

THE PLAY: Strange Images of Death in Eugene O'Neill's Masterpiece

MOURNING BECOMES ELECTRA, a trilogy by Eugene O'Neill, consisting of **HOME-COMING**, a play in four scenes; **THE HUNTED**, a play in five scenes, and **THE HAUNTED**, a play in five scenes. Staged by Philip Moeller; settings and costumes designed by Robert Edmond Jones; produced by the Theatre Guild under the supervision of Theresa Helburn and Maurice Wertheim. At the Guild Theatre.

HOME-COMING.

Seth Beckwith.....Arthur Hughes
Amos Ames.....Jack Byrne
Louisa.....Bernice Elliott
Minnie.....Emily Lorraine
Christine.....Alla Nazimova
Lavinia Mannon.....Alice Brady
Captain Peter Niles.....Philip Foster
Hazel Niles.....Mary Arbenz
Captain Adam Brant.....Thomas Chalmers
Brig. Gen. Ezra Mannon.....Lee Baker

THE HUNTED.

Mrs. Josiah Borden.....Augusta Durgeon
Mrs. Everett Hills.....Janet Young
Dr. Joseph Blake.....Erskine Sanford
Josiah Borden.....James Bosnell
Everett Hills.....Oliver Putnam
Christine Mannon.....Alla Nazimova
Hazel Niles.....Mark Arbenz
Peter Niles.....Philip Foster
Lavinia Mannon.....Alice Brady
Orin Mannon.....Earle Larimore
A Chantyman.....John Hendricks
Captain Adam Brant.....Thomas Chalmers

THE HAUNTED.

Abner Small.....Erskine Sanford
Ira Mackel.....Oliver Putnam
Joe Silva.....Grant Gordon
Amos Ames.....Jack Byrne
Seth Beckwith.....Arthur Hughes
Peter Niles.....Philip Foster
Hazel Niles.....Mary Arbenz
Lavinia Mannon.....Alice Brady
Orin Mannon.....Earle Larimore

By J. BROOKS ATKINSON.

Mr. O'Neill gives not only size but weight in "Mourning Becomes Electra," which the Theatre Guild mounted at its own theatre for the greater part of yesterday afternoon and evening. The size is a trilogy that consumes six hours in the playing. The weight is the formidable earnestness of Mr. O'Neill's cheerless dramatic style. To him the curse that the fates have set against the New England house of Mannon is no trifling topic for a casual dramatic discussion, but a battering into the livid mysteries of life. Using a Greek legend as his model, he has reared up a universal tragedy of tremendous stature—deep, dark, solid, uncompromising and grim. It is heroically thought out and magnificently wrought in style and structure, and it is played by Alice Brady and Mme. Nazimova with consummate artistry and passion. Mr. O'Neill has written overwhelming dramas in the past. In "Strange Interlude" he wrote one almost as long as this trilogy. But he has never before fulfilled himself so completely; he has never commanded his theme in all its variety and adumbrations with such superb strength, coolness and coherence. To this department, which ordinarily reserves its praise for the dead, "Mourning Becomes Electra" is Mr. O'Neill's masterpiece.

As the title acknowledges, "Mourning Becomes Electra," follows the scheme of the Orestes-Electra legend which Aeschylus, Sophocles and Euripides translated into drama in the days of Greek classicism. Like the doomed house of Atreus, this New England family of Civil War time is dripping with foul and unnatural murder. The mother murders the father. The son murders his mother's lover. The mother mercifully commits suicide. The daughter's malefic importunities drive the son to suicide. It is a family that simmers with hatred, suspicion, jealousy and greed, and that is twisted by unnatural loves. Although Mr. O'Neill uses the Orestes legend as the scheme of his trilogy, it is his ambition to abandon the gods, whom the Greeks humbly invoked at the crises of drama, and to interpret the whole legend in terms of modern psychology. From royalty this story of vengeance comes down to the level of solid New England burghers. From divinity it comes into the sphere of truths that are known. There are no mysteries about the inverted relationships that set all these gaunt-minded people against one another, aside from the primary mystery of the ferocity of life. Students of the new psychology will find convenient labels to explain why the mother betrays her husband, why the daughter instinctively takes the father's side, why the son fears his father and clings to his mother, why the daughter gradually inherits the characteristics of her mother after the deaths of the parents, and why the son transfers his passion to his sister. As for Mr. O'Neill, he has been chiefly concerned with the prodigious task of writing these modern plays.

And through three plays and fifteen scenes he has kept the rhythm of his story sculptural in its stark outline. The Mannon curse is inherited. For this fine New England mansion was built in hatred when the Mannons cast off the brother who had sinned with a French-Canadian servant. Her son, Captain Brant, comes back into their lives to avenge his mother's dishonor and he becomes the lover of Ezra Mannon's wife. From that point on "Mourning Becomes Electra" stretches out as a strong chain of murders and revenge and the house of Mannon is a little island walled round with the dead.

There are big scenes all the way through. Before the first play is fairly started the dance of death begins with Lavinia upbraiding Christine, her mother, with secret adultery. Christine plotting with Captain Brant to poison her husband on the night when he returns from the Civil War; Christine poisoning her husband and being discovered with the tablets by Lavinia as the climax to the first play; Lavinia proving her mother's guilt to Orin, her brother, by planting the box of poison tablets on the breast of her dead father and admitting her terrified mother to the chamber of death; Lavinia and Orin following their mother to a rendezvous with the captain on his ship and murdering him in his cabin; Lavinia forcing her brother to suicide and waiting panic-stricken for the report of his pistol; Lavinia in the last scene of the last play sealing herself up with this haunted house to live with the spectres of her dead—all these are scenes of foreboding and horror.

Yet "Mourning Becomes Electra" is no parade of bravura scenes. For this is an organic play in which story rises out of character and character rises out of story, and each episode is foreshadowed by what precedes it. Although Mr. O'Neill has been no slave to the classic origins of his tragedy, he has transmuted the same impersonal forces into the modern idiom, and the production, which has been brilliantly directed by Philip Moeller, gives you some of the stately spectacle of Greek classicism. Lavinia in a flowing black dress sitting majestically on the steps of Robert Edmond Jones's set of a New England mansion is an unforgettable and portentous picture. Captain Brant pacing the deck of his ship in the ringing silence of the night, the murdered Mannon lying on his bier in the deep shadows of his study, the entrances and exits of Christine and Lavinia through doors that open and close on death are scenes full of dramatic beauty. To give you perspective on this tragedy Mr. O'Neill has a sort of Greek chorus in Seth, the hired man, and the frightened townfolk who gather outside the house, laughing and muttering. Mr. O'Neill has viewed his tragedy from

every side, thought it through to the last detail and composed it in a straightforward dialogue that tells its story without hysteria.

As Mr. O'Neill has mastered his play, so the actors have mastered their parts and so Mr. Moeller has molded the parts into a measured, fluent performance. Miss Brady, as Lavinia, has one of the longest parts ever written. None of her neurotic dramatics in the past has prepared us for the demoniac splendor of her Lavinia. She speaks in an ominous, full voice that only once or twice breaks into the splintery diffusion of artificial climaxes. Lavinia has recreated Miss Brady into a majestic actress. As Christine, Mme. Nazimova gives a performance of haunting beauty, rich in variety, plastic, eloquent and imaginatively transcendent. Lee Baker as the Mannon father conveys little of the towering indomitability of that part and lets his death scene crumple into mediocrity. Earle Larimore plays Orin from the inside with great resource, elasticity and understanding. As Captain Brant, Thomas Chalmers has a solid body to his playing. There are excellently designed bits by Arthur Hughes and Erskine Sanford as townspeople. Philip Foster, and especially Mary Arbenz, give able performances as a brother and sister.

For Mr. O'Neill, for the Guild and for lovers of drama, "Mourning Becomes Electra," is, accordingly, an occasion for great rejoicing. Mr. O'Neill has set his hand to a tremendous story, and told it with coolness and clarity. In sustained thought and workmanship it is his finest tragedy. All that he fretted over in the past has trained him for this masterpiece.