

Theatre Review: “Long Day’s Journey Into Night”

By Kevin M. O’Toole

As part of its continuing dedication to “celebrating the classics,” Weston Playhouse Theatre Company has mounted a stripped-down production of Eugene O’Neill’s “Long Day’s Journey Into Night” in order to make it more accessible to today’s audience. Regarded by scholars as one of the seminal works of twentieth century literature, the raw, unsparing portrait of O’Neill’s own family on a single day in 1912 is not for everyone. Perhaps, for that reason, the play has become one that we know of but no longer know.

“Long Day’s Journey Into Night” is entirely autobiographical. The family surname has been changed to “Tyrone” and the names of two children exchanged. In his will, O’Neill specified that “Long Day’s Journey Into Night” was never to be produced onstage. Within a few years of his death in 1953, with the blessing of O’Neill’s widow, the work nevertheless opened to acclaim and was awarded the Tony Award for Best Play and Pulitzer Prize.

O’Neill’s father had been a renowned Shakespearean actor who, along the way, pursued fare that paid more handsomely and allowed him to coast. The brother gained employment in the theatre largely through his father’s doing and seemed content to drink and carouse his life away. O’Neill’s mother became an addict after being prescribed morphine following the difficult birth of Eugene (Edmund in the play) in a second-rate hotel. Another brother died in infancy of consumption. O’Neill himself roused about for awhile, but gravitated back to the family’s summer house, where he wrote poetry and short prose.

In the play, Mary Tyrone has only recently returned home from the sanitarium, and the family is on constant edge about whether yet another attempt to kick her drug habit will fail. As Mary, Kathryn Meisle’s rapid-fire delivery of her lines betrayed her character’s fragility and underlined the endless digs about the life for which Mary had settled. As the patriarch, James Tyrone, Derek Smith offered a showy interpretation of an actor who took the easy way professionally and had grown hardened.

As Jamie, Liam Craig alternately illustrated his character’s pettiness, jealousies, and weaknesses, as well as genuine affection for his younger sibling. Andrew Veenstra stood out as O’Neill’s surrogate, Edmund, exhibiting a sober realization that he may not live to tell his own tale. Piper Goodeve rounded out the cast as the eager-to-please Irish servant, Kathleen.

Tensions onstage were unrelenting as the play reached its powerful conclusion in the fourth act. Opening night patrons, taken along that journey, were left numb. Director Ethan McSweeney remarked before the performance that each of the members of the Tyrone family is given their own aria as the play moves toward nighttime. Each character finally is laid bare. If it ends badly, there is understanding.

The decision to stage “Long Day’s Journey Into Night” simply, on a slightly appointed bare stage with costume racks visible to the audience, allowed us to cut to the chase.

Classic plays such as “Long Day’s Journey Into Night” are not just to be read in schools but to be performed before a live audience. “Long Day’s Journey Into Night” is serious drama for serious theatregoers who care about universal themes of family, guilt and addiction, communicated by a master playwright at the top of his game.

Performances of “Long Day’s Journey Into Night” continue at the Weston Playhouse through September 3. Matinee performances for area schools are being held from September 6-8. For ticket information, call the WPTC box office at (802) 824-5288 or visit its website at www.westonplayhouse.org.