

who seem so intent on making money and "bunny-hugging" and "turkey-trotting" that they have no time left for such old-fashioned things as points of the compass. Thank God I am not so steeped in mental filth that I cannot tell north from south!). Under the Brooklyn Bridge we sailed and I noted that it was a bridge of the suspension type, 113 feet above the water and 6,855 feet long. I am interested in everything.

As I sat on the deck and watched the other bridges drift by over my head (the Manhattan, the Williamsburg, the Queensboro, and the Hell Gate) I thought of the two plays which had opened in New York the week before I left ("The Wooden Soldier" and "Paid Companions"), neither of which was worth thinking any more about. So I stopped thinking of them and devoted my attention to the many interesting sights which were presented along the shores of the river. I will describe more of these, together with my personal reactions to them, in my next week's article, and you may be sure that I shall not mince matters or kow-tow to the Smart Alecs. Any of my readers who do not want to wait until next week before hearing more about my trip may obtain galley proofs of my article in advance by sending to the Ho Hum Department of this paper.

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"MOURNING BECOMES ELECTRA"

Robert Benchley, review published in *New Yorker* 7 Nov 1931 [on premier of *MBE* = *Benchley at the Theatre: dramatic criticism, 1920 - 1940* by Robert Benchley, ed. by Charles Getchell (Ipswich, 1985), 129 - 31.]

IN THE midst of the acclaim with which Eugene O'Neill is being so justly hailed for his latest and most gigantic *tour de force*, "Mourning Becomes Electra," and in the confusion of cross-references to the Greek dramatists from whom he derived his grim and overpowering story, are we not forgetting one very important source of his inspiration, without which he might perhaps have been just a builder of word-mountains? Was there not standing in the wings of the Guild Theatre, on that momentous opening night, the ghost of an old actor in white wig, with drawn sword, who looked on proudly as the titanic drama unfolded itself, scene by scene, and who murmured, with perhaps just the suggestion of a chuckle: "That's good, son! Give 'em the old Theatre!"? The actor I refer to needs no introduction to the older boys and girls here tonight—Mr. James O'Neill, "The Count of Monte Cristo" and the father of our present hero.

Let us stop all this scowling talk about "the inevitability of the Greek tragedy" and "O'Neill's masterly grasp of the eternal verities" and let us admit that the reason why we sat for six hours straining to hear each line through the ten-watt acoustics of the Guild Theatre was because "Mourning Becomes Electra" is filled with good, old-fashioned, spine-curling melodrama. It is his precious inheritance from his trouper-father, his father who counted "One," "Two," "Three" as he destroyed his respective victims, one at the curtain to each act; it is his supreme sense of the Theatre in its most elementary appeal, which allows Eugene O'Neill to stand us on our heads (perhaps our heads would have been more comfortable) and keep us there from five in the afternoon until almost midnight. In this tremendous play he gives us not one thing that is new, and he gives us nothing to think about (unless we are just beginning to think), but he does thrill the bejeezus out of us, just as his father used to, and that is what we go to the theatre for.

Just run over in your mind the big scenes in "Mourning Becomes Electra." A daughter upbraiding her mother for adultery, the mother plotting with her lover the murder of her husband, the poisoning of the husband and the discovery of the tablets in the fainting mother's hand, the placing of the tablets on the breast of the corpse to frighten the mother into a confession (and what a scene *that* was!), the brother and sister peering down the hatch of a sailing ship to spy on the mother and later to murder her lover, and the tense moments of waiting for the offstage shots which would tell of the successive suicides of the mother and the brother. Greek tragedy, my eye! The idea may have been the Greeks', but the hand is the hand of Monte Cristo. If the Greek idea of revenge, murder, incest, and suicide is so thrilling, why isn't Margaret Anglin busier than she is? "Mourning Becomes Electra" is just the old Greek story put into not particularly convincing New England talk, but it is a hundred times better show than "Electra" because O'Neill has a God-given inheritance of melodramatic sense. So let's stop kidding ourselves about the Verities and the Unities and take a grand, stupendous thriller when we find it and let it go at that.

In the face of such an overwhelming victory over Time, Space, and the Daily Press as that which Mr. O'Neill has won, it is perhaps puny in a single commentator to admit such a personal reaction as fatigue during the last of the three sections of the drama (for they are *not* three plays, as advertised, but one play in fourteen successive acts). But, willing as the spirit may be to take punishment, the human frame is not equipped for such a session as that which is imposed upon it in the Guild Theatre (at any rate, mine isn't, and I have a pretty good equipment), and, starting with a pretty bad scene (go ahead, strike me dead, Jove!) of comic relief at the beginning of the section called "The Haunted," I began to be cushion-conscious. This uneasiness was heightened as I saw approaching that margin of Diminishing Returns in Tragedy which I alone seem to be conscious of in O'Neill's dramas, when one more fell swoop of Fate, one more killing, one more father in love with one more daughter, or one more sister in love with one more brother, and the whole thing becomes just a bit ridiculous. It was when I saw those magnificent scenes of the middle section becoming confused with a grand finale of bad comedy, incest, and extra suicide that Miss Brady's agonized cry, "I couldn't bear another death!," struck home, and I began to realize that, for me personally, "Mourning Becomes Electra" was getting to be just about one hour too long. I know that this is a purely individual and unworthy reaction, quite out of place in what should be a serious review of a great masterpiece, but, as this page is nothing if not personal, I am setting it down. And the final scene of

all, in which Electra, or Lavinia, closes herself up in the great New England Greek temple for the rest of her unhappy life, content that mourning is her *métier*, made up for everything.

And now we come to Miss Brady and to Alla Nazimova and to all the rest of the splendid cast which the Theatre Guild has assembled to do homage to Mr. O'Neill's *magnum opus*. Without them, and without Robert Edmond Jones' superb settings, I am not so sure just how effective this drama would be. I can imagine its being pretty bad, as a matter of fact, if only moderately well done. We thrill to the scenes between the mother and daughter on the steps of the cold New England mansion, but how much credit do we give to Mr. Jones and to Mr. Moeller, who gave us this picture of two women in black on the white steps of a Greek temple? (It may have been so nominated in the script, but without Mr. Jones to give it being, it might have remained just a stage-directon.) Alice Brady has at last come into her own, in voice and bearing the perfect Electra, and Nazimova, in spite of her Russian accent, which rings so strangely in Suffolk County, made so much of the sinning Clytemnestra that the drama lost much when she withdrew into the shades of the House of Mannon never to return. Earle Larimore, too, as Orin-Orestes, gave the rôle a human quality which could hardly have been expected in the writing, and Thomas Chalmers, with an opera-trained speaking voice, not only overcame the trick sound-currents of the theatre but gave a healthy robustness to the rather murky proceedings which was reassuring, as long as it lasted. Lee Baker, the first of a long string of entries to die, may have seemed a little stiff, but I suspect that it was a rather stiff part. In short, Philip Moeller in his direction, and the cast in their interpretation, and especially Mr. Jones in his settings, all did more than their share to raise Mr. O'Neill to the undisputed, and probably for a long time uncontested, eminence of the First Dramatist of Our Time. Not that he wasn't there already, but it is good to be sure.

But while we are on our feet, let us drink once again to the Count of Monte Cristo.

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