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As I never tire of telling people, Eugene O'Neill's *Long Day's Journey Into Night* ranks first on my list of all-time favorite plays, which puts me in league with, I'd imagine, several thousand others over the years. Widely considered the greatest work ever written by the author widely considered the greatest playwright our country has yet produced, O'Neill's autobiographical epic is nothing less than America's answer to

King Lear

- an incisive, harrowing, and altogether exhilarating study of family conducted with a microscope and a scalpel.

The four members of O'Neill's crumbling Tyrone clan - father James, mother Mary, older son Jamie, and younger son Edmund - are aware of their failings but even more aware of everyone else's, and know exactly where to strike to inflict emotional damage; characters repeatedly dig away at one another, cauterize the wounds, and begin digging all over again. What keeps this stage memoir from being unbearably wrenching, though, is the rich, poetic beauty of O'Neill's language, and the dazzling empathy with which the author views the Tyrones. In its published version, the author dedicates the play to his wife Carlotta and calls it a work "written in tears and blood." That's exactly what *Long Day's Journey* feels like. O'Neill's Pulitzer Prize-winner is filled with raw pain, yet it's divinely forgiving, and if you encounter it at the right time in your life, you might find that no other stage piece can, or will, compare; the play sets up camp in your head and heart and *stays* there.

Tyrone Power: "Long Day's Journey Into Night," at the Harrison Hilltop Theatre through August 30

Written by Mike Schulz

Monday, 24 August 2009 06:00

Yet despite its reputation (or maybe *because* of it), *Long Day's Journey* is only very rarely produced, and it's not hard to see why: The show is a marathon. Structured in four acts, O'Neill's drama tends to run between three and four hours, and while that can be a long haul for audiences, I'm guessing it's an even longer one for actors, who have to hit devastating emotional peaks in the first act and then hit higher ones, again and again, over the next three. Though I've read the script a good half-dozen times, and have seen the 1962 film version and 1987 Showtime version (a recording of its Broadway revival) more times than I can count, I had all but given up hope of catching

Long Day's Journey
on stage.

So when I heard that the Harrison Hilltop Theatre had put the show on its summer schedule, I greeted the news with both insurmountable joy and utter terror. Joy because I was finally going to hear, *live*, what I consider the most beautiful words ever written for an American play. Terror because if you're going to do *Long Day's Journey*, you'd damned well better do it *right*

; O'Neill's work will gobble up lesser actors and directors and swallow them whole. It is therefore my supreme pleasure - and *relief*

- to report that Harrison Hilltop's participants not only refuse to wilt under the weightiness of their undertaking, but frequently triumph.



Directed by Michal Chasen, the production is gorgeously staged and designed, smartly paced (clocking in at just over three-and-a-half hours), and acted with tremendous passion and understanding, even though, at Thursday's opening-night performance, I thought it was pretty apparent that the show could've used about another week of rehearsals. There were a few awkward (and, I think, unintentional) pauses, a timing/lighting glitch that didn't fully separate Act III from Act IV, and enough stumbling over lines for it to be routinely distracting. (On several occasions, one character name was accidentally substituted for another - Jamie for Edmund, James for Jamie, Catherine for Bridget - and in a few scenes, as during Mary's Act II entrance for dinner, I wasn't sure if dialogue was deliberately cut or accidentally dropped.)

But when it's really rolling, oh my God, how breathtakingly exciting this *Long Day's Journey* is! Through his tight, always well-thought-out compositions, and his smart use of occasionally overlapping dialogue, Chasen handily establishes the Tyrone's tormented relationships and the

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familial purgatory they find themselves in; the air is as thick with dread and foreboding as Sartre's hotel room in

No Exit

. And with his performers embracing O'Neill's endlessly resonant language and offering portrayals of true emotional nakedness, the production offers one almost unbearably heart-stopping sequence after another.

As the Tyrone patriarch, a once-brilliant actor whose crippling fear of poverty led to his artistic bankruptcy, Ray Gabica is so good that you might find it tough to wipe the smile from your face even during his most tortured soliloquies. Unseen on local stages since his shattering turn in My Verona Productions' *Tuesdays with Morrie* in 2007, Gabica burrows, with fearsome depth, into James' rancor and disappointment, and when the character lets his guard down and his emotions erupt - as when James tearfully explains the psychology behind his miserliness - the actor's pleading, alcohol-induced honesty is a sight to behold. All this, and Gabica is legitimately *funny*; he never ignores the elder Tyrone's inherent theatricality, and his witty asides lend the show a much-needed levity. It's a transcendent piece of work.

Playing the ghostly morphine addict Mary, Jackie Madunic - an actress who's often required to be blissfully larger than life - is almost shockingly delicate here, so much so that, on Thursday, her faraway, airy deliveries were sometimes difficult to make out even in a space as intimate as the Harrison Hilltop. Yet her touching, little-girl-lost quality can give way to ferocious blasts of anger and sadness, and when it does, look out; Madunic will knock you sideways. Hers is a deeply felt, gloriously tragic turn, and the actress pulls off brilliant bits throughout: Mary's drug-addled stare at her once-lovely pianist's hands; her reflexive approach toward the staircase (and more morphine), followed by a quick, agonized backing away from it.



Like Gabica's James, Jason Platt's boozehound Jamie is a vibrantly theatrical creation, and Platt - a wizard with emotional complexities - fills him with spectacularly forceful bitterness, resentment, and self-loathing. Also like Gabica, he's almost criminally charming. (The two performers don't look the least bit alike, but that doesn't matter in the slightest, because they completely *feel* like father and son.) With superb yet seemingly effortless control, the actor suggests a worldly man who would seem to have life by the tail, yet who's only (and barely) holding himself together through copious amounts of liquor; frequently smiling, yet with eyes that reveal total panic, Jamie is the latest - and one of the greatest - in Platt's arsenal of

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magically delineated character roles.

At one point in Act IV, James Bleecker's Edmund - a fledgling writer suffering through the early stages of consumption - calls himself as "a ghost within a ghost." And even before you get to that line, the description is being echoed throughout Bleecker's marvelously soulful performance; the young man's melancholy and longing is haunting in the extreme. But what you feel most profoundly in Bleecker's portrayal is love; not only the love that Edmund feels for his rapidly disintegrating family, but that an actor feels for material of *Long Day's Journey*'s caliber. Bleecker, who is

perfectly

cast here, gives himself over to O'Neill's stunning prose and poetry, and while his talent is electrifying, he always reminds you that it's the author who is

Long Day's Journey

's true star. (Maggie Woolley completes the show's five-person ensemble with her brief, vibrant turn as the servant girl Catherine. Her ironic, modern readings are a bit jarring - she's imbuing O'Neill with a healthy dollop of Prenzie - but Woolley's sass and vigor, and her

awesome

screech in the Harrison Hilltop alley, is welcome indeed.)

These are magical performances in a towering piece of drama, and the experience of Harrison Hilltop's latest is greatly enhanced - and this is no afterthought - by Chris Walljasper's fantastically well-considered set design (the finest I've yet seen at the venue), Tristan Tapscott's alternately warm and intensely stark lighting designs, and the period pricelessness of Greg Hiatt's costuming. Thank you all for the hard and terrifically impressive work, and for staging *Long Day's Journey Into Night*

- have I mentioned it's my favorite play? - in the first place; I can die now. Thanks to this beautiful new production, I can die happy.

For tickets and information, call (309)235-1654 or visit HarrisonHilltop.com.