

O'Neill play in Provincetown shows link between two legendary playwrights

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Provincetown Banner

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PROVINCETOWN — What if Tennessee Williams saw an early Eugene O'Neill play and he saw it in Provincetown? What if something in it resonated with him and then eventually seeped into some of his own later work?

He did and it did, and that O'Neill play can be seen beginning this Thursday, and then again during the Tennessee Williams Festival later this month.

The play, O'Neill's "Diff'rent," is about, as director Jef Hall-Flavin says, "the attractive lie you want to believe." Done in two acts set 30 years apart, in 1890 and 1920, the play follows the lives of several characters, the lies they believed, the ones they didn't and where it all ultimately took them.

There is documentation that Williams did see this play produced in Provincetown when Williams was a young man and it is the most direct link between two of Provincetown's most famous playwrights. Considering that this year's festival theme is "Under the Influence," the play seemed a natural.

The Provincetown Theater is producing the play and will show it at the theater, 238 Bradford St., Provincetown, for the next 10 days and reprise it as part of the Williams festival, Sept. 23-26.

Hall-Flavin talks about the play's theme.

"People have an idea of what someone is, the lie we want to believe versus the truth," he says. "In this play, Emma Crosby [Ashlea Potts] is a whaling captain's daughter in a small New England fishing village. She has her eye on Caleb Williams [Beau Jackett]. He's the best young man in town and he's not like everyone else. He comes home two days before they are to marry and she finds out something that shatters her idea of him. She breaks off the engagement."

Act II, he says, picks up 30 years later. Caleb, now played by Tony Jackett, Beau's real life father, is coming home from a voyage. Emma [now played by McNeely Myer] has changed from a principled young woman to a love-starved fool.

She chose to abandon her love when he didn't measure up to her internal image of him, and where is she now? On the other hand, the play also shows her best friend, Harriet, over the same span of time. She did settle for less than the ideal and married a man who turned out to be an SOB. She later wound up alone as well but with a scoundrel for a son.

How all this plays out is classic O'Neill.

"O'Neill can be difficult," Hall-Flavin says, noting the density of language and use of dialect. But, he adds, his work has the ingredients to be vibrant theater.

"It's a pure tragedy and it gets us closer to our own humanity by showing us our mistakes," he says. "Tragedy plays a huge role in why we have [live theater] drama. We need this visceral reminder about mistakes we make."

The resulting play, Hall-Flavin says, resonates with the impact of a Greek tragedy. "If you don't get an emotional release from this play, you are not watching."

Hall-Flavin is a guest director for The Provincetown Theater for this production, and he is also executive director of the Tennessee Williams Festival. When he went to cast the play he reached out to local actor Beau Jackett and later thought, how amazing if Beau's father Tony would play the same character in the second act. Although Tony had not been on stage since high school days, when he played the stage manager in "Our Town" 40 years ago, he agreed. (In another odd bit of coincidence, Beau had played the same role in "Our Town" only last year.)

Ashlea Potts, an actress familiar to Cape Rep audiences, is cast as the young Emma, and the multi-talented McNeely Myers is the older Emma. Andrew Clemons as Jack Crosby, Ian Leahy as Capt. John Crosby, Jane MacDonald as Mrs. Crosby, Tony Johnson as Alfred Rogers, Andrew Eldredge as Benny Rogers, Taylor Ferry as the young Harriet Williams and Melissa Nussbaum-Freeman as Harriet Williams fill out the rest of the cast.

The creative staff for the production are Jeffrey Billard as sound designer, Karen Billard as costume designer, and Michael Steers as both set and light designer.

Thinking about getting Beau and Tony to play the same character, Hall-Flavin says, "Theater is a lot about faith. It's my religion. Blind faith. We say we are going to do a show but we don't know how we will do it."

Hall-Flavin grew up in Minnesota, did a stint in New York and returned to Minnesota as an actor. But, he says, he had a problem — he could not focus only on his part, he kept seeing the whole production. He was told he needed to stop doing that or become a director, and when a friend asked him to direct her show it was an epiphany.

"I literally burned my headshots in effigy," he says. "The sky opened and the sun shone down on my head."

He loves the creative process of directing and says it's a little tough when a show opens. At that point it's as if the actors are being cut loose to stand on their own, but for the director, whose job is largely complete, "It's like a wake."

Hall-Flavin is ready to turn loose. "Rehearsal is the gradual process of letting go of my vision. It's parenting in a way."

Just the facts