



O'Neill's 'Diff'rent' complex, fascinating

By **KATHI SCRIZZI DRISCOLL**

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PROVINCETOWN — It's startling how many shades of meaning playwright Eugene O'Neill was able to draw from just the one word he chose for the title of his 1920 play "Diff'rent."

For example: It's 1890 and Emma Crosby thinks that her beau, Capt. Caleb Williams, is different from all the other rough sailors in the New England seaport village. Idealistic and perhaps romantically unrealistic, rigid Emma warns him that she looks at things differently from other people.

When she finds out about a recent joke played on him on a long whaling voyage, Caleb tries to explain that life and rules seem to be different on a tropical island than in their village. But Emma insists that he should have reacted differently and breaks off their engagement.

The uses of the word go on and on in a story of expectations, love, sexual repression and regret that jumps 30 years ahead in the second act to show the consequences of all the emphasis placed on being and acting different. A happy ending? Hint: This is O'Neill.

Director Jef Hall-Flavin and The Provincetown Theater Company have revived this thought-provoking early work by the playwright in conjunction with the upcoming Provincetown Tennessee Williams Theater Festival. "Diff'rent" is rarely produced, but it was the one play that it can be documented that Williams saw during his summers in Provincetown. There's intriguing speculation about how O'Neill, and possibly this play and its characters and themes, influenced Williams' writing.

The play occasionally slides into melodrama but is fascinating and is impeccably produced here, with sure direction by Hall-Flavin and strong performances by everyone in his cast, even with some restrictively written roles. Michael Steers' frame set of Emma's parlor is more arresting than a full-sided house set would be, and the transformation of that room from 1890 to 1920 is nicely handled by the cast during intermission in what Hall-Flavin jokingly refers to as "the halftime show."

Emma, Caleb and Harriet (Emma's best friend and Caleb's sister) are played by different actors in the two acts, a transformation that works seamlessly. It helps that the decent and reserved Caleb is, in a clever bit of casting, played by theater regular Beau Jackett and then his father, Tony Jackett. Both ably project the tentativeness of a shy man in love as well as his anger and frustration with Emma's actions.

Although Emma isn't likable overall, both Ashlea Potts and McNeely Myers do a fine job nonetheless of making her sympathetic, even as you wince — OK, with the sensibilities of nearly a century later — at her actions. Taylor Ferry shows a hopeful, if practical, Harriet in 1890, which makes the world-weary and harder-edged Harriet played by Melissa Nussbaum-Freeman in the second act that much more heart-rending.

To Emma's overwrought situation and arguments with family and friends, O'Neill adds one character in each act who brings his play to vibrant life: in 1890, brother Jack, well-played as a mischievous rascal by Andrew Clemons, and, in 1920, Benny Rogers, Harriet's son, in a bold, ruthless portrayal by Andrew Eldredge.

O'Neill excels at realistic dialogue, which here includes a variety of period slang, but Hall-Flavin doesn't let the script get bogged down by it. Eldredge, particularly, given the bulk of it, navigates the lingo with charming ease.

The actors also do well in maintaining the tough accent that turns "Emma" into "Emmer" and "voyage" into "vi-edge." And that's the reason for the apostrophe in the title word that haunts all the action: In this accent, "different" becomes a distinctly two-syllable word, whether a character says it reverentially or spits it out in disgust.

on STAGE

What: "Diff'rent"

Written by: Eugene O'Neill

Presented by: The Provincetown Theater Company

When and where: 7:30 tonight through Sunday night at Provincetown Theater, 238 Bradford St., and Sept. 24-26 at The Boatslip restaurant, 161 Commercial St., as part of the Provincetown Tennessee Williams Theater Festival

Tickets: \$25 at Provincetown Theater; \$20 as part of Williams festival

Reservations: 508-487-9793 or provincetowntheater.com for shows at Provincetown Theater; www.twptown.org or 866-789-8366 for festival shows

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