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*The Complete & Condensed Stage Directions of Eugene O'Neill,
Volume One: Early Plays/Lost Plays (review)*

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**THE COMPLETE &
CONDENSED STAGE
DIRECTIONS OF EUGENE
O'NEILL, VOLUME ONE:
EARLY PLAYS/LOST PLAYS**
ADAPTED AND DIRECTED
BY CHRISTOPHER LOAR,
NEW YORK NEO-FUTURISTS
PRODUCTION AT THE
KRAINE THEATRE, NEW
YORK CITY, SEPTEMBER
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As ambitious as it sounds, the title says it all. Christopher Loar and the New York Neo-Futurists, a downtown Manhattan theater company perhaps best known for its raucous, farcical, low-budget experiments like *Too Much Light Makes the Baby Go Blind* (30 Plays in 60 Minutes), has cobbled together a most entertaining seventy minutes of physical comedy from the stage directions of seven of Eugene O'Neill's early plays from 1913–1916, most of them unlikely to receive full revivals themselves. On a spare set designed by Cara Francis, with props hanging from clotheslines at left and right, a woman at a desk conversationally reads O'Neill's stage directions from the plays as a young troupe of six actors and actresses attempt to perform not only the movements but also the facial expressions specified in the playwright's detailed descriptions of stage business. In doing so they not only have a wildly good (and exhausting) time, but insightfully reveal unfamiliar dimensions of O'Neill's early work.

The notoriously verbose stage directions in O'Neill's apprenticeship plays serve three purposes. First, they are a unique primary archival source

for practices of the American theater of the period. Like George Bernard Shaw's similarly detailed descriptions, they indicate both performance and design practices: potted histories of stage technique. Second, they are preparatory to a play's final appearance on the printed page: like Shaw, O'Neill wrote toward an audience of readers as well as spectators. Finally—and far more than Shaw's—O'Neill's stage directions reveal an attempt to find a stage voice that would equal the passion of his literary, lyrical voice. In stripping the dialogue from these early plays, the Neo-Futurists focus on O'Neill as a physical dramatist, aware of the stage as an arena of expression composed of movement, space, and time. They demonstrate the extent to which O'Neill sought a physical correlate to his desire for an American form of tragedy to rival that of early twentieth-century European dramatists like August Strindberg.



FIG. 1

The New York Neo-Futurists. (Photo by Anton Nickel)

What the Neo-Futurists uncover in O'Neill's early work are the similarities between tragedy and farce, built upon a uniquely American melodramatic foundation. O'Neill can be found struggling to transcend contemporary stage practice even while his dramatic imagination is beholden to it. The evening is structured chronologically, starting with his first stage play, *A Wife for a Life* (1913), set in the Arizona desert, moving to the melodrama *The Web* (1913), which takes place in a Lower East Side rooming house. In their exploration of *The Web*, Loar and the company underscore the surprising parallels not only between this play and stage practice of the time, but also the extent to which the Victorian emotionalism of the contemporary American film, with its strict realism, was inflecting the stage with its own techniques. In this

staging—with its consumptive young heroine caring for her beloved child (here a dragon hand-puppet manipulated by members of the cast, but still affecting for all that)—*The Web* becomes a silent film most reminiscent not of the stage but of D. W. Griffith's early Biograph films, produced in New York near Union Square (not far from the Kraine Theatre) only a few years before.



FIG. 2
The New York Neo-Futurists. (Photo by Anton Nickel)

The Neo-Futurists recognize the excesses of O'Neill's (and Griffith's) melodramatic vision comically, capturing the absurdity of the melodrama, but with the next plays their practice becomes more textured. In their renderings of the 1913 *Thirst*, which might also be a Griffith film, and especially the 1914 *Bound East for Cardiff*, the first of these plays with which a contemporary audience might conceivably be familiar, the frantic stage business becomes less comic and more chaotic, especially in the death-haunted milieu of the latter. In the Neo-Futurist staging of *Bound East for Cardiff*, the cacophony of the grunts and mumbling that stand in for O'Neill's dialogue and of Paul's accordion as Yank lies dying doesn't lead to a comic payoff as in the other plays, but suggests the first play in which O'Neill found a stage imagination to parallel his literary imagination. This staging—like the production's version of *Before Breakfast* (1916), in which Mrs. Rowland is played by the three women of the ensemble executing the same movements in synchronization—leaves a haunting aura. It is perhaps unsurprising that these are the two plays of O'Neill's apprenticeship that lean most toward tragedy and least toward melodrama, a tendency that Loar and the cast respect. The evening concludes with a wild tour through O'Neill's only farce, *Now I Ask You* (1916), set among the middle-class and Greenwich Village-style *artistes*

manqué, and ending with “an interval of three minutes during which the theatre remains darkened,” as O’Neill wrote in the stage direction that ends the third act and precedes the epilogue—an embarrassing dramaturgical misstep that suggests just how much the three remaining *Glencairn* plays, which were to immediately follow this apprenticeship, exhibited extraordinary advances in O’Neill’s development.



FIG. 3
The New York Neo-Futurists. (Photo by Anton Nickel)

It remains only to congratulate the members of the ensemble—Danny Burnam, Brendan Donaldson, Cara Francis, Connor Kalista (who bears a striking resemblance to O’Neill himself, if O’Neill were played by a young John Cleese), Jacquelyn Landgraf, Erica Livingston, and Lauren Sharpe—and director Christopher Loar, who acknowledges his fascination with O’Neill’s career in the program notes, a fascination that has resulted in this most worthwhile and entertaining re-examination of the dramatist’s apprenticeship plays. Whether or not there is an eventual “Volume 2,” this volume alone has reopened the book.

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