TALES FROM THE EDGE

Engagement Guide

By Dramaturgs Katie N. Johnson and William Davies King

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Tales From the Edge

Dramaturgs
Katie N. Johnson & William Davies King

Tales From the Edge Dramaturg Engagement Guide by:

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Introduced by **Eric Fraisher Hayes**, EONF Artistic Director

Katie and Dave's **virtual discussion** of *Tales From the Edge* was recorded on Dec. 11, 2025 and can be viewed on our Youtube channel here: https://youtu.be/TNziGtG5nw4

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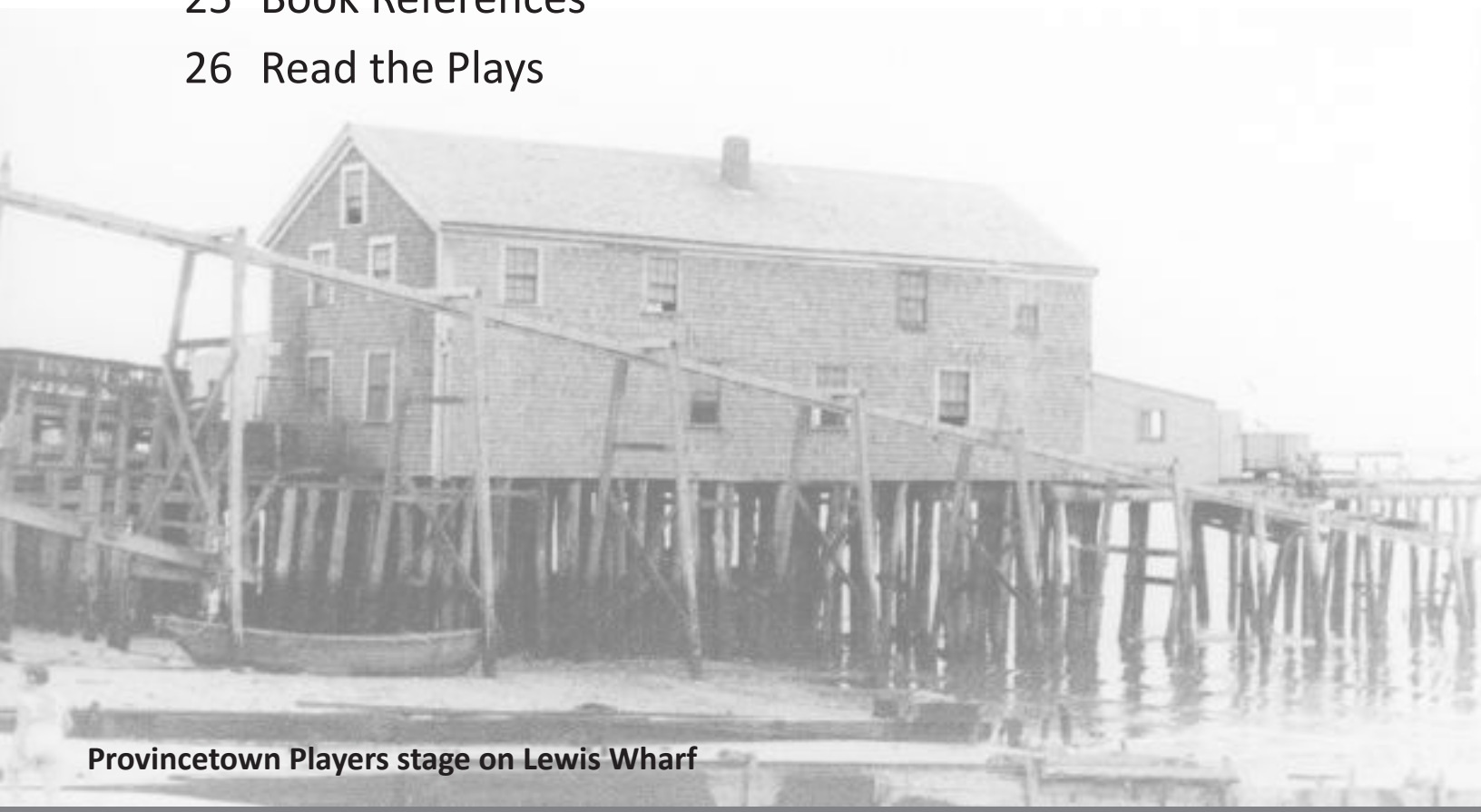
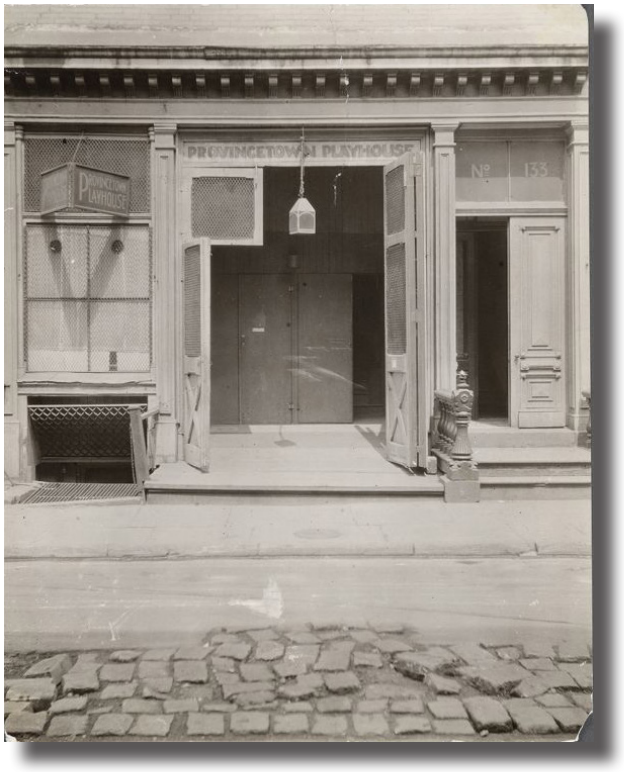


Provincetown Players stage on Lewis Wharf

The Provincetown Players Resolution 1916

"Be it resolved that it is the primary object of the Provincetown Players to encourage the writing of American plays of real artistic, literary, and dramatic, as opposed to Broadway,--merit. That such plays be considered without reference to their commercial value, since this theatre is not to be run for pecuniary profit."

-- Jack Reed



Billy Rose Theatre Division, The New York Public Library. "Exterior of the Provincetown Playhouse at 133 MacDougal Street" The New York Public Library Digital Collections. 1916. https://digitalcollections.nypl.org/items/74394be0-f127-013c-a555-0242ac110002

Cocaine in the Progressive Era

I was late to the *Peaky Blinders* craze, but as I began to watch—and become hooked—I was shocked by the extensive cocaine use. Was there really such a problem back then?

The answer is: yes, there was. The cocaine menace harked back to the nineteenth century.

> "The euphoric effects of coca leaves have been known to mankind for thousands of years. Yet the first epidemic of cocaine use in America occurred during the late 19th century. Initially, there were no laws restricting the consumption or sale of cocaine. In fact, cocaine was freely available in drug stores, saloons, from mail-order vendors, and even in grocery stores. It is reported that one drug manufacturer, in 1885, was selling cocaine in 15 different forms, including cigarettes, cheroots, inhalants, cordials, crystals, and solutions." [1]

Even Coca-Cola featured traces of cocaine, although in 1903, Coca-Cola removed the drug from its soda. As Bart Elmore observes, "But even though Coke went cocaine-free in the Progressive Era, it continued to purchase coca leaves from Peru, removing the cocaine from the leaves but keeping what was left over as a flavoring extract. By the end of the twentieth century it was the single largest purchaser of legally imported coca leaves in the United States." [2]

An 1890s advertising poster for Coca Cola.
via Wikimedia Commons. Public domain.

The cocaine epidemic arose as accidental overdoses occurred, both medically and recreationally.

"By 1902 there were an estimated 200,000 cocaine addicts in the United States, By 1905, it had become popular to snort cocaine and within five years, hospitals and medical literature had started reporting cases of nasal damage resulting from the use of this drug. In 1912, the United States government reported 5,000 cocaine-related deaths in one year."[3]

Just two years before Pendleton King's *Cocaine* opened, the Harrison Narcotics Tax Act was passed to regulate and tax the importation and use of opiates. President Woodrow Wilson, who had declared cocaine "Public Enemy No. 1," signed the act into law in 1914.

As King's *Cocaine* and *Peaky Blinders* remind us, cocaine use and addiction remained nonetheless.

[1] Das G., "Cocaine Abuse in North America: a Milestone in History," *J Clin Pharmacol* , vol. 33, no. 4 (1993): 296-310. doi: 10.1002/j.1552-4604.1993.tb04661.x. PMID: 8473543.

[2] Bart Elmore, "What Coke's Cocaine Problem Can Tell Us About Coca-Cola Capitalism," *Oxford University Press Blog*, March 21, 2014, https://blog.oup.com/2014/03/coke-cocaine-coca-cola-capitalism-business-strategy/, Accessed December 11, 2025.
[3]"Cocaine," Metropolitan Playhouse, https://www.metropolitanplayhouse.org/infococaine. Accessed December 9, 2025.

Literary References in *Cocaine*

One of the most unmistakable names in theatre history is Nora. She hails from Ibsen's *A Doll's House* (1879), known as the character who slammed the door on bourgeois marriage. Was Pendleton King referencing this iconic feminist character by selecting her name for his one-act play, *Cocaine*? It is unclear how intentional King's use of Nora is, but for me, it invites the question: what happens after Nora walks out that door, without money, education to secure a job, or a place to live? Might she end up in a tenement in New York City like the Nora in King's play?

Second, Nora recites a poem by Oscar Wilde when she and Joe are making a crucial decision about their future called "My Voice." How does this poem shed light on her state of mind?

"My Voice"
by Oscar Wilde

Within the restless, hurried, modern world
We took our hearts' full pleasure—You and I,
And now the white sails of our ships are furled,
And spent the lading of our argosy.

Wherefore my cheeks before their time are wan,
For very weeping is my gladness fled,
Sorrow hath paled my lip's vermilion
And Ruin draws the curtains of my bed.

But all this crowded life has been to thee
No more than lyre, or lute, or subtle spell
Of viols, or the music of the sea
That sleeps, a mimic echo, in the shell.

The poem is written as a ballad (or ode) in iambic pentameter in 3 stanzas. When published, *My Voice* directly followed a poem called *Her Voice*, which Wilde wrote about his doomed relationship with Florence Balcombe Stoker, who dumped him for Bram Stoker. *My Voice* offers his perspective.

Tales From the Edge—Scenes From the Edge

All three one-act plays selected for the Eugene O'Neill Foundation's "Tales From the Edge" program are staged in slum-like dwellings, in what we might call "scenes from the edge."

Exorcism
a squalid rooming house occupying the three upper floors of a building on a side street near the waterfront, New York City—the ground floor being a saloon of the lowest type of grog shop.

Cocaine
The action takes place in an attic bed room on Grand Street, between Allen and the Bowery, in the late summer of 1916, and occupies the time between four o'clock a.m. and daylight.

The Dreamy Kid
Mrs. Saunders' bedroom in a house just off of Carmine Street, New York City. The left of the room, forward, is taken up by a heavy, old-fashioned wooden bedstead with a feather mattress. A gaudy red-and-yellow quilt covers the other bedclothes. In back of the bed, a chest of drawers placed against the left wall. On top of the chest, a small lamp. A rocking-chair stands beside the head of the bed on the right. In the rear wall, toward the right, a low window with ragged white curtains. In the right corner, a washstand with bowl and pitcher. Bottles of medicine, a spoon, a glass, etc., are also on the stand. Farther forward, a door opening on the hall and stairway.

Whether a "squalid rooming house" near the waterfront, an attic apartment in the 10th Ward of the Bowery, or a bedroom in the Village, these one-act plays were portraying scenes from the edge. Building on the early twentieth-century slum dramas, Exorcism, Cocaine, and The Dreamy Kid offered more nuance and complexity to those struggling to live lives on the edge.

~Katie Johnson

Slum Realism on Stage

By Katie N. Johnson

What is the purpose of this elaborate exploitation of the slums?
Or is there any purpose in it?
~John Corbin, *Saturday Evening Post* (1909)[1]

At the turn of the twentieth century, American urban slums were in vogue. We find them depicted in literature and visual culture of the era, like Stephen Crane's *Maggie: A Girl of the Streets* (1893), Theodore Dreiser's *Sister Carrie* (1900), the Ashcan artists' paintings, or Jacob Riis's haunting photographic journalism in *How the Other Half Lives* (1890). Progressive-Era culture authenticated the modern by rendering the slums, whether via voyeuristic portrayal of drunkards, drug users, prostitutes, or the working poor.

American theatre capitalized on this trend with what I've characterized as "slum realism," seen most startingly in stagings of flophouses and slum bars in plays like *Salvation Nell* (1908) and *The Easiest Way* (1909). What made the staging of slum realism so tantalizing was because it was *embodied*, not merely literature, and audiences flocked to theatres to be shocked, and touched, by tales from the edge.[2]

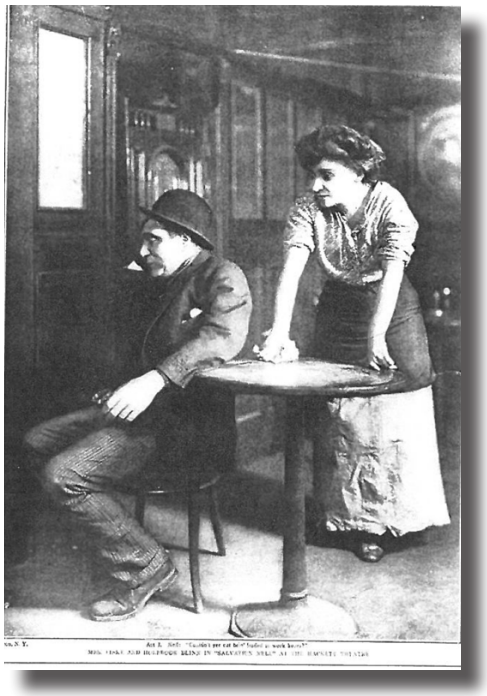
Jacob Riis, "Lodgers in Bayard Street Tenement." 1889. Public Domain, https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=9481015. Accessed December 11, 2025.

There are two important theatrical precursors to examine for the staging of slum realism.

Salvation Nell

(this is an excerpt from my essay published in Theatre History Studies in 2006)

> "When Edward Sheldon's drama of the same title opened in 1908, the play dazzled audiences with its remarkably realistic portrayal of tenement life, bar culture, and the path to salvation. The opening moments at Sid's bar in Hell's Kitchen showed men swigging real beer, prostitutes soliciting men, and star-actress Minnie Maddern Fiske scrubbing the bar. Long remembered for Fiske's pioneering realistic acting in the title role, *Salvation Nell* significantly influenced the development of modern American drama.
>
> The opening tableau reveals an unforgettable depiction of Sid McGovern's Empire Bar, a dive in New York City's Hell's Kitchen. Within the bar, a collection of 'shabby, ill-dressed, poor looking men of all ages already jovial with liquor' occupy center stage. Four women sit at stage left in the ladies' buffet (the women's section of the bar usually frequented by prostitutes), including two 'shabby, painted streetwalkers' named Mabel and Sal, along with two men, presumably clients. Although women are present in the bar, it is unmistakably a male space in which men spit in spittoons, grab and sexually harass women (including Nell), pick up prostitutes, and hide from their wives and families. It is, moreover, the first representation of the ladies' buffet onstage, and it was an undeniable inspiration for Eugene O'Neill's 1921 divided barroom scene in '*Anna Christie*.' Thus, through the opening mise-en-scène—a set that was groundbreaking in realism—*Salvation Nell* frames the action of the play within lower-class bar culture, masculine authority, and the underworld." [3]



Actress and theatre producer Minnie Maddie Fisk in the opening bar scene of *Salvation Nell* (1908).

The Easiest Way

In staging *The Easiest Way* in 1909, impresario theatre director David Belasco and his scenic designer Ernest Gros memorably staged a heightened form of slum realism. They went into the Tenderloin to find inspiration for their Broadway blockbuster.

As Belasco recounts it in his memoir *The Theatre Through Its Stage Door*, after finding the shabbiest room in a flophouse, he "bought the entire interior of one of its most dilapidated rooms—patched furniture, threadbare carpet, tarnished and broken gas fixtures, tumbledown cupboards, dingy doors and window casings, and even the faded paper on the walls."[4] Belasco and Gros then reassembled these items on stage.

Here's an excerpt that I have written about the slum realism in *The Easiest Way*:

> "Some critics credited *The Easiest Way* 'as the first naturalist play of the American theatre.' Indeed, Belasco's staging was described as 'photographically real, and tremendously vigorous.' The *New York Herald* remarked that the play demonstrated 'all the convincing evidence of photography with the realism of life added." *Munsey's Magazine* praised the production's attention to details: 'every accessory was absolutely faithful in its realism' in showing 'the dregs of Tenderloin life.' Alan dale reported (perhaps somewhat revealingly), 'I have seen garrets and boarding house rooms, and the squalid resorts of the shabby genteel a thousand times, but never have I seen anything so unmistakable as Laura's furnished room . . . all indescribably real.'"[5]

Frances Starr (right) in her tenement apartment in David Belasco's staging of Eugene Walter's *The Easiest Way* (1909). To her left is Emma Dunn as her maid, in blackface.
Credit: Theatre Magazine, 1909.

[1] John Corbin, "The Drama of the Slums," *Saturday Evening Post*, March 20, 1909, 15.
[2] See Max Shulman and J. Chris Westgate, eds., *Performing Progressive Era: Immigration, Urban Life, and Nationalism on Stage* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2019).
[3] "The Salvation Lass, Her Harlot Friend, and Slum Realism in Edward Sheldon's *Salvation Nell* (1908)." *Theatre History Studies* 26, no. 1 (2006): 88-107.
[4] David Belasco, *The Theatre Through the Stage Door* (New York: Harpers and Brothers, 1919): 77.
[5] Katie N. Johnson, *Sisters in Sin: Brothel Drama in America, 1900-1920*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, American Drama Series, 2006: 76 – 78.

Dramaturgical Introduction to *The Dreamy Kid*

By Katie N. Johnson

The Dreamy Kid was written in 1918, while O'Neill was in Provincetown, living with Agnes Boulton (his second wife). This is before Gene earned his first Pulitzer Prize with *Beyond the Horizon* (1920). *Dreamy* opened on Halloween in 1919, one day after Shane was born.

O'Neill had originally conceived of "the story of a young Negro gangster" in short-story form. "O'Neill initially began to write the idea as a short story in the summer of 1918," notes Jeffrey Kennedy, "and, after writing a page, typed a letter to Lee Foster Hartman of *Harper's Magazine*, dated July 6, 1918, regarding the submission of the story for possible publication."[1] As Agnes Boulton tells it, "He did a page or so of the short story, then put it aside—decided it should be a one-act play." [2]

Significantly, *Dreamy* had been rejected by the Provincetown Players the previous year after it was found "unsuitable," but by the 1919-1920 season, the Provincetown Players were ready to produce *The Dreamy Kid*.[3] *Dreamy* was the first play on the bill for the Players sixth season, as was the tradition to begin with an O'Neill play. It opened on October 31, 1919, and ran for two weeks through November 13. Also on the bill were: *The Philosopher of Butterbiggens* by Harold Chapin, *Three From the Earth* by Djuna Barnes, and *Getting Unmarried* by Winthrop Parkhurst.

Provincetowner Ida Rauh directed. Ashcan artist Glenn Coleman designed the set. Unfortunately, no photos or set designs have survived.

PREMIERE: October 31 – November 13, 1919
Mammy Saunders: Ruth Anderson
Ceely Ann: Leath Colvert
Irene: Margaret Rhodes
Dreamy: Harold Simmelkjaer

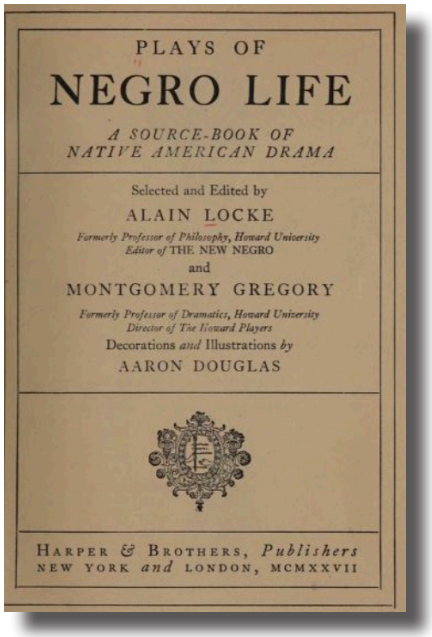
REVIVAL: February 1925
The Dreamy Kid was revived as part of a double bill with *The Emperor Jones* on February 11, 1925, at the Fifty-Second Street Theatre in New York City. It ran for 24 performances. It was produced by Harry Weinberger.

Cast

Mammy Saunders: Agne Marsh
Ceely Ann: Anyce Francis
Irene: Edna Thomas
Abe [Dreamy]: Frank Wilson

Script Versions

The first publication of *The Dreamy Kid* appeared in *Theatre Arts Magazine* in January 1920, shortly after the Fall 1919 run at the Provincetown Playhouse. This version is the one that Travis Bogard uses for the Library of American edition. There was an earlier version of the script that was "significantly different" from the one that Bogard used for the LOA edition, according to Dave King. In his edition of Boulton's *Part of a Long Story*, he restores the omitted passages of *Dreamy* by Yale University in the earlier edition.


PLAYS OF
NEGRO LIFE
A SOURCE-BOOK OF
NATIVE AMERICAN DRAMA
Selected and Edited by
ALAIN LOCKE
Formerly Professor of Philosophy, Howard University
Editor of THE NEW NEGRO
and
MONTGOMERY GREGORY
Formerly Professor of Dramatics, Howard University
Director of The Howard Players
Decorations and Illustrations by
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The *Boston Evening Transcript* also published *The Dreamy Kid* on November 20, 1920.[4]

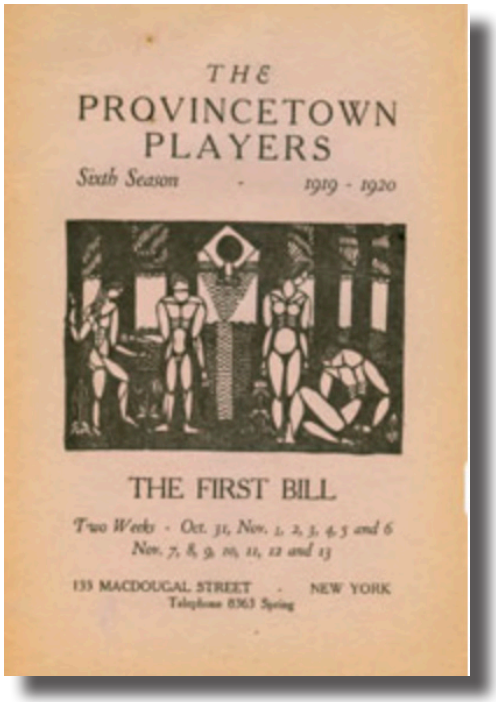
Alain Locke included *The Dreamy Kid* in his *Plays of Negro Life* published in 1927.[5]

Reception

O'Neill never considered *The Dreamy Kid* one of his best works. In a letter to John Peter Toohey[6]in 1919, O'Neill wrote: "I'm glad you liked The Dreamy Kid and that it was done so well. Of course, I by no means rate it among my best one-act plays for genuine merit, but I did think that it would prove theatrically effective and go over with a bang to an audience—thanks partly to the trick, which I acknowledge."[7]

O'Neill's biographer Louis Sheaffer characterized the Players' "lackluster season" of 1918-19: "There had been two one-acters by O'Neill, *The Dreamy Kid* and "Exorcism," neither of them among his best."[8]

In his analysis of early portrayals of African American characters in *Black Manhattan*, James Weldon Johnson mentions O'Neill's *Moon of the Caribbees*, *The Dreamy Kid*, along with Drinkwater's *Abraham Lincoln* (with a sizable role for Gilpin) as important, but not fully formed artis-



tically: "None of these efforts, so far as the Negro is concerned, evoked more than mildly favourable comment." It wasn't until *The Emperor Jones* in 1920 "that an important page in the history of the Negro in theatre was written."[9]

The *New York Time*s critic Alexander Woollcott reviewed *The Dreamy Kid*. Without gushing—for Woollcott was not one known for gushing—his lead line made his assessment clear: "'The Dreamy Kid' is another good play from Eugene O'Neill." Woollcott contextualizes O'Neill's play in the landscape of American realist literature, specifically Theodore Dreisser's obscure *The Hand of the Potter*, but ultimately pans the evening's collection of one-act plays: "the entire program is on the quasi-amateur level, and pretends no more."[10]

The *Boston Transcript* observed of the premiere, "the dramatic possibilities of it were wantonly thrown away because the actors were not allowed to . . .[the clipping cuts off].[11]

The Dreamy Kid was reviewed limitedly in the Black press. Chicago's *Broad Axe* reported that the "famous Provincetown Players," a white company that produced "the play dealing with colored life," but also noted that it was performed for "a private audience" of the "elite society," likely referring to Playhouse's subscription policy. Chicago's newspaper complimented the cast, who "all did well and were splendidly received by the audience."[12]

1 Jeffrey Kennedy, Staging America: the Artistic Legacy of the Provincetown Players (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama, 2023), 385. Kennedy also has a robust website about the Provincetown Players. See Provincetown Playhouse.com, Accessed December 5, 2025, http://www.provincetownplayhouse.com/dreamykid.html#:~:text=He%20had%20been%20on%20the,but%20the%20production%20never%20materialized.
2 Agnes Boulton, Eugene O'Neill as a Young Man in Love, edited by William Davies King (New York: McFarland, 2011), 147.
3 Travis Bogard, Contour in Time: the Plays of Eugene O'Neill, Rev. ed. Oxford University Press, 1988), 101.
4 The Dreamy Kid: A Characteristic Play From a Risen Playwright," Boston Evening Transcript, November 20, 1920: 10+.
5 Alain Locke, Plays of Negro Life: a Source-book of Native American Drama (New York and London: Harper & Brothers, 1927).
6 John Peter Toohey was an American writer and publicist. He is best known as a member of the Algonquin Round Table.
7 Selected Letters of Eugene O'Neill, edited by Travis Bogard and Jackson R. Bryer (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1988), 95.
8 Louis Shaeffer, O'Neill: Son and Artist (New York: Little, Brown & Co, 1973), 15.
9 James Weldon Johnson, Black Manhattan (New York: DaCapo, 1930), 183-84.
10 Alexander Woollcott, "Second Thoughts on First Night." New York Times, November 9, 1919, XX2.
11 "Four Times and Out," Boston Transcript, November 5, 1919. From The Dreamy Kid Clipping File, Billy Rose Theatre Collection, New York Public Library for the Performing Arts.
12 "The Doings Among the Afro-Americans in New York City," Broad Axe [Chicago], November 8, 1919, 2.

The Significance of *The Dreamy Kid* for Black Theatre

Eugene O'Neill transformed Broadway with breaking color lines on stages around the world by writing African American characters with integrity. In documenting O'Neill's innovations in my latest book, *Racing the Great White Way: Black Performance, Eugene O'Neill, and the Transformation of Broadway*, my focus was primarily on plays that impacted Broadway and elsewhere with multiple revivals of *The Emperor Jones* (1920) and *All God's Chillun Got Wings* (1924).

But a case can equally be made for the importance of *The Dreamy Kid* (written in 1918 and staged in 1919), which preceded both *Jones* and *Chillun* in breaking the color line. It was the first play "in which all of the four characters were Negroes," as James Weldon Johnson put it, portrayed by Black actors.[1] *Dreamy* was moreover significant for cultivating "serious roles" for Black characters, "showing O'Neill's early recognition of their theatrical possibilities in integrated companies," notes Margaret Ranald.[2]

Its importance was not only for characterizing Black life, but also for its casting. As Robert Dowling observes, in adding *The Dreamy Kid* to their 1919-20 season, the Provincetown Players "doubled down on their revolutionary methods by flouting the long-standing tradition of white companies using white actors in blackface and instead hired an all-black cast."[3]

One person who was central to this casting innovation was Ida Rauh, who directed *The Dreamy Kid*. In spite of previous artistic disagreements between Rauh and O'Neill, her vision shaped the production by insisting on casting African American actors, "though it is not known whether this was from her own sense of racial equality or as a way to make a lesser O'Neill play unique," observes Jeffrey Kennedy.[4] In order to fulfill this mission, Rauh searched spaces like Black churches and the library in Harlem to locate actors like Harold Simmelkjaer, who was a complete unknown at that time. Cheryl Black observes, "In casting *The Dreamy Kid*, Rauh was the first and only Provincetown director to entirely reject blackface performance in plays with nonwhite actors."[5]

Beyond its original performance and revival in 1925, *The Dreamy Kid* made its mark in the published world. It was the first drama listed in the collection of *Plays of Negro Life* published by Alain Locke in 1927 (*The Emperor Jones* is also included).[6]

Below is an excerpt from *Racing the Great White Way*.[7]

> "Writing about Black experience was part of O'Neill's repeated efforts to document voices that had been mostly absent from American mainstream drama. Like the Irish, Swedish, and Norwegian immigrants who populated his early plays, African American characters were part of O'Neill's vision to craft a new American drama featuring diverse stories. His experiments with characters of color began in plays such as *Thirst* (1913), *The Moon of the Caribbees* (1917), and *The Dreamy Kid* (1918), and became central to works (5) such as *The Emperor Jones* (1920) and *All God's Chillun Got Wings* (1924); his last Black character appeared in *The Iceman Cometh* (1939).[8] As Deborah Wood Holton observes, "O'Neill created, between 1913 and 1939, sixteen black characters—six male and ten female—who appeared in a total of six plays, the majority of them on stage between 1916 and 1924."[9]
>
> "In terms of the emergence of serious drama, a significant development was *Three Plays for a Negro Theater*, a series of one acts that featured all-Black casts that ran for three weeks in 1917. While notable for featuring Black performers, these short plays were not considered substantial works, received mixed reviews, and were created by two white theater artists: Ridgely Torrence (who wrote and directed) and Robert Edmond Jones (who designed).[10] In the 1920s there were five plays by Black playwrights on Broadway, but all of them came after O'Neill's *The Dreamy Kid* (1918) and *The Emperor Jones* (1920), with more limited runs.[11] As I clarify more below, companies in the Harlem Little Theatre Movement offered exciting work, often performing Broadway hits in whiteface on Harlem stages. In spite of this artistic activity, as Susan Curtis notes in *The First Black Actors on the Great White Way*, "officially and openly, black actors remained barred from the so-called legitimate theaters"[12] and Broadway was largely closed to them in meaningful roles—until O'Neill.

O'Neill knew that tales from the edge—which he heard from his friend, Joe Smith, at the Hell Hole (see other essay)— should be told with complexity and integrity.

Over a hundred years later, *The Dreamy Kid*'s importance is uncannily resonant with our contemporary moment, where racialized violence and policing are in the headlines. The Eugene O'Neill Foundation's revival, directed by Eric Fraisher Hayes, asks us to rethink "tales from the edge," when desperate people wait for the knock upon their doors, not knowing whether justice will be served.

~ Katie N. Johnson

[1] James Weldon Johnson, *Black Manhattan* (New York: DaCapo, 1930), 183.
[2] Margaret Ranald, *The Eugene O'Neill Companion* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1984), 190.
[3] Robert M. Dowling, *O'Neill: a Life in Four Acts* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2016), 189.
[4] Jeffrey Kennedy, *Staging America: The Artistic Legacy of the Provincetown Players* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama, 2023), 387.
[5] Cheryl Black, *Women of Provincetown, 1915 – 1922* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama, 2020), 106.
[6] Alain Locke, *Plays of Negro Life: a Source-book of Native American Drama* (New York and London: Harper & Brothers, 1927).
[7] Katie N. Johnson, *Racing the Great White Way: Black Performance, Eugene O'Neill, and the Transformation of Broadway* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2023), 4-6.
[8] Eugene O'Neill, *Thirst*, *The Moon of the Caribbees*, and *The Dreamy Kid*, in *Eugene O'Neill: Complete Plays, 1913–1920*, ed. Travis Bogard (New York: Library of America, 1988); and *The Emperor Jones* and *All God's Chillun Got Wings* in *Eugene O'Neill: Complete Plays, 1920 -31*, ed. Travis Bogard (New York: Library of America, 1988). See also Gary Jay Williams, "*The Dreamy Kid*: O'Neill's Darker Brother," *Theatre Annual* 43 (1988): 3–14; and Shahed Ahmed, "Evolution of Black Characterization in American Theater: Eugene O'Neill's *The Dreamy Kid* and Entrée into 'Authentic Negro' Experience," *SUST Studies* 15, no. 1 (2012): 21–33.
[9] Deborah Wood Holton, "Revealing Blindness, Revealing Vision: Interpreting O'Neill's Black Female Characters in *Moon of the Caribbees*, *The Dreamy Kid*, and *All God's Chillun Got Wings*," *Eugene O'Neill Review* 19, nos. 1–2 (1995): 29–44, at 29.

[10] The three one-acts constituting *Three Plays for a Negro Theater* were *Granny Maumee*, *The Rider of Dreams*, and *Simon the Cyrenian*, all written by white playwright Ridley Torrence; they were performed April 5–24, 1917. Drama critic Alexander Woollcott scorned "the preposterous production of the Torrence plays" with Black actors as "utterly inadequate for the dramatic needs of the roles" other than possessing a "naturing makeup box." Woollcott's critique of Torrence's three one-act plays was included in his review of *The Dreamy Kid*. Alexander Woollcott, "Second Thoughts on First Night," review of *The Dreamy Kid*, by Eugene O'Neill, directed by Ida Rauh, Provincetown Playhouse, *New York Times*, November 9, 1919, XX2.
[11] Early African American–authored plays were *The Chip Woman's Fortune* by Willis Richardson (1923), *The Fool's Errand* by Eulalie Spence (1927), *Meek Mose* by Frank Wilson (1928), *Appearances* by Garland Anderson (1925), and *Harlem* by William Jourdan Rapp and Wallace Thurman (1926). All of these plays appeared after *The Emperor Jones*. See Errol Hill and James V. Hatch, *A History of African American Theatre* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 234–42; David Krasner, *A Beautiful Pageant: African American Theatre, Drama, and Performance in the Harlem Renaissance, 1910–1927* (New York: Palgrave, 2002); John G. Monroe, "The Harlem Little Theatre Movement, 1920–1929," *Journal of American Culture* 6, no. 4 (1983): 63–70; Freda Scott, "Five African-American Playwrights on Broadway, 1923–1929" (PhD diss., City University of New York, 1990); and Jeanne-Marie A. Miller, "The First Serious Dramas on Broadway by African American Playwrights," in *Experimenters, Rebels, and Disparate Voices: The Theatre of the 1920s Celebrates Diversity*, ed. Arthur Gewirtz and James J. Kolb (Westport, CT: Praeger, 2003), 71–81.
[12] Susan Curtis, *The First Black Actors on the Great White Way* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1998), 41.

Joe Smith and *The Dreamy Kid*

In his younger years, as many O'Neillians know, O'Neill did "research" while frequenting bars. In dives like the Hell Hole (the Golden Swan) and elsewhere, O'Neill cultivated material from people "on the edge," much like turn-of-the-century American writers such as Theodore Dreiser and Stephen Crane, who wrote realistic novels portraying "how the other half lives."

Joe Smith was a long-standing Hell Hole friend, and his stories populated O'Neill's dramas. As Virginia Floyd observes, "The close association with Joe Smith, the black gambler with whom he roomed at the Hell Hole [in 1915], reinforces his determination to combat racial discrimination."[1] More specifically, Smith gave O'Neill the idea for *The Dreamy Kid*. According to Rob Dowling, O'Neill met up with Joe Smith at the Hell Hole "and he told O'Neill about a black gangster in New York with the street moniker 'Dreamy.'" [2]

As O'Neill's second wife Agnes Boulton recalls, "He got the idea for *The Dreamy Kid* during a conversation with dark, pock-marked Joe Smith, his old friend at the Hell Hole. I think that was it—as unimportant a thing as Joe merely mentioning someone of that name. *Dreamy*! I remember Gene speaking that name almost lovingly and then laughing. Negro gangster named Dreamy—so Joe had spoken of him. *Why Dreamy*?"[3]

O'Neill left New York and returned to Provincetown in May 1918 where he wrote *The Dreamy Kid*.[4]

Eugene O'Neill, Letter to Agnes Boulton O'Neill. December 2? 1919

> "Own Wife: Last night about ten I made a voyage to the Hell Hole to see how it had survived the dry spell. Lefty, Jim Martin, Joe Smith and quite a populous mob of the old bunch were there along with a lot of new 'guerillas' to whom I was presented as our old pal, Gene.' There was no whiskey in the house and Joe Smith told me they couldn't get it more than two days a week now—and then it had to be stolen by some of the gang out of a storehouse, and sold to Tom Wallace afterward. . . . Lefty and Joe Smith seem as delighted with Shane's arrival as if they were godparents. They urged me to send all their blessings to you on the 'the little girl.'"[5]

It is possible that O'Neill's idea for setting *The Dreamy Kid* in the black neighborhood of Carmine Street also stemmed from Smith, who lived on nearby Cornelia Street, part of "Little Africa," where "a free Black community in New York City" emerged in the late eighteenth century.[6]

Joe Smith inspired other dramatic works after *The Dreamy Kid*. Floyd points out how O'Neill outlined several ideas for Black characters modeled on his former Hell Hole roommate, beginning with his 1921 notes for a play tentatively titled "'Honest Honey Boy,' whose hero is 'Joe'—tragic-comedy of Negro Gambler (Joe Smith)—his decline." O'Neill also referenced his "Old Joe Smith idea" again on May 20, 1932, but "his friend does not appear until 1939, when he emerges as Joe Mott, the black gambler in *The Iceman Cometh*."[7]

O'Neill kept in touch with Joe Smith after departing New York for Bermuda (1925 -27) and France in 1928. Perhaps as an acknowledgement for the material Smith had provided him (a royalty of sorts, for Smith's intellectual labor), O'Neill also sent Smith money.

Letter To Joe Smith, ca. 1925 - 1927

Handwritten letter to Joseph B. Smith, Esq. 16 Cornelia Street/NYC from Spithead Bermuda, August 18, n.d. [ca 1925 -1927]

> Dear Joe:
>
> Yes, I sent a check back to you by return steamer that time. It's never been cancelled. I guess someone must have thought there would be cash in it and frisked your letter box, or something. I'm sure I had your address right. Anyway, in case of a wrong address it would have been returned to me.
>
> I'm enclosing the same again. I'd make it more but it's been a bad past season and I've been cash flat myself. I'm coming up to New York in a few weeks and I want very much to look you up and have a talk about the old days. I've been 'on the wagon' for almost two years—retired permanently from the ring—and gotten grey-haired a lot but outside of that I haven't changed."[8]

Letter to Joe Smith, date unknown (likely 1928 or 1929)

> "I was damn glad to hear from you again! But damned sorry to learn the breaks are not coming your way. I sure hope the luck will soon change for you and you'll get on your feet again. You know you've always got my best wishes and that I am your friend and will always do anything I can to help you. I haven't forgotten the old days and your loyal friendship for me. I'm enclosing a check to give you a boost over this rough sport you've run into. . . . Buck up, Joe! You're not going to confess the game has licked you, are you? That isn't like you! Get a new grip on yourself and you can knock it dead yet! Write me a long letter soon and tell me all your news."[9]

Joe Smith died in 1929.

~ Katie N. Johnson

[1] Virginia Floyd, *The Plays of Eugene O'Neill: a New Assessment* (New York: Ungar, 1985), 176.
[2] Robert M. Dowling, *O'Neill: a Life in Four Acts* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2016), 177.
[3] Agnes Boulton, *Part of a Long Story*: *Eugene O'Neill as a Young Man in Love*, edited by William Davies King (New York: McFarland, 2011), 146-47.
[4] Virginia Floyd, ed., *Eugene O'Neill at Work: Newly Released Ideas for Plays* (New York: Ungar, 1984),19.
[5] Eugene O'Neill, quoted in *Selected Letters of Eugene O'Neill*, edited by Travis Bogard and Jackson R. Bryer (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1988), 99 - 100.
[6] David Herman, "The Supposed Streets of Little Africa," *Off the Grid*, January 21, 2022, https://www.villagepreservation.org/2022/01/21/the-supposed-streets-of-little-africa/, Accessed December 9, 2025.
[7] Floyd, *The Plays of Eugene O'Neill: a New Assessment*, 181.
[8]Handwritten letter to Joseph B. Smith, Esq., 16 Cornelia Street/NYC from Spithead Bermuda, August 18, n.d. [ca 1925 -1927]. O'Neill moved to Bermuda in 1925 and departed late 1927. In "Letters, Light, James." Eugene O'Neill Foundation Archive, Danville, California.

The Bowery, New York City. Bowery New York Street, 1914. Photograph. https://www.loc.gov/item/93508235/.

Who Were the Dreamy Kids?

Harold Simmelkjaer

As the actor who originated the role of Abe—the Dreamy Kid—Simmelkjaer had a relatively short acting career, moving from the stage to activism and politics. He went on to perform in *Taboo* in 1922 (with Paul Robeson), which is his only Broadway credit, according to the Internet Broadway Database. Simmelkjaer, "who, despite the Dutch name, is a Negro," observed James Weldon Johnson in his important book, *Black Manhattan*, made history by performing in O'Neill's one-act play.[1]

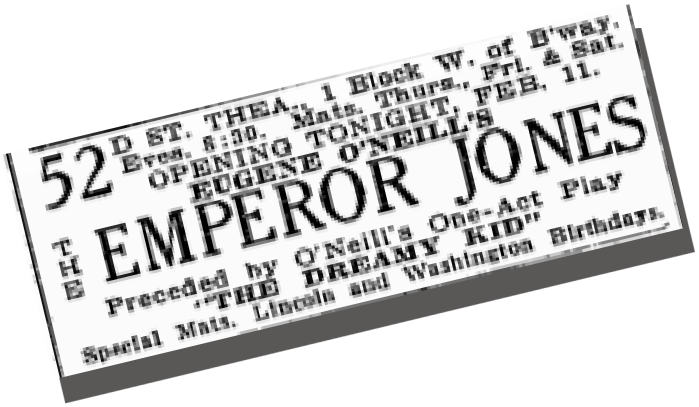
Simmelkjaer turned his energies from the stage to civil rights activism. In his obituary, the *New York Times* characterized him as a "political leader" who was "active in seeking equitable treatment for Negroes."[2] In 1921 he wrote a book called "The Scientific Side of the Negro Problem." In 1926, he authored an essay in the African American periodical *The Messenger* called "Civil Rights and the Negro."[3] In addition to his political and community accomplishments, his role in *The Dreamy Kid* was mentioned in his obituary.

According to his great-grandson, Simmelkjaer came to New York City from St. Croix, then part of Danish West Indies, a Danish colony in the Caribbean from the late 1600s until 1917 when Denmark sold them to the U.S. St. Croix is now a part of the U.S. Virgin Islands. There is an uncanny connection to O'Neill's future writing: The West Indies will become the setting for *The Emperor Jones*.

Frank Wilson

Wilson was an important actor during the Harlem Renaissance, appearing in key plays that advanced a new Black theatre "about us," "by us," "for us" and "near us" to quote W.E.B. DuBois's important 1926 essay.[4] Wilson starred opposite Paul Robeson in O'Neill's *All God's Chillun Got Wings* (May – October 1924) the year before *The Dreamy Kid* in February 1925. Wilson also performed in *In Abraham's Bosom* (1927) *Porgy* (1927), *Green Pastures* (1935), *Take a Giant Step* (1953), and many more Broadway shows. He wrote his own plays, including *Meek Mose* and *Walk Together Chillun*, which he directed for the Negro Unit of the Federal Theatre Project in 1936.

In the 1925 revival of *The Dreamy Kid*, Wilson played Abe (aka "Dreamy"), a man being hunted by the police for killing a white man. The February revival consisted of pairing two O'Neill one-actors: *Dreamy* and *The Emperor Jones*. In the second piece, Wilson played Lem, the "Native Chief," who pursues (and kills) Brutus Jones. The performative citationality of having Wilson perform both roles back-to-back is fascinating to consider when thinking about Black characters fleeing oppressors. In the first piece, Wilson (as Abe) seems on the cusp of certain death. In the second play of the pairing, Wilson embodies Lem, the Indigenous leader who is victorious over tyrannical rule.



~ Katie N. Johnson`

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[1] James Weldon Johnson, *Black Manhattan* (New York: DaCapo Press, 1930), 183.
[2] "H.E. Simmelkjaer: 66, A Political Leader," *New York Times*, June 26, 1956, 28.
[3] "H.E. Simmelkjaer, "Civil Rights and the Negro," *Messenger*, vol 8, no. 3 (March 1926): 73 – 75
[4] W.E.B. Du Bois, "Krigwa, 1926," *The Crisis* 31 (August 1926), 134.

Dramaturgical Introduction to *Exorcism*

by William Davies King

Exorcism, the play we can now see and read, is a play that Eugene O'Neill did not want us to see or read. After its first and only production in his lifetime, by the Provincetown Players in 1920, he gathered all the scripts and destroyed them. The reasons why he chose to suppress this particular play are well worth understanding, but we can only speculate, since the play is as finished and as artful as many of his early writings—those plays that established his reputation as a new voice in the American theater.

O'Neill destroyed or buried quite a few other plays from his early years, and he was embarrassed and infuriated when a set of *Lost Plays* was published, without his permission, a few years before his death. They were recovered from copies he had sent to the Library of Congress for copywriting. But *Exorcism,* we are told, was different, because this play had been seen by audiences, reviewed by critics, and yet O'Neill acted to remove it from existence. That Freudian term *repression* plays a role, and therefore the production we can now see functions as a kind of psychoanalysis.

Around 2011, a single copy of the play came to light. Apparently, Agnes Boulton, who had been married to O'Neill at the time when he wrote the play, held onto a typescript, which O'Neill perhaps had retained for reference. More than a decade after they were divorced, she passed on the typescript as a gift to a friend. That friend, a Hollywood screenwriter, kept it in his files until, after his death, it was published by Yale University Press.

When O'Neill's final plays—the ones written at Tao House—emerged in the 1940s-50s, it became clear that the writer often used autobiography as a source of his dramas. As O'Neill biographers and critics looked back over the extent of his career, they could see that elements of the O'Neill family story appeared in many earlier plays. *Exorcism* is arguably the one that most directly drew on memory, in a way that he came to regret, and most likely that is why O'Neill became so opposed to it remaining a part of his legacy. This, truly, was a play "on the edge," even on the edge of oblivion.

Jimmy the Priest's was the name affectionately given to the saloon/rooming house at 252 Fulton Street, where O'Neill roomed with Jimmy Byth in 1912. The saloon is the setting for *The Iceman Cometh*. A room upstairs is the setting for *Exorcism.* This photograph was taken after the demise of that establishment.

The play's setting—"a squalid rooming house occupying the three upper floors of a building on a side street near the waterfront, New York City—the ground floor being a saloon of the lowest type of grog shop"—is transparently the same as in *The Iceman Cometh,* where it is known as Harry Hope's. O'Neill spent a good part of 1911-1912 living in such a rooming house, known as Jimmy the Priest's for the kind of "communion" available there. O'Neill's roommate at the time was a dissolute newspaper reporter and publicist James Byth, affectionately called Jimmy Tomorrow for his habit of procrastination. He is the source of the character called James Cameron in *Iceman* and simply Jimmy in *Exorcism.* James Byth would bring his own dismal story to a conclusion by jumping from an upper story window of Jimmy the Priest's in 1913. O'Neill would tell that story in *Tomorrow,* one of only two short stories he completed in his career. The theme of a person lost in pipe dreams *today* and putting off life till tomorrow is central to *Iceman* and is also pertinent to *Exorcism.*

Those rooming house years were dismal years for O'Neill, who was drinking too much, living on a bare allowance from his parents, and also feeling alienated from them. He was 23, a drop-out from college, and he had written no more than a few poems. Two years earlier, he had recklessly married a young woman, horrifying his parents and hers by his poor judgment. She was pregnant, and he had no way of making a living, and then he abandoned her and went off on a gold mining expedition in Honduras, followed by some voyages as a seaman. When he returned to New York, he was no better able to step into the role of husband/father, and so a divorce was arranged.

The autobiographical main character in *Exorcism,* Ned Malloy, gives us a vivid account of what steps needed to be taken by O'Neill to establish legal grounds for the 1912 divorce and the depressing effect this episode had on the young man, indeed, to the point of his "bottoming out." In 2012, exactly one hundred years after the divorce trial, the court transcript became accessi-

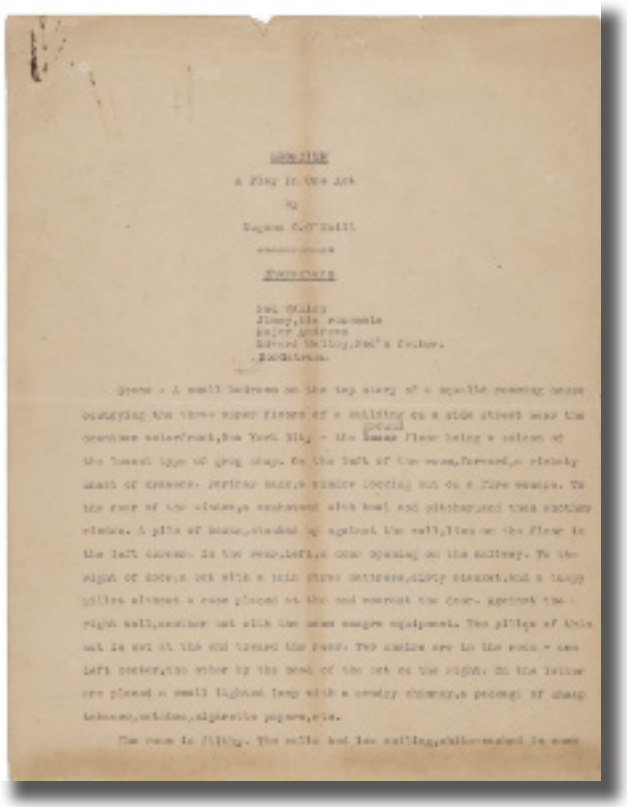
ble, and it established the basic veracity of the ugly story told by Ned and the act that resulted. The play represents this dire episode as a major turning point in the young man's life, and we know that less than two years later, while recovering from tuberculosis in a sanitorium, O'Neill turned to playwriting. Within a few years, he had become the leading playwright of the fledgling Provincetown Players, which was at the forefront of the experimental art theater in the United States. A few years after that, O'Neill was recognized as the most promising American playwright, and beginning in the 1920s, he fulfilled that promise.

Exorcism was the last O'Neill one-act to be premiered by the Provincetown Players, and the opening came at a painful moment in O'Neill's life, which played a part in his misgivings about the play. His father had been diagnosed with cancer, and he would die just a few months later. O'Neill had just enjoyed the experience of his first full-length play produced on Broadway, *Beyond the Horizon,* and his parents were rightly proud. He was, by then, married to Agnes Boulton, and they had a son, Shane. James O'Neill could go to his grave knowing that his son was gaining stability in his life and was well on his way to establishing a reputation as a theater artist of importance. Gene had long scorned the commercial values of his father's career as an actor, but now he was beginning to make money from his writing, and he took that development in stride.

A consequence of all these circumstances, sad and joyful, was that Gene and his father were able to have meaningful conversations. It is thought that the dialogue between Edmund and James Tyrone in act 4 of *Long Day's Journey* reflects the new sympathetic understanding (EDMUND: "I'm glad you've told me this, Papa. I know you a lot better now"). The father in *Exorcism*, named Edward Malloy, brings the welcome message that they should "let bygones be bygones" and "the past is the past," but he also implies that he is there to deliver Ned from "this filthy dive" and bring him "home." He also suggests there will be a marital reconciliation, yet it is clear that Ned's mind is fixed on a future that is far from such domestic values, and he dismisses his father's effort to bring a happy end to the play with a hint of mockery. Perhaps he had some doubts about the way the play ends, leading him to give the play a subtitle: "A Play of Anti-Climax."

It is unlikely that James O'Neill saw this play by his son, and he probably was not even invited. He had recently suffered a stroke, and undoubtedly, he would have been shocked to see such a painful episode of family history portrayed in the play. We should note that James O'Neill's father was named Edward, like the father in the play, and James grew up deeply resenting his father's abandonment of his family. Edward O'Neill moved back to Ireland when James was only ten, leaving James to step into familial responsibility. He found success as a leading actor, most notably in an adaptation of *The Count of Monte Cristo,* which is plotted on a succession of father/son separations, as Eugene O'Neill well knew.

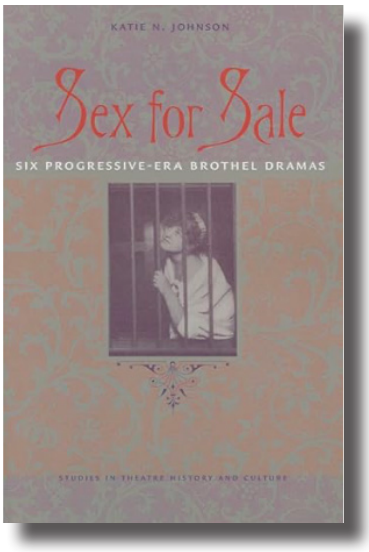
Around the time of his unsuccessful suicide attempt in 1912 (though before or after is unclear), Eugene O'Neill joined his father and brother (another "Jim") on a final (and suicidal?) tour of *Monte Cristo* on a vaudeville circuit, with the epic story cut to a mere 45 minutes. That tour failed and was terminated somewhere in the vicinity of Minnesota, giving a final ironic twist to the conclusion of *Exorcism.*



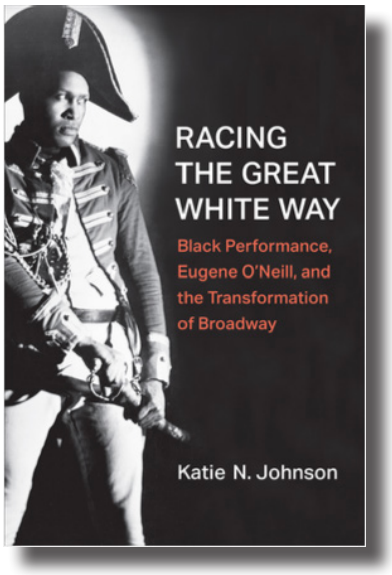
What stands out in the recovered script of *Exorcism* is the specific language O'Neill uses to characterize his protagonist's perception of this bottoming-out moment in his life. He feels forgiven and reborn, and he uses the language of Catholic confession. God "evidently wants to retain my services here below—for what I don't know yet but I'm going to find out—and I feel of use already!" We can be thankful that his "services" ultimately included writing about twenty more plays, including some of the finest drama ever written in the United States.

~William Davies King

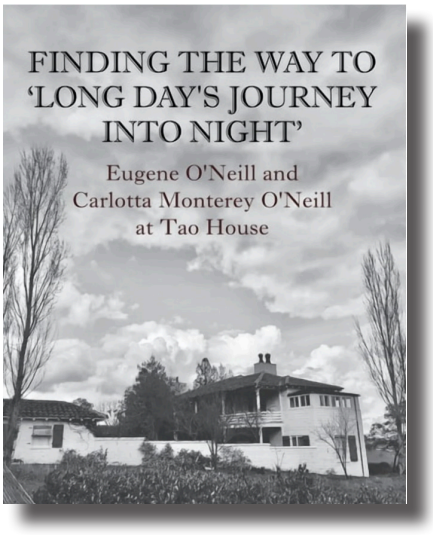
Book References



O'Neill's one-act play *Cocaine* is referenced in Katie Johnson's anthology *Sex for Sale: Six Progressive Era Brothel Dramas*, available here: https://www.amazon.com/Sex-Sale-Progressive-Era-Brothel-Studies/dp/1609383133



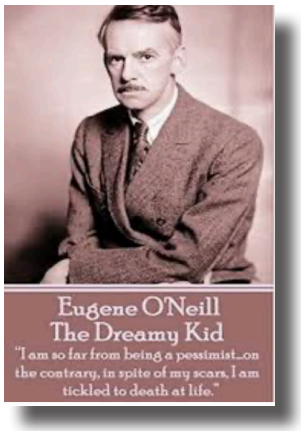
Her most recent book is *Racing the Great White Way: Black Performance, Eugene O'Neill, and the Transformation of Broadway.* Find it here: https://www.fulcrum.org/concern/monographs/t722hc39v?locale=en



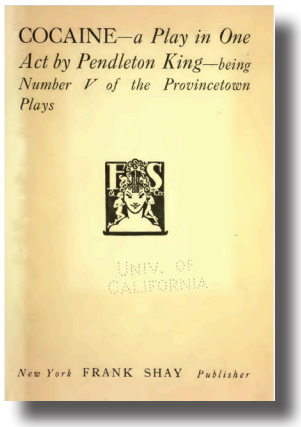
William Davies King's recently published book, *Finding the Way to Long Day's Journey Into Night* is available here: https://www.barnesandnoble.com/w/finding-the-way-to-long-days-journey-into-night-william-davies-king/1144947559

READ THE PLAYS

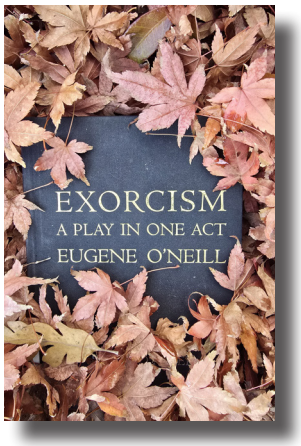
The Dreamy Kid by Eugene O'Neill
https://eoneill.com/texts/dreamy/contents.html



Cocaine - a play in one act by Pendleton King
https://one-act-plays.com/dramas/cocaine.html



Exorcism by Eugene O'Neill is under copyright as it was not published until recently. Thought lost, recently found, and not published until 2012. Find it at your public library!
https://yalebooks.yale.edu/book/9780300181319/exorcism/



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