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Eugene O'Neill and Tennessee Williams are the primary playwriting titans who spent time, and wrote key work, in Provincetown, but the two are known to have crossed paths - of a sort -

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only once.

That was in 1940, according to Provincetown Tennessee Williams Theater Festival founder David Kaplan’s research, when Williams attended a revival in town of O’Neill’s 1920 play **“Diff’rent.”** That play is being produced for two weekends at Provincetown Theater, then moving to a special waterside venue (The Boatslip restaurant) to coincide with the Sept. 23-26 festival itself.

Directing “Diff’rent” is Williams festival director Jef Hall-Flavin, whose first reaction when asked to take on the job a few years ago, was “No way.” He laughs now. “I think my exact words were ‘How on

earth am I going to do that play?”

He says he was frightened to take on the script because he’d never done an O’Neill play, it’s relatively unknown and it’s an early O’Neill play, “so it can read a little old-fashioned.”

But, he notes, “Often the things that scare us are the things we should do.” And he now says his actors are bringing the language to life and they’ve all been figuring out how best to deliver it. It’s not contemporary speech, but “I’m approaching it as I would Shakespeare, and that’s not a scary thing at all,” Hall-Flavin says. “Luckily, the audience will find it easier to understand than Shakespeare.”

The story centers on an idea that O’Neill came back to often: the truth about ourselves versus the lie we want to believe about ourselves. To tell the entire story, which spans 30 years, Hall-Flavin decided not to age actors (“I’m allergic to bad wigs”). He chose instead to cast two actresses as the lead Emma (Ashlea Potts and McNeely Myers) and two actors - interestingly, Beau Jackett and his father, Tony, who hasn’t been on stage in years - as love interest Caleb. Hall-Flavin says he focuses on the theme of Emma having an ideal for what she wants in a husband, but how humans cannot be an ideal.

While he can’t say how O’Neill might have influenced Williams, Hall-Flavin notes that some of the latter playwright’s most famous characters - like Blanche Dubois - also lived in a fantasy world and had lives that were defined by a moment in their youth.

Sexual repression is also central to “Diff’rent,” he says, and was a recurring theme in Williams’ work, too. “It’s impossible to say how much this play affected Williams, but that’s impossible to say with any of us.”

“Diff’rent” will run at 7:30 p.m. Sept. 9-12 and 16-19 at Provincetown Theater, 238 Bradford St. (508-487-9793 or provincetowntheater.com), then Sept. 24-26 at The Boatslip restaurant, 161 Commercial St. (www.twptown.org or 866-789-8366).

For other theater news and commentary, see Kathi Scrizzi Driscoll’s Stage Door blog at www.capecodonline.com/stagedoor.