

1750
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As I Remember Eugene O'Neill

by JULIET THROCKMORTON

■ THE MAN WHO STOOD IN THE RECEPTION room of the Red Inn at Provincetown, Massachusetts, was exceptionally tall. His light gray suit and soft white shirt emphasized the mahogany sunburn of his skin. The expression of his face, of his dark and piercing eyes, was sad, somber, even stern—but when he smiled, it became sympathetic and sweet. His manner was almost embarrassingly shy. This was Eugene O'Neill when I met him first in the early '20s. His mighty talent had burst like a hot sun on pale shores of mediocrity. He was 35 years old, and a score of his plays, short and full-length, had already been produced—among them *Anna Christie* and *The Emperor Jones*. Audiences and critics were dazzled. He was the man-of-the-hour.

But there was not the slightest trace of self-importance as he greeted Mary Blair and me that summer night. Mary had created the leading role in

his short play *Different*. Leaving New York for a holiday, she'd said to me, "Why don't you come up to Provincetown with me? I'll introduce you to Gene O'Neill—he has a home there." This had seemed to me an incredible prospect; but here he was, on the very first night of our visit, inviting us to come the next day to his house, Peaked Hill Bar, some miles out of Provincetown, across the dunes. He knew our time was limited and had made most careful arrangements for us. We were to drive to a certain point on the highway, and there, since a car could not mount the dunes, a little donkey cart and driver would meet us and take us to his door. He himself often walked the distance, but he thought, he said, it might be too much for us.

The following morning found us jogging along in this sweetly primitive conveyance until at last O'Neill's house came (continued on page 93)

The Eugene O'Neills, about 1923, when they were living in the old Peaked Hill Bars Life Saving Station (swept into the sea in 1932) out on the tip of Cape Cod. The author's first meeting with him was at this location. O'Neill is holding his son, Shane.



in sight. The long low yellow building, formerly a coast guard station, lay on the lonely shore, swept by sun and wind and looking out on the limitless sea. We lunched informally and delightfully at a refectory table in a sunny dining room. Outside, gulls wheeled and the ocean boomed softly. Present were O'Neill's wife, and a tiny boy in a white sailor suit, his son, Shane.

I can remember most of the conversation. O'Neill then and always seemed baffled by conversational trivialities and small talk. His shyness was marked. But his was no one-track mind. His interest in all the arts was widespread. In speaking of painting, he was particularly enthusiastic about the art critiques of the American writer, Thomas Craven. He expressed interest in Scott Fitzgerald, and had recently read and liked the German novel, *The World's Illusion*, by Jacob Wasserman. Of his own work, he said nothing, though he did remark naively that he hoped he'd be able to see *Anna Christie*, which had recently been filmed.

Full of the enthusiasm that one has on first view of a tropic land, I told him of a recent visit to Bermuda. He was very interested and said he thought he'd go there in the coming winter. This indeed he did, eventually building a house at Spithead. He spoke of American schools, puzzled where to send his stepdaughter. He asked where I had gone and, when I told him the convent's name, he said he thought he'd send the little girl there. This he, too, subsequently did. In fact, as I was to find out, he kept to his word in all matters. He drew from me that I had stage ambitions and was finding the going hard. He deplored the lack of theatre training in the young in America, and he offered generously and spontaneously to help me.

He had high hopes, he said, for the coming season at the New York Provincetown Theatre. A new group had been formed for it, headed by himself, Kenneth McGowan, and Robert Edmund Jones, with Cleon Throckmorton, designer of the famous *Emperor Jones* sets, as technical director. Elsewhere, he had expressed his credo for this theatre: "It should lay emphasis on building up a medium for achievement in acting that will make young actors want to grow up as a part of a whole, giving their acting a new, clean, fakeless group excellence, and group eloquence, that will be our own unique acting, our own thing, our own American theatre." This was a subject on which he felt strongly, always.

He suggested that if I would ring him up in the fall, when the theatre was opening, he would do all he could to get me into it. When I tried to thank him, he merely smiled and said he hoped he could really help. We sat long over