

STUDY GUIDE

Desire Under the Elms



aNoiseWithin
California's Home for the Classics
Inaugural Season in Pasadena 2011/12



PHOTO BY CRAIG SCHWARTZ

Desire Under the Elms



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Cast of Characters & Setting



SYMBOLISM OF THE ELM TREE: Dark passion, intuition, the tree of sleep, maternal, rigid structure, strength of will, fighting to the finish.

Dámaso Rodríguez, Director
of *Desire Under the Elms*

"*Desire* is too-rarely staged, in large part because the material is so challengingly complex. Finding actors that can access the emotional range O'Neill demands is nearly impossible. I find the story of the play to be extremely compelling, mesmerizing even. O'Neill somehow makes the characters' tragic choices both surprising and somehow inevitable. This inevitability is consistent with all great tragedy. And while the play explores themes found in Greek Tragedy, I'm intrigued by a darkly humorous irony that runs through the text."

A director of theater and film, **Dámaso Rodríguez** is Co-founder and Resident Director of the Furious Theatre Company, where he served as Co-Artistic Director from 2001-2011. From 2007-2010 he served as Associate Artistic Director of the Pasadena Playhouse, where he directed main stage productions and oversaw all programming for the Playhouse's second stage, including its Hothouse New Play Development Program. He has directed over 25 award-winning, critically acclaimed productions at theatres such as Seattle's Tony Award-winning Intiman Theatre, the Pasadena Playhouse, A Noise Within, The Theatre@Boston Court and Furious Theatre. Dámaso is a recipient of the Los Angeles Drama Critics Circle Award, the Back Stage Garland Award, the NAACP Theatre Award, and the Pasadena Arts Council's Gold Crown Award.

CAST OF CHARACTERS:

Ephraim Cabot
Simeon Cabot
Peter Cabot
Eben Cabot
Abbie Putnam
Young girl and
neighboring town folk.

SETTING:

1850, height of the
California Gold Rush, on
a New England Farm.

"The action of the entire play takes place in, and immediately outside of, the Cabot farmhouse in New England, in the year 1850...Two enormous elms are on each side of the house. They bend their trailing branches down over the roof. They appear to protect and at the same time subdue. There is a sinister maternity in their aspect, a crushing, jealous absorption. They have developed from their intimate contact with the life of man in the house an appalling humaneness. They brood oppressively over the house. They are like exhausted women resting their sagging breasts and hands and hair on its roof, and when it rains their tears trickle down monotonously and rot on the shingles..."

—An excerpt from O'Neill's setting description.

About the Play: Synopsis



PHOTO BY CRAIG SCHWARTZ

ACT I

Scene 1: Eben Cabot calls his half-brothers Simeon and Peter to supper from their work in the barn. The two brothers stop to remark on the beauty of the sunset and dream of an easy life looking for gold in California. They complain to each other about the hard life of working the farm for their father Ephraim Cabot, who has been gone now for months without a word.

Scene 2: After supper Eben tells his brothers that he has overheard their conversation about California. He belittles their plan and claims they will never leave as long as they have a chance to inherit the farm. As Eben is preparing to go into town to visit Minnie, a local prostitute, the boys taunt him.

Scene 3: The next morning Eben returns, rousing Simeon and Peter to tell them that their father has married again. The brothers realize that the farm will now go to the new wife. Eben offers them money, which he stole from their father, for the journey to California on the condition that they relinquish any claim to the farm. Simeon and Peter agree, and Eben is jubilant. Cabot arrives with Abbie Putnam, his new bride, and goes in search of his sons. Abbie comes upon Eben and tries to befriend him, but he rejects her. Cabot returns, still looking for Eben's brothers. When Eben tells him they have left for California, Cabot prays to the Lord to smite his sons. Eben and Cabot start the morning chores as Abbie goes in to look at her new home.

ACT II

Scene 1: Two months later on a hot Sunday afternoon, Abbie catches Eben sneaking away to see Minnie. She makes advances towards him, but they argue and Eben leaves. Abbie, stung from the fight, asks Cabot if he will leave the farm to Eben. Cabot bristles, and says he would rather burn the farm to the ground before he dies than leave it to anyone. When Abbie asks about her right to inherit the farm, Cabot rejects the idea because he believes the farm needs a man to work it. Abbie declares that she will have a son. Cabot is overcome with emotion, and they pray to God to bless them as Abbie plots her future.

Scene 2: That night, following an unsuccessful attempt at the creation of a son, Abbie loses herself in thoughts of Eben, while Cabot rambles on about his farm. Eben, alone in his room, thinks of the oppression created by the stone walls and senses Abbie's closeness. Cabot, feeling cold and lonely, goes off to the barn. Abbie appears at Eben's door and declares her love for him. Though confused at first, he plans revenge on his father through Abbie. They passionately express their love for each other.

ACT III

Scene 1: The following spring Abbie bears a child. Local gossip suggests that Eben is really the father. Neighbors gather for a celebration and Abbie sings a lullaby to her baby. Eben arrives and together they look at their son. Cabot calls for Eben and tells him that now he will not inherit the farm. He describes Abbie's plot to secure the farm for herself and her child. Eben attacks Cabot, who overpowers him. Abbie, finding Eben beaten, admits that when she first arrived she had conspired against him, but that she now loves him. Eben calls her a liar, wishes their son had never been born, and vows to follow his brothers to California. Abbie, confused and alone, sings again to her baby as she tries to think how to prove her love to Eben.

Scene 2: A few hours later, while Eben prepares to leave, Abbie tells him that she has killed their child. Horrified, Eben rushes away to summon the Sheriff.

Scene 3: Abbie waits for Eben to return with the Sheriff. Cabot appears. When she reveals what she has done, and that the baby was Eben's, Cabot tries to strangle her. Eben arrives and tells Abbie that while he was telling the Sheriff of what she'd done, he realized how much he loves her and now hopes they can escape together. Abbie insists that she must pay for her sin. When the Sheriff arrives, Eben tells him that he helped plan the killing, and the lovers are led away, leaving Cabot to work the farm alone. ❖

Source: http://solo.naxos.com/mainsite/blurbs_reviews.asp?item_code=8.669001-02&catNum=669001&filetype=About%20this%20Recording&language=English

Biography of Eugene O'Neill



EUGENE O'NEILL was one of the greatest playwrights in American history. Through his experimental and emotionally probing dramas, he addressed the difficulties of human society with a deep psychological complexity. O'Neill's disdain for the commercial realities

of the theater world he was born into led him to produce works of importance and integrity.

Born in a hotel on Broadway in 1888, Eugene O'Neill was the son of Ella Quinlan and the actor James O'Neill. Eugene spent the first seven years of his life touring with his father's theater company. These years introduced O'Neill to the world of theater and the difficulties of maintaining artistic integrity. His father, once a well-known Shakespearean, had taken a role in a lesser play for its sizable salary.

O'Neill spent the next seven years receiving a strict Catholic education before attending a private secular school in Connecticut. Though a bright student, he was already caught up in a world of alcohol and prostitutes by the time he entered college. He eventually dropped out before finishing his first year at Princeton University. Though he would later enroll in a short class in playwriting at Harvard, this was the end of his formal education. After leaving Princeton, O'Neill moved to New York, where he spent most of his time drinking and carousing with his older brother.

In 1910 he fell in love with and married the first of three wives, Kathleen Jenkins. Soon after, however, O'Neill left his wife for the adventures of traveling. In Honduras he contracted Malaria, and returned to find Kathleen pregnant with his child. Without seeing the boy (Eugene O'Neill, Jr.), O'Neill shipped out again, this time for Buenos Aires, and later for England. In 1912, Kathleen filed for divorce and soon after, plagued by illness, O'Neill returned to his parents' home. It was there among the turmoil of a despondent father and a morphine-addicted mother that he decided to become a playwright.

O'Neill spent the next five years working primarily on one-act plays. In 1918 he married Agnes Boulton,

and with her had two children, Shane and Oona. He continued to publish and produce his one-acts, but it was not until his play *Beyond the Horizon* (1920), that American audiences responded to his genius. The play won the first of three Pulitzer Prizes for O'Neill. Many saw in this early work a first step toward a more serious American theater. O'Neill's poetic dialogue and insightful views into the lives of the characters held his work apart from the less sober playwrighting of the day.

Following the success of *Beyond the Horizon*, O'Neill went into an incredibly productive period, writing many of his greatest plays. *The Emperor Jones* (1920) and *The Hairy Ape* (1922) follow the lives of two men through personal struggles and their search for identity. Received well, these two established O'Neill as a master of the craft. The times, however, were fraught with turmoil—seeing the death of O'Neill's father, mother, and brother, as well as the break-up of his marriage.

Despite (or because) of these tragedies, he went on to create a number of penetrating and insightful views into family life and struggle. With plays such as *Desire Under the Elms* (1924) and *Morning Becomes Electra* (1931), O'Neill uses the moral and physical entanglements similar to Greek drama to express the complexities of family life. Throughout much of the 1930s and 1940s, O'Neill continued in this vein working on a cycle of plays (nine) which would deal with lives of a New England family. Concerned that they might be altered after his death, O'Neill eventually destroyed the manuscripts, accidentally leaving behind only one, *A Touch of the Poet*.

O'Neill's final years were spent estranged from much of the literary community and his family. Though he was awarded the Nobel Prize in 1936, most of his later works were not produced until after his death. His failing health did not prevent him, however, from writing two of the greatest works the American stage has ever seen. Both *The Iceman Cometh*, a story of personal desperation in the lives of a handful of barflies, and *Long Day's Journey into Night*, a view into the difficult family life of his early years, were profound insights into many of the darker questions of human existence. Produced posthumously, these were to be his two greatest achievements. By the time of his death in 1953, O'Neill was considered one of the twentieth century's greatest writers. ❖

<http://www.pbs.org/wnet/americanmasters/episodes/eugene-oneill/about-eugene-oneill/676/>

Timeline of Works and Awards



PHOTO BY CRAIG SCHWARTZ

1912

Drinking heavily and living at Jimmy-the-Priest's boarding house and saloon in New York, O'Neill attempts suicide. In 1919 he will write *Exorcism*, a one-act play based on the suicide attempt.

O'Neill contracts tuberculosis and is inspired to become a playwright while reading during his recovery.

1916

O'Neill joins a group of young writers and painters who launch an experimental theater in Provincetown, Massachusetts. They produce his first one-act play, *Bound East for Cardiff*, one of many plays he will write about sailors or life at sea. The play debuts in New York on November 3.

1918

April 12: O'Neill marries the writer Agnes Boulton. They will have two children, Shane and Oona, before O'Neill leaves Agnes for Carlotta Monterey, who will become his third wife.

1920

February 3: O'Neill's first full-length play, *Beyond the Horizon*, is produced on Broadway at the Morosco Theater. The play will win a Pulitzer Prize, the first of three in O'Neill's lifetime.

August 10: James O'Neill dies in New London, Connecticut, after confiding to Eugene that *The Count of Monte Cristo* cursed his career as an actor.

December 27:

O'Neill's *The Emperor Jones*, which follows the destruction of an ex-Pullman porter who has seized control of a West Indian island, opens on Broadway. It features Charles Gilpin, the first African American to play a major role in a white American company.

1922

February 28: Ella O'Neill dies in California of a brain tumor. His parents now deceased, O'Neill will soon begin to write about them through the characters in his plays.

May 21: *Anna Christie*, a play about a prostitute returning to her seafaring father and falling in love with a sailor, is awarded a Pulitzer Prize, O'Neill's second.

1923

November: An alcoholic and broken man, Eugene's older brother Jamie O'Neill dies after being taken to a sanitarium in an advanced state of delirium tremens. Eugene will base his play *A Moon for the Misbegotten*, which he will write two decades later, on the last days of his brother's life.

1924

November 11: *Desire Under the Elms*, about a woman who cements her bond to her stepson-lover by murdering their baby, premieres at the Greenwich Village Theater. The play by O'Neill has been called "the first important tragedy to be written in America."

1928

O'Neill wins his third Pulitzer Prize for *Strange Interlude*, a play in nine acts that catalogues the life of a woman, from the death of her fiancé to her listless marriage. The play earns him \$275,000 and later is made into a movie starring Norma Shearer.

1929

July 22: O'Neill marries Carlotta Monterey. She will remain his wife and protector until his death 24 years later.

1931

O'Neill completes one of his most ambitious works, *Mourning Becomes Electra*, for which he adapts the Greek tragic myth *Oresteia* to 19th-century New England.

1933

October 2: *Ah, Wilderness!*, the only comedy O'Neill will write, opens at the Guild Theatre on Broadway.

1936

November 12: O'Neill is awarded the Nobel Prize in literature, becoming the first—and only—American dramatist to win the honor.

1939

O'Neill writes *The Iceman Cometh*, one of his most acclaimed tragedies. Set in a dive bar in New York, the play concerns the "pipe dreams" of a group of drunken derelicts.

1941

O'Neill completes *Long Day's Journey Into Night*, his best-known play, and arguably

America's greatest, which dramatizes the embattled relationship of his parents during a wrenching day in the life of his family.

1943

June 16: O'Neill's daughter Oona, at 18, marries film star Charlie Chaplin, who at 54 is about the same age as her father. Eugene O'Neill rejects the marriage and will never see his daughter again. Oona and Chaplin will have eight children together and remain married until his death in 1977.

1945

November 29: Delivering the text of *Long Day's Journey Into Night* to Random House in New York, O'Neill insists that the play must not be published until 25 years after his death.

1946

October 9: *The Iceman Cometh* opens on Broadway. It is the last Broadway production of an O'Neill play during his lifetime.

1948

August: Shane O'Neill is arrested and pleads guilty to heroin possession, receiving a two-year suspended sentence. Eugene O'Neill never again has contact with his younger son.

1950

September: Eugene O'Neill Jr. commits suicide. His note reads: "Never let it be said of O'Neill that he failed to finish a bottle." His father, in failing health, does not attend the funeral of his oldest child.

1953

November 27: Suffering from a neuromuscular disorder that has robbed him of the ability to write, O'Neill dies in the Shelton Hotel in Boston. He has written 50 plays and seen 35 of them produced.

1956

February: Yale University Press publishes *Long Day's Journey Into Night*. Carlotta takes the manuscript to Yale after Random House adheres to O'Neill's instruction not to publish the play until 25 years after his death.

November 7: *Long Day's Journey Into Night* opens at the Helen Hayes Theatre in New York. The playwright will be recognized with a posthumous Pulitzer Prize.

1957

May 2: *A Moon for the Misbegotten*, O'Neill's play about his brother's final days, debuts at the Bijou Theater in New York.

1967

More Stately Mansions, an unfinished manuscript O'Neill thought he had destroyed, is finished by others and produced on Broadway as —misleadingly— "a new play by Eugene O'Neill." Although it stars Ingrid Bergman, it is not a hit.

1976

October 19: President Gerald Ford signs a bill into law authorizing the establishment of the Eugene O'Neill National Historic Site at Tao House in Danville, California. O'Neill wrote his masterpieces, *The Iceman Cometh*, *Long Day's Journey Into Night* and *A Moon for the Misbegotten* while living at the site from 1937 to 1944.

1979

December 29: The Eugene O'Neill Society, a scholarly and professional organization devoted to the promotion and study of the playwright's life and works, is formed. ❖

<http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/amex/oneill/timeline/index.html>



PHOTO BY CRAIG SCHWARTZ

Tragic/Mythic elements in the play



Phèdre et Hippolyte by Baron Pierre-Narcisse Guérin (1802)

The mythological elements

Sophocles' play *Oedipus Rex* serves as an introduction to the themes of incest and Oedipal complex in this drama. Oedipus was left at his birth by his parents due to their fear that he will kill his father Laius and marry his mother Jocasta. After an unfortunate series of events, that did happen, thus making Oedipus the king after his father. His story is a classical representation of the fight a father and a son have for mother's love and the son's rebellion against a father.

This drama complicates the Oedipal complex in the sense that Eben has problems with it on more levels, due to the fact that he has three maternal figures in his life, each dominant in her own time. Those include his mother, Abbie and the prostitute Min. The last one is not that active during the course of the play, but is important to see Eben's inner struggles on yet another level. She is the one to whom he goes when he needs to spend time with a woman and she, in a way, serves as a replacement for his maternal and sexual need until Abbie arrives. Eben "shares" Min with his brothers and his father, since all of them were once her lovers before him. He says that "She may've been his'n—an' your'n, too—but she's mine now!" His complex derives

from the unconscious rivalry with his father for the love of his mother and is enlarged by arrival of Abbie. Both men strive for her, influencing Eben's inner conflict and his outer conflict, presented by the hostile treatment of the father figure. He sees Ephraim as a rival and wants to eliminate him, ultimately rejecting him as a father ("I meant—I hain't his'n—I hain't like him—he hain't me! [...] I'm Maw—every drop o' blood!"). Eben's inferiority to the mother and her strong influence over his life is what moves him on and shapes him into a man he is.

O'Neill's drama is analogous to the mythical connection Phaedra has with Hippolytus and his father, Theseus. This myth has inspired many authors to write dramas, two of them being a Greek, Euripides, while the other Seneca, a Roman. There are some slight differences between them. In Seneca's version, named Phaedra, Phaedra is Theseus' second wife and soon after she meets his son, she falls in love with him. However, Hippolytus rejects her love, making her seek her revenge after him. She accuses him of raping her and Theseus, after hearing that, curses his son, who later dies. There are a few variations of Hippolytus' death, but they all come from one source—Phaedra.



Medea by Evelyn De Morgan.

In the Euripides' play, *Hippolytus*, the plot is triggered by Hippolytus' refusal to honor the Goddess of love, Aphrodite, in order to honor the Goddess of hunt, Artemis. As a way to get her revenge, Aphrodite inspired Hippolytus' stepmother, Phaedra, to fall in love with him, which is eventually causing his death. In Seneca's version, Phaedra is presented as a more cunning and deceiving character, as she even makes her nurse an accomplice, thus making this version of her closer to Abbie.

By following the accounts of mythical heroes, O'Neill portrays the Cabot family in a similar way. The roles of Hippolytus, Phaedra and Theseus are taken by Eben, Abbie and Ephraim. Abbie is passionate about Eben who firstly rejects her (but, unlike Hippolytus, enjoys the affair) and is unaware that their love marks the end of their previous life. Opening of the plot is mythical, as both stepmothers find their stepsons a threat for the fathers' property and they both hide their true emotions by hatred. Both developments are swift and cannot be stopped. The drama's epilogue is similar to the myth: Ephraim is left alone, but not before Eben's curse falls on his and Abbie's son. Differences are rare and mark only their willingness to share love and the fact that it was Eben, not Ephraim, who cursed his son.

Another myth used is the one of Medea, later made into a play by Euripides. It builds on the previous ones that, combined, influenced Abbie and Eben to have a child. Medea is infamous for murdering her children in order to get revenge on her husband Jason who left her for another. She had the choice whether or not she would murder them and she choose to do so, committing one of the greatest sins in the Greek tragedy—killing someone of one's own blood. Just like her, Abbie deliberately decided to make an innocent victim while ending her son's life. What is more, it is that same son who was supposed to secure her position on the farm and in the family. Later, Eben curses her and their boy for being born in a similar way that Theseus cursed Hippolytus. ❖

A Timeline of the California Gold Rush

PETER: Waal—in a manner o’ speakin’—thar’s the promise. Gold in the sky—in the West—Golden Gate—Californi-a! Gold West!—fields o’ gold!

SIMEON: Fortunes layin’ just atop o’ the ground waitin’ t’be picked! Solomon’s mines, they says!

In 1850, brothers Peter and Simeon Cabot leave for California to be part of the estimated 50,000 people that were mining for gold in California.

1848

January 24: James Marshall and Peter L. Wimmer discover gold in the tailrace at Sutter’s new sawmill on the American River. “It made my heart thump, for I was certain it was gold,” Marshall recalled later.

February 2: The United States and Mexico sign the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo, bringing a formal end to the war. California is ceded to the U.S. People living in the territory, with the exception of Native Americans, are granted U.S. citizenship. The treaty gave the U.S. the land from Texas to Oregon, and completed the American vision of Manifest Destiny—one nation from the Atlantic to the Pacific.

March 15: The Californian reports gold is being found “in considerable quantities” at Sutter’s sawmill. San Franciscans are skeptical of the news.

May 12: Sam Brannan sets off gold fever in San Francisco when he waves a bottle of gold dust and shouts “Gold! Gold! Gold from the American River!”

August 19: The New York Herald prints an item about the discovery of gold in California.

September 14: More announcements of the gold rush are published on the East Coast of the U.S., including an issue of the Philadelphia North American that runs a letter from an alcalde (Spanish official) in California saying, “Your streams have minnows and ours are paved with gold.”



PHOTO BY CRAIG SCHWARTZ



December 5: Based on the report from Colonel Mason, President James K. Polk confirms the discovery of gold in California in his State of the Union Address.

1849

January 11: The New York Herald reports the stories of gold in California have "set the public mind almost on the highway to insanity." Capitalizing on the fever, ship owners announce departures, merchants begin pushing the sale of India rubber boots, tents, money belts, medicine, gold testing and gold washing machines.

February 28: First regular steamboat service to California is inaugurated by the arrival of the Pacific Mail's steamer California.

Mid-April: Some 30,000 gold rushers are congregated in the outfitting towns along the Missouri River, all waiting for the prairie to firm up adequately and grass to grow high enough to feed their animals on the long journey to California. Cholera was rampant in the camps.

August: Americans traveling overland in caravans from the East begin to arrive in California.

November 13: California voters approve the State Constitution.

December 31: The population of California is estimated at 100,000 including 35,000 people who came by sea, 3000 sailors who deserted ships and 42,000 who came overland. There are an estimated 40,000 people mining in California by the end of 1849. The entire non-native population is estimated at 100,000.

1850

January 29: U.S. Senator Henry Clay presents a compromise to prevent the Union from dissolving over the issue of slavery. Congress debates Clay's proposal for eight months before passing the Compromise of 1850, which includes allowing California to enter the union as a free state.

May 1: The Panama sails from San Francisco for the East Coast carrying \$1,500,156 in gold dust.

September 9: California is admitted to the Union as the 31st state. ❖

<http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/amex/goldrush/timeline/index.html>

STONES ATOP O'STONES

By Stella Gorlin

The hardness and durability of stone have always impressed men. The stone when whole symbolized unity and strength; when shattered it signified dismemberment, psychic disintegration, infirmity, death and annihilation. Stones fallen from heaven served to explain the origin of life.

—J.E. Cirlot,
A Dictionary of Symbols, 1962

When ye kin make corn sprout out o' stones,
God's livin' in yew!

— Ephraim Cabot

FOR EPHRAIM CABOT, rugged patriarch of *Desire Under the Elms*, the heavy stones embedded deep within the landscape evoke an eternal, unrelenting God; "God o' the old! God o' the lonesome!" Steadfast in his belief that "God's in the stones," Cabot drives his resentful sons to mine the fields and build walls as a sign of their devotion to a demanding deity. According to scholar Travis Bogard, O'Neill's tragedy depicts, "the response of the characters to the land on which they lived. Close to the soil, their identities and destinies were shaped by a force they sensed moving in the earth ... [by] the hardship that comes when the land turns sterile or in the joy that the land in springtime brings to its people."

O'Neill pronounced *Desire* "a tragedy of the possessive—the pitiful longing of man to build his own heaven here on earth by glutting his sense of power with ownership of land, people, money—but principally the land and other people's lives." The isolated, lonely world of the farm is for Cabot a kind of promised land in which God blesses His faithful with prosperity but demands unconditional sacrifice. All of the characters on the farm have biblical names: Peter, widely known as the leader of Christ's Apostles, derives from the Greek *petros* or "rock;" Simeon, one of the twelve tribes of Israel, comes from the Hebrew *Shim-on* which means "God has heard;" Eben, the shortened form of *Ebenezer*, means "stone of hope" and recalls the stone monument erected by Samuel to commemorate the defeat of the Philistines; Abbie references King

David's wife Abigail (or "father's joy"), who is described in the Book of Samuel as "good in discretion and beautiful in form"; and Ephraim, a son of Joseph and the Egyptian Potiphara, means "fruitful" in Hebrew.

Although Simeon and Peter succumb to the allure of "the sinful, easy gold o' Californi-a," escaping the farm on which they proudly toiled for so many years proves formidable. Their lives have been devoted to the back-breaking work of hauling stones, tending cattle, and chopping wood, to the never-ending, seasonal process of transforming dormant land into fertile fields. Before the boys can break out of the stone prison erected by their domineering father, they must honor the land they cultivated. Simeon's departing eulogy illustrates how deeply he has become attached to the earth: "Waal—ye've thirty year o' me buried in ye—spread out over ye—blood an' bone an' sweat—rotted away—fertilizin' ye—richin' yer soul—prime manure, by God, that's what I been t' ye!"

For Simeon and Peter, freedom means parting with Ephraim's immortal God dwelling in the rocky soil. The youthful Eben—"dead spit an' image" of his father—struggles against Ephraim's demanding God even as he envies the old farmer's intimacy with the land. Eben seethes with rage as he comes to know the plight of his dead mother, whose spirit still haunts the farm. He is convinced that Ephraim "murdered her with his hardness," denying Eben the maternal warmth and softness he craves and finds (if only temporarily) in Abbie's embrace. To Eben, every rock represents Ephraim's culpability and drives the son to renounce his father's stifling path to heaven: "Yew 'n' yewr God! Allus cussin' folks—allus naggin' 'em! T' hell with yewr God!"

Unlike his sons, who feel imprisoned by the stone walls, Ephraim embraces the dry, rocky terrain of his farm because he feels God's presence in the earth. In the daily grind of his life, he trusts that the hand of God is testing him to the limits of human endurance, both in his physical strength and his capacity for loneliness: "Stones. I picked 'em up an' piled 'em into walls. Ye kin read

the years o' my life in them walls, every day a hefted stone, climbin' over the hills up and down, fencin' in the fields that was mine, whar I'd made thin's grow out o' nothing'—like the will o' God, like the servant o' His hand. It wa'n't easy. It was hard an' He made me hard fur it."

According to scholar Jean Anne Waterstradt, the stone monuments suggest that "Ephraim is the most creative, the most fulfilled member of the Cabot family; that he is the only one that knows who he is; that he has a sense of his own identity and realizes how and where he belongs." Ephraim condemns his sons for giving in to their "lust fur gold—fur the sinful, easy gold o' Californi-a," because of his own experience of that same temptation. Exhausted from "nothin' but fields o' stones," he fled west dreaming of an easy life only to hear the thundering voice of God demanding his return to struggle and sacrifice. By surrounding the farm with stone walls, evidence of his faith and penitence, Ephraim can remind himself of the idle, godless life he renounced and imagine the path to righteousness. He believes that God's hands have transformed his stones into a source of life. As Waterstradt concludes, "Only Ephraim has the strength to make the earth produce; only Ephraim has the will to toil to the end of his days to preserve that productivity; only Ephraim loves the land; only Ephraim is 'fruitful'; and ultimately only Ephraim values life."

O'Neill's characters recognize the elementary nature of stone as immovable, unbreakable, and immortal, as representative of endless toil. But their responses vary sharply: for Ephraim, they represent a path to salvation while for Eben, Simeon, and Peter, the stones are bleak obstacles to a freedom just beyond reach. O'Neill crafts his conflict, rock by rock, to illuminate his tragic vision of life under the scrutiny of a relentlessly demanding God, a life of "makin' walls—stone atop o' stone—makin' walls till yer heart's a stone ye heft up out o' the way o' growth onto a stone wall t' wall in yer heart!" ❖

<http://www.americanrepertorytheater.org/inside/articles/articles-vol-3-i3b-stones-atop-ostones>

Undesirable: Controversy and Censorship of *Desire Under the Elms*



PHOTO BY CRAIG SCHWARTZ

WITH ITS DEPICTION of a passionate relationship between a young man and his stepmother, O'Neill's *Desire Under the Elms* outraged New York District Attorney Joab Banton after it opened on Broadway in 1924. *Desire*, he said, was "too thoroughly bad to be purified by blue pen," and he threatened to convene a grand jury if the play was not shut down. After the producer refused, Banton created a citizen jury to evaluate the morality of Broadway productions. Upon seeing *Desire*, the jury reached a verdict that it was not obscene, and the show went on. O'Neill bemoaned the final result. "We got a large audience, but of the wrong kind of people," he said. "They came for dirt and found it in everything. It ruined the actors because they never knew how a line was going to be taken."

Despite this victory, the play continued to cause controversy. It was banned in Boston and refused a license in England until 1940. When it went on tour out west in 1925, the entire cast was arrested in Los Angeles and tried in court for performing in an obscene play. A policeman testified in court, "I was painfully shocked... I blushed. I sat there so embarrassed that I feared for the time when the act would end and the lights would again be turned on. After I left that place I couldn't look the world in the face for hours." ❖

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CAST OF O'NEILL PLAY ARRESTED IN WEST

Los Angeles Police Seize Actors in 'Desire Under the Elms' as Presenting Obscene Play.

LOS ANGELES, Feb. 19 (AP).—The entire cast of "Desire Under the Elms," a play by Eugene O'Neill, was arrested here late last night on a charge of giving an obscene play.

Trial was set for Tuesday in Municipal Court today. The bail of \$50 each was remitted by the Court and the actors were released on their own recognizance.

The lawyer for the players said that the charge would be fought "to the last ditch." He said that those who say anything wrong with the play "saw it on the inside of their own minds."

The arrests came at the close of the night's performance after the play had been attended by representatives of the Board of Education, Parent-Teachers' Association, several ministers and members of the police vice squad.

Those arrested were Frank McGlynn, Arthur Lubin, Forest Taylor, Norman Feusier, Jessie Arnold, Margaret Wessner, Felix Haney, Arthur Foster, Harry Desser, Allan Elder, Billy E. Leicester, Harrison J. Terry, Dorothy Meeks, Joan Standing, Richard Sloane, Ming Champan and Dan Freeman.

The cast that has been acting the play in Los Angeles was composed entirely of Western actors with the exception of Frank McGlynn, creator of the title rôle in Drinkwater's "Abraham Lincoln," who went to the coast from New York to play the leading rôle. The play was leased by its New York producers to Thomas Wilkes, who is entirely responsible for the production.

Kenneth Macgown, one of the principal producers of the play here, characterized the action of the Los Angeles police as "highly amusing."

LOS ANGELES JURY SEES O'NEILL PLAY

'Desire Under the Elms' Cast Put Under Oath for Special Performance.

Special to The New York Times.

LOS ANGELES, April 15.—The jury in the "Desire Under the Elms" case witnessed a special matinee performance of the play this afternoon at the Orange Grove Theatre, after a morning of testimony. The play was presented in the form it was given the night the seventeen players of the cast were arrested. Judge, bailiff, witnesses and policemen attended. The oath before the play began.

Mrs. Helen Thurston, Chairman of the Dramatic Committee of the Friday Morning Club, was the star-witness of the day. She called the play one of the best she had ever seen and said it was a "marvelous presentation of certain phases of life," and that it had a great moral lesson. At its conclusion, she said, the audience was so convinced she believed if some one had said "Let us pray," the hearers would have dropped to their knees and confessed it a fitting ending.

Mrs. Thurston was more shocked by the manners of the characters in the play than by what they said, testified Mrs. Thurston. "You might say there was a little obscenity in the play," she said. "One performance was on the stage and the other in and by the audience. At first the audience giggled and tittered and was obviously reacting to what some believed were risqué speeches by the actors. Then, toward the end of the play, when the profound moral lesson is taught, I believe that most of the members of the audience felt like falling on their knees and praying."

"As far as the language of the characters is concerned I was far more shocked by their table manners than by what they said." Judge Frederickson denied a motion by the defense to have the play read line by line from the witness stand. "I don't want to sit here and listen to it," he declared.

Published February 19, 1926, April 15, 1926. Copyright ©The New York Times.

Fit as a Fiddle:

Creating Music for *Desire Under the Elms*

By Endre Balogh

IT IS VERY UNUSUAL for a classical violin soloist to venture into theatrical work. However, since I had been a fan of ANW for many years, Artistic Directors Geoff Elliot and Julia Rodriguez-Elliot asked me to be a part of their 2007 production of Shakespeare's *The Winter's Tale*. For that, I wrote all the music and also moved in and out of the play's action as a costumed character, adding underscoring and musical commentary sort of like a musical "Greek Chorus".

I have a similar musical role to play in *Desire Under The Elms*. However, O'Neill also wrote a speaking part for "The Fiddler" in the second act, so it was an easy leap for our director, Dámaso Rodriguez, to decide that all the music should be provided by the lonely voice of a fiddle. O'Neill specifies certain fiddle tunes in the script for the party scene — "Lady Of The Lake", "Pop Goes The Weasel" and "Turkey In The Straw". With the exception of these, all the other music is my own composition. In approaching it, I wanted the music to reflect the stark yet hauntingly beautiful New England landscape that O'Neill continually has his characters refer to throughout the play. With that in mind, I started by sketching out some music for the beginning and ending of the play and quickly realized that in order for it to work properly, I would have to adjust my playing technique to be much more like an American fiddler than a classical violinist. (To help get the right sound, I am



Endre Balogh

With an impressive list of international concert triumphs to his credit, violinist Endre Balogh has performed as soloist with the Berlin Philharmonic, Rotterdam Philharmonic, Zürich Tonhalle Orchestra, Frankfurt Symphony, and Basel Symphony as well as several other European ensembles. In the United States he has appeared with the Los Angeles Philharmonic and the orchestras of Washington D.C., Seattle, Denver, Dallas, and Honolulu to name just a few. In the course of his career he has worked with such eminent conductors as Zubin Mehta, Edo de Waart, James de Priest, Lawrence Foster, Milton Katims, and Christoph von Dohnányi. He was the youngest First Prize winner in the history of the prestigious Merrweather Post Competition. Endre has had several concert tours of the United States, and Europe; which have included live televised recitals in Amsterdam and taped performances for the BBC. He is an accomplished Chamber Music performer and toured throughout the United States, Canada, and Europe with the Pacific Trio for nearly 30 years. He has also played with such luminaries as Vladimir Horowitz and Leonard

Pennario as well as in the acclaimed series of 1993 chamber concerts: "André Watts and Friends." For decades, he performed with his friend and colleague, James Smith – Chairman of the Classical Guitar Department at USC until his passing in 2010. Over the years they amassed a unique body of repertoire of original and arranged works for violin and guitar. Lately, he has joined forces with cellist Dennis Karmazyn and pianist Genevieve Lee to perform Piano Trios once again. He also performs violin/viola duos frequently with his friend and colleague, violist Steven Gordon. In 2008, Endre was asked by the nationally known repertory company "A Noise Within" to compose original music for their production of Shakespeare's "The Winter's Tale". Throughout the 40 performance run, Endre played his music as a costumed character in the play, garnering unanimous audience enthusiasm and critical acclaim. In 2009, he returned to perform solo violin music again with "A Noise Within", as a costumed character in the American premier run of Neil Bartlett's adaptation of "Oliver Twist".



What's the difference between a violin and a fiddle?

The main thing that makes a fiddle a fiddle and a violin a violin is the type of music that is played on it. Generally, fiddles play folk/traditional genres (e.g. Cajun music, Irish trad, and klezmer), and violins play composition-based genres (e.g. Western classical music, Indian classical music, and jazz). And when it comes down to it, it's all pretty wishy-washy. It's not uncommon to hear a great violinist such as Itzhak Perlman refer to his Stradivarius as his "fiddle," or a bluegrass fiddler talk about the family "violin" that his great-granddad carved by hand in the woodshed.



PHOTO BY CRAIG SCHWARTZ

using an amateur-made violin rather than my own 1728 Stradivarius!) Also, I have incorporated a lot of droning double stops (playing on two strings at once), which are reminiscent of American country fiddle music.

I have gone to all the rehearsals to watch these brilliant actors craft their roles. By immersing myself in what they do to create their characters and also by working closely with Dámaso Rodríguez's ideas, small bits of thematic material began to suggest themselves. I would try out a musical idea as it occurred to me during a rehearsal and if we felt it captured the mood effectively, I would jot it down and then refine it later. Over time, those musical experiments evolved into my permanent collection of little leitmotifs—musical themes that reoccur, which I associate with particular characters or situations. In the second act, for instance, there is a musical fragment (two bars long) that I first use to introduce the Parlor Scene. I then transform that motif in different ways to underscore subsequent events as they unfold. I actually write down very little of this, other than the few bars I need to remind myself where to start. This allows me to improvise the rest of the music anew at each performance. Consequently, music at each show will always be a little different. Doing it that way allows me a lot of creative freedom. It keeps the music fresh and also frees me to tailor the length of music required to fit the many timing variables that can happen during a live performance. Just like the actors, I need a cue to begin playing and also need to know what action or line cues me to stop.

As the rehearsals progressed, the music became more integral to the overall effect of the play's action and synergistically seemed to help the actors refine their characterizations. After a pause in the rehearsal, for instance, they frequently asked me to play the preceding bit of transition music to help them find their way back into the emotion necessary for the scene. ❖

Split Decision: Scenic Design for *Desire Under the Elms*



PHOTO BY CRAIG SCHWARTZ



Gordon Matta Clark

John Iacovelli, Scenic Designer

What was your inspiration for *Desire's* set design?

I found the most inspiration in the words of the text itself. Eugene O'Neill talks about how the elm trees are reaching up, almost strangling the future. It is a foreboding. Also he talks about the way the earth is so hard to work and how the rocks are so heavy, I wanted it to feel as if it was a tough place to live. He set the play in 1850 at the start of the Gold Rush. This is before electricity or many modern conveniences like inside plumbing that we take for granted today. It was a raw hard life for even simple folk.

Were there any artists in particular that influenced your design?

I love this guy Gordon Matta Clark. I had seen some of his work at the Museum of Modern Art in NYC. He is interesting as he cuts through buildings and houses with a chain saw and then reassembles the pieces, it gave me a good way to look at this architecture and cut through it to see through walls. It also provides a lot of tension for "what's not there."



Gordon Matta-Clark

A trained architect and the son of the Surrealist artist Roberto Matta, Gordon Matta-Clark occupied the uneasy territory between the two professions when architecture was searching for a way out of its late Modernist doldrums. His best-known works of the '70s, including abandoned warehouses and empty suburban houses that he carved up with a power saw, [called "building cuts"] offered potent commentary on both the decay of the American city and the growing sense that the American dream was evaporating. The fleeting and temporal nature of that work — many projects were demolished weeks after completion — only added to his cult status after an early death in 1978, from cancer, at 35.

For architects, Matta-Clark's status as naughty boy is linked particularly to "Window Blow-Out" (1976), a series of bleak black-and-white photographs of vandalized housing projects in the Bronx...His photographs of smashed windows, testifying to the failed social and architectural policies of 1970s New York, were intended as a rebuke to such deadly abstractions. To underscore his point, he crept into the gallery late one night and blasted out several windows with an air rifle, establishing himself as a delinquent outsider and a hero for young architects.

Three decades later, however, what stands out is not so much Matta-Clark's somewhat naïve ideological stance as the wonderfully raw quality of the work itself. One of the most entrancing pieces at the Whitney is the crude homemade video "Splitting" (1974), which shows the artist carving through the various floors of a quintessential suburban American home, literally splitting it in two. The act evokes the disintegration of the American family, as well as more personal trauma. (The old Matta, a less-than-supportive father, once spat on one of his son's artworks.)

The cuts are about texture: the raw edge of the wall—exposing ripped wallpaper, plaster and stud walls—becomes more important than the finished surfaces. They sensitize the viewer to the world around them, to the structural and social glue that holds disparate elements together.

Adapted from the New York Times article *Timely Lessons From a Rebel, Who Often Created by Destroying*, written by Nicolai Ouroussoff in March 2007. <http://www.nytimes.com/2007/03/03/arts/design/03matt.html?pagewanted=all>



PHOTO BY CRAIG SCHWARTZ

JOHN IACOVELLI, an Emmy Award-winning artist, teaches in the Department of Theatre and Dance's MFA design program. Professor Iacovelli has designed more than 200 productions at theatres across the nation, including the critically acclaimed, Tony nominated Broadway revival of *Peter Pan* starring Cathy Rigby. The Academy of Television Arts and Sciences awarded Iacovelli the coveted 2001 prime-time Emmy Award for his art direction of the A&E broadcast of *Peter Pan*. He also designed *The Twilight of The Gods* on Broadway. Internationally he designed Pinter's *A Slight Ache* for the Teatro Beckett in Barcelona and *Oedipus in Colonus* directed by Wole Soyinka for the Cultural Olympiad in Delphi, Greece. Recent designs include *The Book of Daniel* starring Aidan Quinn for NBC Primetime and Warner Theatricals' *Casablanca*, a ballet based on the classic film. He has designed for the Pasadena Playhouse, the American Conservatory Theatre, Mark Taper Forum, the Magic Theatre, Berkeley Repertory Theatre, Old Globe Theatre, and South Coast Repertory, among others. The winner of the 2001 Bob Z Award for Lifetime Achievement in Set Design, presented by the LA Drama Critics Circle, Iacovelli has also won a Los Angeles Drama Critics Circle Award, a Bay Area Drama Critics Circle Award and the Backstage West Garland Award, plus fourteen Drama-Logue Awards. In addition to his theatre work, Iacovelli is a television and film production designer and art director for such shows as *Ed*, *Babylon 5*, *The Cosby Show*, *Resurrection Blvd.*, and the films *Honey*, *I Shrank the Kids* and *Ruby in Paradise*. He works on the cutting edge of integrated digital art direction and was nominated for the 1997 Excellence in Production Design award from the Society of Motion Picture and Television Art Directors. He is both a Tony and an Emmy voter. He holds an MFA in Scenic Design and Art Direction from New York University.

Resource Guide



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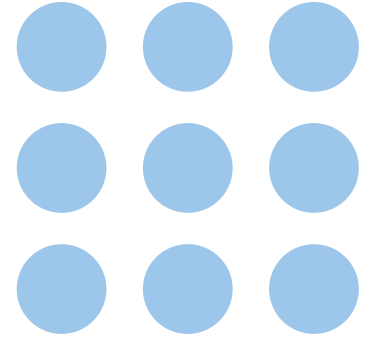
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FILM

- *Desire Under the Elms* – directed by Delbert Mann, 1958. Starring Sophia Loren, Anthony Perkins, and Burl Ives

About Theatre Arts



Today, movies and television take audiences away from what was once the number one form of amusement: going to the theatre. But attending a live theatrical performance is still one of the most thrilling and active forms of entertainment.

In a theatre, observers are catapulted into the action, especially at an intimate venue like *A Noise Within*, whose thrust stage reaches out into the audience and whose actors can see, hear, and feel the response of the crowd.

Although playhouses in the past could sometimes be rowdy, participating in the performance by giving respect and attention to the actors is the most appropriate behavior at a theatrical performance today. Shouting out (or even whispering) can be heard throughout the auditorium, as can rustling paper or ringing phones.

After *A Noise Within's* performance of *Desire Under the Elms*, you will have the opportunity to discuss the play's content and style with the performing artists and directors. You may wish to remind students to observe the performance carefully or to compile questions ahead of time so they are prepared to participate in the discussion.

blocking: The instructions a director gives his actors that tell them how and where to move in relation to each other or to the set in a particular scene.

character: The personality or part portrayed by an actor on stage.

conflict: The opposition of people or forces which causes the play's rising action.

dramatic irony: A dramatic technique used by a writer in which a character is unaware of something the audience knows.

genre: Literally, "kind" or "type." In literary terms, genre refers to the main types of literary form, principally comedy and tragedy. It can also refer to forms that are more specific to a given historical era, such as the revenge tragedy, or to more specific sub-genres of tragedy and comedy such as the comedy of manners, farce or social drama.

motivation: The situation or mood which initiates an action. Actors often look for their "motivation" when they try to dissect how a character thinks or acts.

props: Items carried on stage by an actor to represent objects mentioned in or implied by the script. Sometimes the props are actual, sometimes they are manufactured in the theatre shop.

proscenium stage: There is usually a front curtain on a proscenium stage. The audience views the play from the front through a "frame" called the proscenium arch. In this scenario, all audience members have the same view of the actors.

set: The physical world created on stage in which the action of the play takes place.

setting: The environment in which a play takes place. It may include the historical period as well as the physical space.

stage areas: The stage is divided into areas to help the director to note where action will take place. Upstage is the area furthest from the audience. Downstage is the area closest to the audience. Center stage defines the middle of the playing space. Stage left is the actor's left as he faces the audience. Stage right is the actor's right as he faces the audience.

theme: The overarching message or main idea of a literary or dramatic work. A recurring idea in a play or story.

thrust stage: A stage that juts out into the audience seating area so that patrons are seated on three sides. In this scenario, audience members see the play from varying viewpoints. *A Noise Within* features a thrust stage.

About A Noise Within

A NOISE WITHIN'S MISSION is to produce great works of world drama and to foster appreciation of history's greatest plays and playwrights through comprehensive educational programs. ANW is the only theatre in Southern California and one of only a handful in North America to exclusively produce year-round classical dramatic literature—from master works by Euripides, Moliere and Shakespeare, to modern classics by Arthur Miller, Henrik Ibsen and Samuel Beckett—in rotating repertory with a company of classically trained resident artists.

The company was formed in 1991 by founders Geoff Elliott and Julia Rodriguez-Elliott, both of whom were classically trained at the acclaimed American Conservatory Theatre in San Francisco. All of A Noise Within's Resident Artists have been classically trained, and many hold Master of Fine Arts degrees from some of the nation's most respected institutions.

In its 19 year history, A Noise Within has garnered over 500 awards and commendations, including the Los Angeles Drama Critics' Circle's revered Polly Warfield Award for Excellence and the coveted Margaret Hartford Award for Sustained Excellence.

More than 24,000 individuals attend productions at A Noise Within annually. In addition the theatre draws over 10,000 student participants to its arts education program, Classics Live! Students benefit from in-classroom workshops, conservatory training, subsidized tickets to matinee and evening performances, post-performance discussions with artists, and California standards-compliant Study Guides.

A Noise Within's vision is to become a national leader in the production of classical theatre, creating an environment that continues to attract the finest classical theatre artists, educates, and inspires audiences of all ages, and trains the leading classical theatre artists of tomorrow.

Study Guides

A Noise Within creates California Standards compliant study guides to help educators prepare their students for their visit to our theatre. Study guides are available at no extra cost to download through our website: www.anoisewithin.org. All of the information and activities outlined in these guides are designed to work in compliance with Visual and Performing Arts, English Language, and other subject standards as set forth by the state of California.

Study guides include background information on the plays and playwrights, historical context, textual analysis, in-depth discussion of A Noise Within's artistic interpretation of the work, interviews with directors and designers, as well as discussion points and suggested classroom activities. Guides from past seasons are also available to download from the website.



Study Guide Credits

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