalist systems and inspired cultural movements, its influence declined sharply after World War I. Government crackdowns—including raids, arrests, and deportations during the 1920's Red Scare—alongside internal divisions and the rise of more moderate unions, eroded its power. By the mid-1920s, the Wobblies had lost much of their influence and membership. Still, their radical vision of worker solidarity and resistance left a lasting imprint on American labor history and helped shape the political and artistic imagination of figures like Eugene O'Neill.

How can *The Hairy Ape* be considered a comedy?

At first glance, Eugene O'Neill's *The Hairy Ape* seems like a bleak Expressionist tragedy about dehumanization, capitalistic ills, and existential despair. In other words, not typical material for comedy. However, the subtitle of *The Hairy Ape*, *"A Comedy of Ancient and Modern Life,"* invites a more nuanced reading of O'Neill's play.

The structure and characters of *The Hairy Ape* has connections to many different types of comedy that have existed for thousands of years:

- **Satirical Comedy:** *The Hairy Ape* critiques modern society especially class structure, industrial capitalism, and identity, all with biting irony. Satire is a long-standing comedic form, and O'Neill's treatment of the elite's detachment, the futility of labor, and the search for belonging aligns with this tradition.

- **Grotesque or Expressionist Comedy:** O'Neill was influenced by European Expressionism, where exaggeration and distortion often produce both horror and absurdity. Yank's over-the-top masculinity and eventual demise can evoke uncomfortable laughter. The absurdity of his journey mirrors the tragicomic condition of the modern man.

- **Inversion of the Tragic Hero:** Yank's belief in his own power and relevance collapses in a humiliating, almost slapstick fashion. His encounter with the ape in the zoo, which is both tragic and ridiculous, has the structure of a farce gone wrong. In this sense, O'Neill is using comedy to highlight the absurdity of modern alienation.

- **Comedic Tradition of Outsider Figures:** Like the fools, clowns, or anti-heroes in traditional comedy (from Shakespeare to sitcoms), Yank is both self-deluded and oddly insightful. His language, behavior, and ultimate fate suggest that he is trapped in a world that does not recognize or value him—a common theme in tragicomedy.

As O'Neill is borrowing from comedic forms spanning thousands of years, it may be helpful to think about *The Hairy Ape* in relation to key moments of theater history.

Ancient Greece

Comedy began as a genre in ancient Greece, emerging alongside tragedy in the 5th century BCE. Aristophanes is its most famous practitioner, using bawdy humor, political satire, and fantastical plots to mock the powerful and critique Athenian society (*Lysistrata, The Clouds*). Old Comedy featured a chorus, direct audience address, and grotesque exaggeration, elements that would influence modern playwrights like O'Neill.

The Wrath of Simo.

Roman Comedy

Playwrights like Plautus and Terence developed New Comedy, which focused more on domestic situations and stock characters like the clever slave, the foolish old man, and the braggart soldier. These tropes would echo through Commedia dell'arte, Shakespeare, and beyond. Stephen Sondheim's musical *A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum* plays with these elements from Roman comedy.

Medieval and Renaissance Comedy

Medieval morality plays and farces introduced slapstick, bodily humor, and allegorical figures. During the Renaissance, Shakespeare fused high and low comedy, exploring love, identity, and social norms. His "problem plays" (e.g., *Measure for Measure*) prefigure the dark comedy O'Neill would later write.

18th–19th Century: Sentimental to Satirical

Comedy evolved to reflect bourgeois concerns: *The School for Scandal* (Sheridan) and *The Rivals* (Goldsmith) satirized manners and class hypocrisy. Meanwhile, melodrama and farce dominated popular stages, often portraying exaggerated emotion, predictable plot lines, archetypal characters, and physical comedy.

Early 20th Century: Modernism and Expressionism

The rise of modernism shattered neat categories. Comedy became darker, more psychological, and often existential. European playwrights like Jarry and Wedekind used absurdity to critique society.

***The Hairy Ape* (1922)**

O'Neill draws on ancient tragic and comedic models while infusing his work with modern existential dread. The result is a play that resists easy classification. Its "comedy" lies in its distortion, its irony, and the dark absurdity of Yank's plight. He is the modern Everyman: lost, out of place, and finally rendered obsolete. Like the best dark comedies, the play makes us laugh uncomfortably at our own misunderstandings, ambitions, and failures.

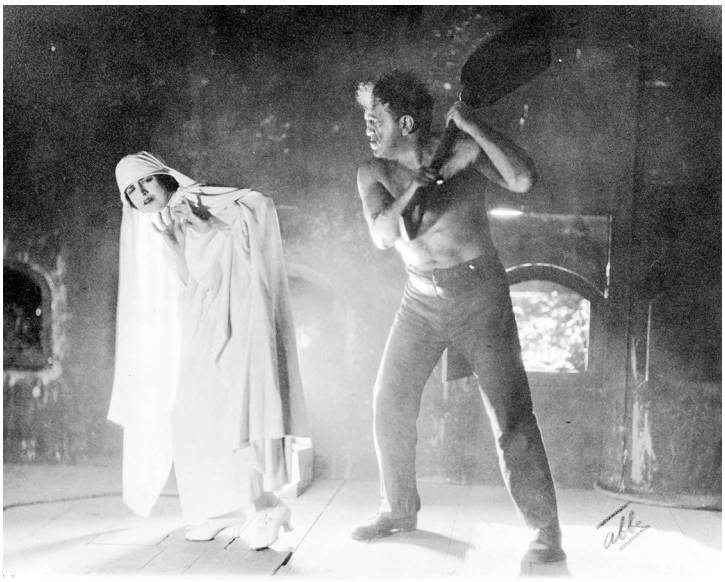
As biographer Robert Dowling argues, O'Neill's true innovation was to combine Naturalism and Expressionism. "'It isn't Expressionism,' O'Neill remarked of *The Hairy Ape*. 'It isn't Naturalism. It is a blend—and, as far as my knowledge goes—a uniquely successful one.' (He nevertheless instructed that the set designs 'must be in the Expressionistic method.') It was this merger, what he later termed 'super-naturalism,' that would prove to have the longest lasting impact on theater history. Throughout what O'Neill called the 'Mad Twenties,' he kept working in this style with plays like *All God's Chillun Got Wings* (1923), *Desire Under the Elms* (1924), *The Great God Brown* (1925), and *Strange Interlude* (1927), which won him a third Pulitzer. *The Hairy Ape* thus signaled O'Neill's complete transformation from an unruly naturalist to one of the consummate avant-garde modernists of the 1920s, and ultimately led to his becoming, in 1936, a Nobel laureate."

Post-War and Contemporary Comedy

Following WWII, absurdist playwrights like Beckett and Ionesco took the dark comic vision further. In the U.S., playwrights like Albee, Mamet, and Kushner continued blending humor and despair. Today, comedy remains a versatile tool for social critique, often bending genre definitions, just as O'Neill did.

Production History

March, 1922: *The Hairy Ape* is first produced by the Provincetown Players. The production, directed and designed by Robert Edmond Jones, was praised for its use of expressionistic set design and staging techniques, and was transferred to the Plymouth Theatre on Broadway. Actor Louis Wolheim became famous for his interpretation of Yank.



Actress Carlotta Monterey with Louis Wolheim in the 1922 Broadway production. Monterey and O'Neill met during the production and eventually married in 1929.

According to biographer Robert Dowling, "After the final curtain had fallen on the premiere of *The Hairy Ape* at the Provincetown Playhouse, a cramped theater space in the heart of Greenwich Village, the audience leapt to its feet. Louis Wolheim, who played the anti-hero Robert 'Yank' Smith, received a deafening ovation, and the packed auditorium then echoed with cries of 'Author! Author!' Their shouts carried on after the house lights went up; but once it became clear that the 'author' wouldn't be appearing, everyone slowly headed for the exit, still eagerly glancing over their shoulders for a potential last-minute, delayed entrance by playwright Eugene O'Neill. A glowing *New York Times* review was printed the next morning, in which the theater's auditorium was described as 'packed to the doors with astonishment . . . as scene after scene unfolded.'"

April, 1922: *The Hairy Ape* moves uptown to Broadway (The Plymouth Theatre). Eugene O'Neill's name shone brightly on the marquee. As Dowling argues, "This fact alone was an extraordinary leap for an American playwright—the marquee was where the star's name went, never the playwright's. Broadway plays had nearly always been written and produced with moneymaking stars in mind, and their authors were principally viewed as hired guns rather than artists."

1930: A London production, featuring African American actor Paul Robeson playing Yank, the lead white role, is a critical success, despite having only five performances.

1944: A low-budget film version produced by Jules Levey, released by United Artists, stars William Bendix, Susan Hayward, Dorothy Comingore, and John Loder. According to a review in the *New York Sun* it had a "happy ending" and generally "made the story lighter and less loaded with social significance."

1996: A postmodern multimedia interpretation by the Wooster Group opens with Willem Dafoe playing the protagonist.

2002: A Marin Theatre production directed by Lee Sankowich and starring Aldo Billingsea, a black actor, opens in Mill Valley.

2006: *The Hairy Ape* is produced to positive reviews by the Irish Repertory Theatre in New York City. The *Irish Voice* declared, "O'Neill's spirit still resonates. [This] new production of *The Hairy Ape* reminds us why O'Neill is considered the first Irish-American playwright."

2009: Director Sean Graney of the Hypocrites Theatre Company opens a production of *The Hairy Ape* at the Goodman Theatre in Chicago. BBC Radio 3 broadcasts a radio adaptation of *The Hairy Ape* directed by Toby Swift later that year.

2012: The first major London revival in 25 years is produced at the Southwark Playhouse in London Bridge. Director Philip Boehm of Upstream Theater stages an acclaimed production of *The Hairy Ape* in St. Louis, Missouri later on that year.

2016: The Oracle Theatre in Chicago opens *The Hairy Ape* with an entirely black cast.

2017: The Park Avenue Armory production of *The Hairy Ape* starring Bobby Cannavale, directed by Richard Jones, and designed by Stewart Laing opens in New York. Cannavale received a 2017 Obie Award for his performance presented by the American Theatre Wing.

2021: *The Classics Theatre Project* present a new adaptation of *The Hairy Ape* directed and adapted by Joey Folsom in Dallas, Texas.

Bobby Cannavale, 2017

Discussion questions: *The Hairy Ape*

Yank begins the play feeling he "belongs" in the stokehole but ends alienated and alone. What moments shift his sense of belonging?

How does Yank's interpretation of Mildred's reaction to him change the course of the play? Why?

How is masculinity portrayed in *The Hairy Ape*? In what ways is Yank both strong and vulnerable?

What does the play suggest about the relationship between class and identity? Do you see parallels with today's society?

How does O'Neill use sound, setting, and expressionist style to communicate Yank's inner world?

What does the gorilla in the final scene represent to you?

How might the play's themes of labor, technology, and belonging resonate differently for audiences in 1922 versus today?

As late as 1946, after O'Neill's writing career was cut short by an incapacitating, ultimately fatal neurological disease, a reporter asked him which of his plays he "liked the best." He responded that this was really two questions: which play he *liked* the best and which he *thought* was the best. For the second question, he hedged a bit, but named *The Iceman Cometh* (its Broadway premiere was about to open). For the first, O'Neill was unequivocal: "I like *The Hairy Ape.*"

- Robert M. Dowling, Author of *Eugene O'Neill: A Life in Four Acts*

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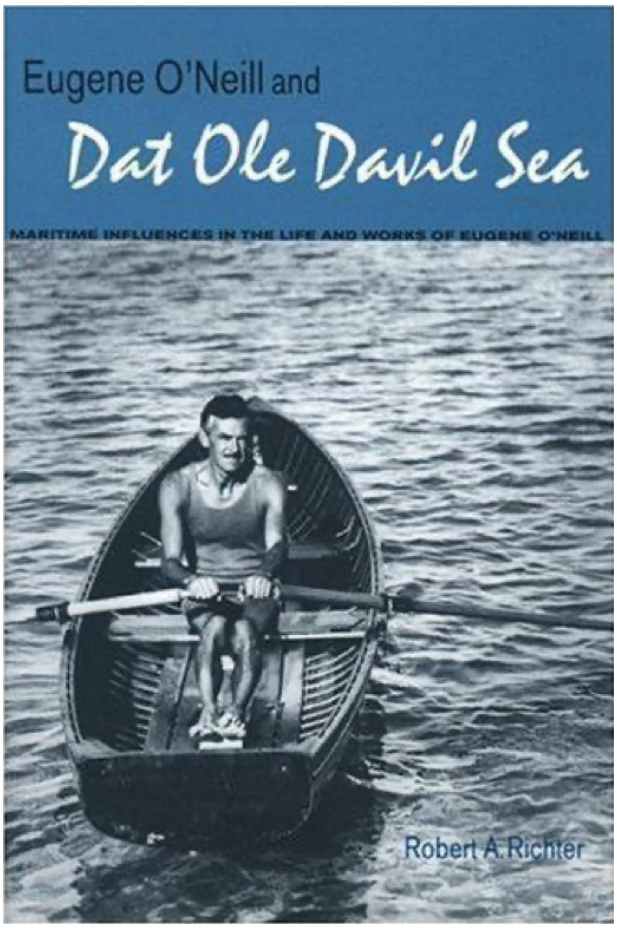

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