

**A ROOF OVER OUR HEADS**

**The Provincetown Repertory Theatre and  
The Rebirth of Professional Theater in Provincetown**

It was, by any measure, a night to remember.

There, on a cramped stage in the Provincetown Museum, stood Jose Quintero, the legendary director of some 50 Broadway and Off Broadway plays. He had come to Provincetown only a few weeks earlier at the invitation of the Provincetown Repertory Theatre--a fledgling not-for-profit company of professional actors, most of them young--to direct two one-act plays by Eugene O'Neill. It had been a long shot. Hardly anyone thought Quintero would come. But come he did. In doing so, as he later admitted, he had surprised even himself--not to mention the company.



During rehearsals Quintero had both educated and inspired his actors, not only with his great gift for direction, but with his passionate love for the theater, and particularly for the plays of Eugene O'Neill, of which he is considered the master interpreter.

And on this memorable opening night the cast had just finished thanking Quintero by giving him the performance of their lives.

And Quintero wasn't the only celebrity in the house. Adding their applause to that of the SRO audience were none other than stage and screen stars Jason Robards and Julie Harris, and television star Kirstie Alley.

Quintero hadn't directed a play in six years. He hadn't been sure he'd ever direct again. Despite repeated pleas to return to Broadway, he was quite happy to be out of the limelight and far away in Florida, where he teaches. After all, what more did he have to prove? He had co-founded the Circle in the Square Theatre in New York, been elected to the Theatre Hall of Fame, and won the most prestigious awards the theater world can bestow: The Tony, the Drama Desk, the Obie, the Outer Circle, and the Eugene O'Neill Gold Medal. He had directed some of the best actors of his time in the plays of O'Neill: Igmarr Bergman, Colleen Dewhurst, George C. Scott, Liv Ullman, Geraldine Page, Ben Gazzara--and of course, Jason Robards.

But here he was now, standing on this little stage in this little out of the way town at the tip of Cape Cod, telling the young cast how wonderfully they had performed *Ile* and *The Long Voyage Home*, two one-act sea plays that O'Neill had written 80 years ago in Provincetown. He told them how much his experience with the Provincetown Rep and these two O'Neill plays reminded him of his early days with The Circle in the Square when he was a young director still in his 20s. "Provincetown has always been a mystical place to me," Quintero said, referring to O'Neill's early successes here. "I never thought I'd be directing again, And, I never thought it would be in Provincetown. The

circle has been completed.”

Then it was Jason Robards’ turn. “This reminds me of the way Jose and I started out 44 years ago,” Robards told Quintero and the actors in his familiar baritone voice.

“I am moved and thrilled.”



“I told you how much this was like the Circle in the Square and you didn’t believe me,” said the famed director, chiding Robards, as the two theater veterans continued to reminisce about their early days together, and how they were reminded of those days by the assembled group of actors they were honoring.

The two theatrical veterans, both now in their 70s, not only go back a long way with each other, but with the plays of Eugene O’Neill too. Quintero directed Robards in *The Iceman Cometh* and in *Long Day’s Journey Into Night*, both of which Quintero

brought to the stage in 1956, reviving what *The New York Times* characterized as “O’Neill’s then-diminishing reputation.”

Julie Harris joined in the chorus of praise for the company. But, she also added a challenging note to the otherwise festive atmosphere. Quoting from an African proverb, Harris said, “The beginning of wisdom is having a roof over your head.”

In one sentence the veteran star of stage and screen had put her finger on the one thing the Provincetown Repertory Theatre desperately lacks: a permanent home. A theater to call its own. It’s a sad fact that in the town where Eugene O’Neill first rose to prominence as a dramatist and where, in the truest sense, American theater was born, there is no building dedicated solely for theatrical performances. The last one burned down in 1977 and was never replaced.

Though enthusiastic with the overwhelming response accorded the two O’Neill productions and to an earlier play, *Men’s Lives*, the members of the Provincetown Rep know better than anyone that to assure the long term survival of professional theater in Provincetown, they do, indeed, need a roof over their head. And they are fiercely determined to have one. But first they must raise money--significant money.

To do so, they will depend heavily on the generosity of individuals and businesses both within and outside the community, persons who believe, as the company and its board do, that first rate professional theater belongs back in Provincetown. Back where it got its start 80 years ago. Back where Eugene O’Neill gave birth to American theater as we now know it.

## RAVE REVIEWS FROM THE CRITICS

The Provincetown Rep probably didn't need any more affirmation than it received from Julie Harris, Jason Robards, Jose Quintero and a very responsive Opening Night audience. But they got it anyway--from reviews and newspaper articles up and down the Cape. And from *The New York Times*. Appearing in the Sunday Theater section only three days after Provincetown Repertory's triumphant opening night performances of *Ile* and *The Long Voyage Home*, *The New York Times* piece said, "Nowhere is the tormented spirit of the great playwright (Eugene O'Neill) more evident than at the tip of Cape Cod ..." Said *The Cape Cod Times*, "... there was a feeling that the playwright himself could have returned to his theatrical roots and was waiting in the wings."

Townpeople were just as enthusiastic. Berta Walker, a Provincetown art gallery owner, called the opening night performance and the gala party following, "One of the most exciting events of the season--simply smashing!"

The reviews and the word of mouth acclaim accorded the two productions, billed jointly as *O'Neill 80*, immediately touched off a stampede for tickets. Guest houses in Provincetown and elsewhere on the Cape began filling up with theater lovers. Box office personnel reported that they were receiving ticket requests not only from distant parts of the U.S., but from as far away as Europe.

And somewhere amid all the praise and accolades there was talk that O'Neill plays would become a staple of the company, and that Jose Quintero might just come back to direct them. Quintero fueled speculation when he told *The Cape Codder*, "I think it is about high time that we began exhibiting our treasures. There should be a theater that

every year does O'Neill ... He has led me back to his very beginnings and a theater group that I hope will grow into a big theater ... So it was like the ending of a journey or maybe the beginning or a new journey. Who knows?"

Pretty good for a theater company that performed its first Eugene O'Neill plays in the exhibition space of a local museum.

Not that all the fuss should have been totally unexpected. Only days before they turned the theater world on its ear with their performances of the two O'Neill plays, the Provincetown Repertory Theatre had earned critical acclaim with its interpretation of *Men's Lives*, a modern sea play of sorts that was written by Joe Pintauro and based on a non-fiction book by Peter Matthieson. The actors were honored to have Pintauro in the audience on opening night to share the applause and acclaim with them.

Once again, the company had managed to overcome the considerable disadvantages of performing a work in a space ill-suited for a theater. This time it was Provincetown's Town Hall, which had been outfitted with metal folding chairs for the occasion. But if the actors and technicians found themselves handicapped by inadequate facilities, the critics and the public seemed almost not to notice. Wrote *The Cape Codder*, "Days after seeing it, I am still haunted by the images I saw in Provincetown Repertory Theatre's new show. *Men's Lives* has a universal truth that speaks volumes for any seaside town where commercial fishing is--or struggles to be--a way of life ... Director Christopher Smith, and the actors in the company, deserve a lot of credit for this production."

### **SUDDENLY LAST SUMMER**

That this professional troupe, collected largely from New York and Los Angeles,



was immensely talented became quickly apparent during its first season in Provincetown, the summer of 1995, with its production of *For Heaven's Sake*, nine short plays by Joe Pintauro. "Well written and gracefully executed," wrote *The Cape Cod Times*. The *Provincetown Banner* called the production "... what theater in Provincetown should be: commanding, original, well-acted and superbly directed by Jerry O'Donnell. Good theater, thinking person's theater, can work in Provincetown. It just takes talent.

Exuded *The Cape Codder*, *For Heaven's Sake*, Provincetown Rep's first production, shows just what's been missing--not only from Provincetown, but from much of the rest of the Cape as well ... Intelligent, funny, sad and provocative, this eclectic collection ... is beautifully acted by a cast of six (including director Jerry O'Donnell) who play



comedy and tragedy equally well.” And further, “With its debut, Provincetown Rep had raised the level of theater on the Cape ... Anyone who has hungered for good, local theater will find satisfaction here.”

And from the *Insiders Guide to Cape Cod*: “Several new acting companies surfaced during the summer of 1995 ... It’s easy to name the best: Provincetown Repertory Theatre.”

### **JUST WHO ARE THESE ACTORS ANYWAY?**

Clearly, the actors who convinced Jose Quintero to direct them, and who won the admiration of Jason Robards and Julie Harris, didn’t just appear out of nowhere. They are true professionals, members of Actor’s Equity who have trod the boards in many other places. They have acted on Broadway, Off Broadway, and Off-Off Broadway; in regional theater, movies and television.



flavor of the sea.”

O'Neill was virtually unknown when he arrived in Provincetown in 1916 as an apprentice playwright financially dependent on his father. Before he left Provincetown nine years later, he was rich and famous, having already won the first of his four Pulitzer Prizes. He would also win the Nobel Prize, the only American playwright ever to do so.

The Provincetown Players packed up and went to Greenwich Village after the 1916 season, never to return. But other companies moved in to take their place. The Barnstormers and the Wharf Theater came to town in 1923. Productions of the Barnstormers ended in the same decade. The Wharf Theater continued until 1940, the year its wharf was destroyed by a winter storm. The Provincetown Playhouse on the Wharf was organized in 1946. Thirty-one years later, in 1977, an arsonist burned it down. It was the last time that Provincetown had a theater to call its own.

The wharves are now gone, and with them, all of the wharf theaters. In Provincetown itself, however, there are plenty of reminders of the town's theatrical heritage. Some still stand. Some have been replaced with later structures. Quite a few have well-documented connections with Eugene O'Neill. For example, O'Neill and a drinking companion by the name of Terry Carlin lived part of the summer of 1916 at 516 Commercial street, in what is now known as the Snow Boathouse. In a booklet written by Leona Rust Egan on Provincetown's historic theater sites, it is described as a “shack where the fishermen hung up the nets that no one was using.”

The Atlantic House Hotel at 4 Masonic Place was a particularly productive place for O'Neill during March and April of 1917. During these two months he wrote four of

his sea plays, including *Ile* and *The Long Voyage Home*, the two that the Provincetown Repertory Theater performed so brilliantly under Jose Quintero's direction. The other two were *The Moon of the Caribbees* and *In the Zone*.

During the summer seasons of 1917 and 1918, O'Neill lived at the John Francis Apartments, 577 Commercial Street. He occupied the apartment located on the southwest corner of the top floor. It was fitting that Jose Quintero made this address his home while he was in Provincetown.

O'Neill married Agnes Boulton in 1919, and shortly afterward the couple moved to the renovated Peaked Hill Life Saving Station on the Atlantic Ocean Beach, an area of pounding surf, windswept dunes and perfect solitude. The place was a wedding gift from O'Neill's father, James. And it was here, in 1921, that Eugene O'Neill received word that he had won the Pulitzer Prize, the first of his four, for *Beyond The Horizon*. O'Neill lived here until 1925, his last year in Provincetown. Other plays, which he wrote during the nine years he lived here, included *The Emperor Jones*, *The Hairy Ape* and *Anna Christie*.

In 1931, the house fell into the sea, leaving only memories behind. A letter written in 1921 to Pierre Loving by O'Neill illustrates the feeling that he had for his seaside dwelling, "The place has come to mean a tremendous lot to me. I feel a true kinship and harmony with life out there. Sand and sun and sea and wind ... there's always the monotone of surf on the bar ... you can walk or swim along the beach for miles and meet only the dunes, Sphinxes muffled in their yellow robes with paws deep in the sea." Observed *The New York Times*, echoing what critics and audiences have known for a long time, "... the atmosphere of the place, its fogbound loneliness, its tenuous coexistence with the sea, would find its way thematically into much of his work."

“The question always is, “Would he have done it without Provincetown?”” asked Leona Rust Egan when she was recently interviewed by *The New York Times* for the piece on O’Neill and the Provincetown Rep. Her answer was, “Maybe, but it would have been different.”

Other sites with significant O’Neill connections include Susan Glaspell’s House at 564 Commercial Street. There, actor Teddy Ballantine read O’Neill’s *Bound East For Cardiff* to the troupe for the first time. At that moment they knew what the rest of the world would soon discover. They had a great playwright in their midst.

The Provincetown Theater at Whaler’s Wharf, 237 Commercial Street, was built in 1919 as a silent movie house. In 1924, it showed the silent movie version of O’Neill’s *Anna Christie*, starring Blanche Sweet. According to Leona Rust Egan, O’Neill attended the first showing of the film and even stayed to greet the departing audience afterward. This was considered highly out of character for O’Neill, who was notoriously reclusive.

In the Barn Theater at 27A Bradford Street, home of the Barnstormers, Frank Shay staged the premiere of O’Neill’s *S.S. Glencairn*, another O’Neill sea play. Shay, owner of a bookstore in Greenwich Village, had published early editions of O’Neill plays. There is evidence that O’Neill’s *The Emperor Jones* may also have been produced here, with Paul Robeson in the title role.

O’Neill’s identification with Provincetown made it a popular retreat for other writers, as well. In the 1920s, Edmund Wilson often rented O’Neill’s house, inviting other writers such as e.e. cummings and John Dos Passos to join him there. Novelist and Noble Prize winner Sinclair Lewis arrived in 1939 and worked as an actor, director and play-

wright for the Wharf Theater. With Faye Wray, best known for her role in *King Kong*, he wrote a play entitled *Angela 22*. Asked about his temporary conversion to the stage, Lewis was quoted as saying, "I wanted to see how it was. I wanted to try to recapture a mood long gone. I know you can't but I wanted to try it. About acting, I can't explain that. I needed summer on a different boat. That's the best I can say."

The O'Neill mystique also attracted Tennessee Williams to Provincetown, where one of his plays, *The Unsatisfactory Supper*, was staged. Williams also wrote parts of two better-known plays while staying in Provincetown--*The Glass Menagerie* and *A Streetcar Named Desire*.

## BUILDING ON THE TRADITION

Almost anywhere you turn in Provincetown the ghost of O'Neill seems to hover, daring you to forget him and the great theatrical tradition he caused to be born here. And



now, with Provincetown Rep's critically acclaimed performances of two nearly forgotten O'Neill sea plays, the spirit of America's greatest playwright and the Provincetown theatrical tradition have had new life breathed into them. The excitement that this has generated is palpable wherever you go in Provincetown.

“There’s an incredible percolating energy here now, a real renaissance,” said Alix Ritchie, publisher of the *Provincetown Banner*. Ritchie, a native of Bloomington, Illinois, was involved in theater in various ways during her college days at Wellesley, and for several years in New York, before moving to Provincetown in 1980.

She welcomes the presence of the Provincetown Repertory Theatre. “I think (artistic director Ken Hoyt) has really wonderful creative energy,” Ritchie continued. “It’s that kind of energy and drive that makes things happen. Things don’t happen by themselves. Things happen because somebody makes them happen.”

Like many others in the community, Ritchie is acutely conscious of the need for a theater in Provincetown. “Provincetown was America’s first art colony. Secondly, it’s really the hometown of American play writing. Theater needs to come home to its own past, but the incredible thing is that theater has no home here.”

“I think the Provincetown Rep has a great, great future here in Provincetown,” offered Natalie Coulter, a young Australian actress who played the role of Mag in *The Long Voyage Home*. “I think it’s really needed. There’s a yearning here for great theater, and I think that Provincetown has a responsibility to provide the community with great productions.” Coulter says that company sees “a really great future” for itself in Provincetown and that its members are committed to staying on. “I think that the company’s going to grow and get stronger and be here for a long time, and I hope it brings established playwrights, and new playwrights too, who will do good, strong, contemporary work. There’s a very special feeling about what we’re doing here.”

“... talk of the glorious theatrical past of this artists colony continues,” wrote Laura Collin-Hughs in *The Cape Codder*. What make the talk different now is that it’s accompanied by action, most notably the efforts of actor Ken Hoyt to found the Provincetown Repertory Theatre, the town’s first resident professional company since the demise of the Playhouse.”



“The Provincetown Rep has initiated a new energy,” says Berta Walker. “They’ve shown a willingness to go through what you have to go through, and to involve the community in the process. That’s what’s happening now, and it’s very exciting. It got me involved right away. They’re looking for this community to say, ‘What do you need?’ and they’re looking to the history of American theater, which has its roots right here in Provincetown.”



“The talent level and the commitment (of the Provincetown Rep company) have just been terrific,” continues Berta Walker. “The willingness to take a chance. The innocence, the nerve, with which Ken Hoyt wrote to Jose Quintero, and brought him in. The energy that has been created is extraordinary. They weren’t afraid to do something they knew would be good for the company; they weren’t afraid to go for it. All this is very important, and very much a part of the company’s success so far.”

“I see people coming here from all over, because they’ll know that major actors are going to be doing major American plays here,” Walker said. “And that is the history of Provincetown.”

Both Berta Walker and Alix Ritchie see professional theater as a missing link in the artistic life of this beautiful Cape Cod community, a place where painters and other fine artists have lived and worked for decades. With the establishment of professional theater, they hope that the visual and performing arts will be able to cooperate with one another, for example, by visual artists designing and building theater sets.

And like everyone else who makes a living in Provincetown, they would be delighted if the Repertory company could help extend Provincetown’s short summer season into September and October, something managing director Evan Sadler (who sometimes doubles as the troupe’s sound man) is confident can be done.

“We’re well aware that everyone wants the Provincetown season extended,” Sadler said. “And, Provincetown Rep can deliver. We can deliver crowds.”

Mark Finnen, a local landscape architect who sits on the Provincetown Rep board, believes that the early success of the troupe will attract playwrights who will write plays that are set in the community. "Provincetown is different from any place in the United States," Finnen said. "The playwrights who worked here in the teens and 20s, during O'Neill's time, wrote plays about each other.

There's a lot of stuff that goes on in Provincetown today that would be worthy of drama, and we already have the acting talent we need." Finnen said that *Men's Lives* was "a wonderful thing to do," because it won the support and respect of the local Portuguese community. "They were amazed that something was done on a subject that's meaningful to them." The company further demonstrated its respect for the Portuguese community by casting one of their own, Joe Lomba, a senior at Provincetown High School, in all three 1996 productions.

Finnen hopes that the coverage of Provincetown Rep in newspapers such as *The New York Times*, *The Village Voice* and *The Boston Globe* will help to convince their urban readership that Provincetown is a place that takes theater seriously, and he believes that will happen.

"It's going to be a little different now," he smiles.

## TO BUILD A THEATER

Without a doubt, the Provincetown Repertory Theatre is in the midst of an historic moment. Not pausing to bask in the success of their 1996 season, they are forging ahead with their dream: a roof over their head. They are well beyond the talking stage. They are riding the momentum they have generated with their own incredible accomplishments, and it has become a juggernaut. Both before and in the very midst of the 1996 season they recruited new board members, set up an advisory board, and even laid firm plans for the 1997 season. As important as performance days were, they were never an excuse to postpone or cancel a meeting. Many were held on weekends. To cover expenses, individuals in the company and on the board dipped into their own pockets. Quite obviously they are determined to make their dream a reality, and no one will be surprised when they do.

"We're going to get it done," says J. Anton Schiffenhaus, a retired New Jersey industrialist, longtime patron of the arts, and PRT board chairman. Until recently, Schiffenhaus was running a 100-year-old family business. He brings several decades of hard-nosed business experience and acumen to the board, and an intense love for the local community, having spent almost every summer of his life in Provincetown.

A veteran of many boards, both corporate and artistic, Schiffenhaus well understands the necessity of solid, professional management. Consequently, he has made the hiring of a top-notch business manager for the PRT one of the company's top priorities.

Schiffenhaus's experience in business and in the arts has also made him acutely aware of the need for all board members to understand and subscribe to the PRT's Vision State and Mission. Before anyone is voted to membership on the board, he or she must agree to support the PRT's Vision and Mission. Both are clear and unequivocal.

## VISION STATEMENT

To create in Provincetown, a permanent theater company dedicated to challenging theatergoers with intelligent, provocative and professional theater, so that the community may once again be enriched through this artistic experience.

## MISSION

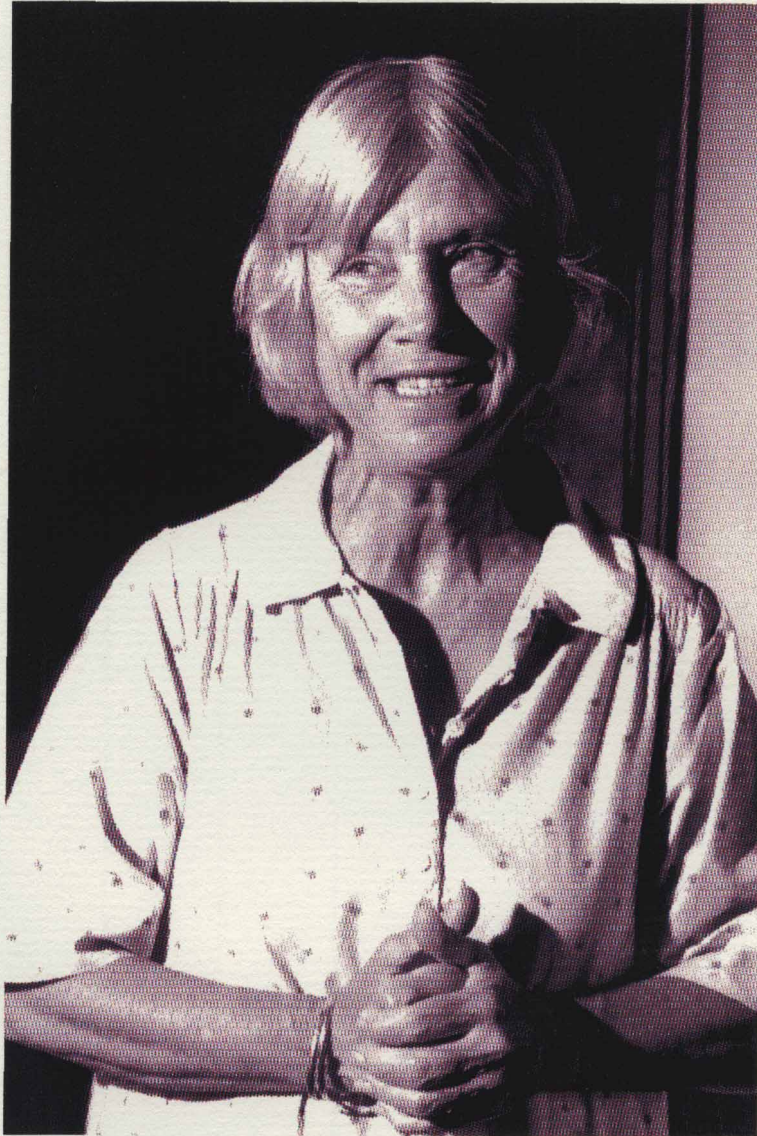
To meet this Vision, the theater must:

- \* Build a regional theater audience that supports and encourages the return of a theater company to Provincetown.
- \* Create a permanent and accessible theater space that is versatile, comfortable, and will provide an exciting theater experience.
- \* Mount a variety of stimulating works that evoke recognition of the human experience. Included would be works born in Provincetown, both old and new.
- \* Build a permanent resident company dedicated to professional ensemble production.
- \* Establish a program which provides an opportunity to a broad range of community members to intern with professional directors, actors, playwrights and designers.

## THE FUTURE

Artistic director Ken Hoyt promises plenty of variety in the kinds of productions the troupe will offer, though he admits to a definite preference for plays that are, in his words, "gutsy." This probably means that audiences won't be seeing much along the lines of *Camelot* or *Hello Dolly!* What they're much more likely to see are plays by O'Neill, and Williams, as well as those of Horton Foote, William Inge, Lillian Hellman and Clifford Odets.

Hoyt doesn't expect to cast every show from the company, which doesn't pose a problem, given the proximity to Boston and New York, and the company's commitment to develop, encourage and take advantage of local talent.



As for the building itself, now in the early stages of design, it will be first and foremost, versatile. "We want something where we can present anything," said Hoyt, "A theater that's not limiting, where we can be free to do what we want. It will be a commu-

nal space, one that brings the audience in close. People need to be part of it. They pay good money. It's not about just sitting and watching it."

And it should have a adjacent rehearsal hall, one that's large enough to contain all the scenery and permit the same blocking that will be used when a production is performed before an audience on stage. The advantages of such a room are obvious, particularly in repertory where a theater must often accommodate two productions simultaneously, the one that's playing and the one that's in rehearsal. When one show closes and the other opens, the stagehands simply slide or roll the sets from one space to the other.

There will be plenty of storage space for sets and equipment not in use. And high ceilings, so lights and booms can function properly and with the least amount of distraction.

All these considerations and many more are currently stored in the brain of David McMahon, a Yale-trained architect who divides his time between Boston, where his firm is located, and Provincetown, where he owns a guest house. From rough sketches that have poured from his quick fingers at planning sessions will come working drawings and, soon after, detailed plans.

Providing housing for the actors will challenge the company's creative powers perhaps even more than the design and building of the theater building. In a popular vacation community located at the tip of a narrow Peninsula and bordered by federal wet lands, not to mention the Atlantic Ocean, space is always at a premium, as well as very costly--whether you rent or buy it. This year, housing was the company's greatest expense, greater even than salaries.

It would be wonderful if the Provincetown Repertory Theatre could build or buy sufficient housing adjacent to the theater. But they would be thankful to have it almost anywhere in Provincetown. According to Sadler, it would be used the year around--by members of the resident company in season, by playwrights, apprentice actors and others on fellowships and grants in the off season.

What Julie Harris should have said, perhaps, is that the beginning of wisdom is not just one room over your head, but several.

Joining Miss Harris in her tribute and wish was the *Village Voice*, when it exclaimed in late August, "Kudos to the Provincetown Repertory Theatre, and Jose Quintero, for honoring O'Neill in the birthplace of his art, and may the troupe soon find the permanent theater space they seek."

If anyone can do it, the Provincetown Rep can--with a great deal of financial support from its friends, who firmly and sincerely believe, as they do, that theater is taken seriously in Provincetown.