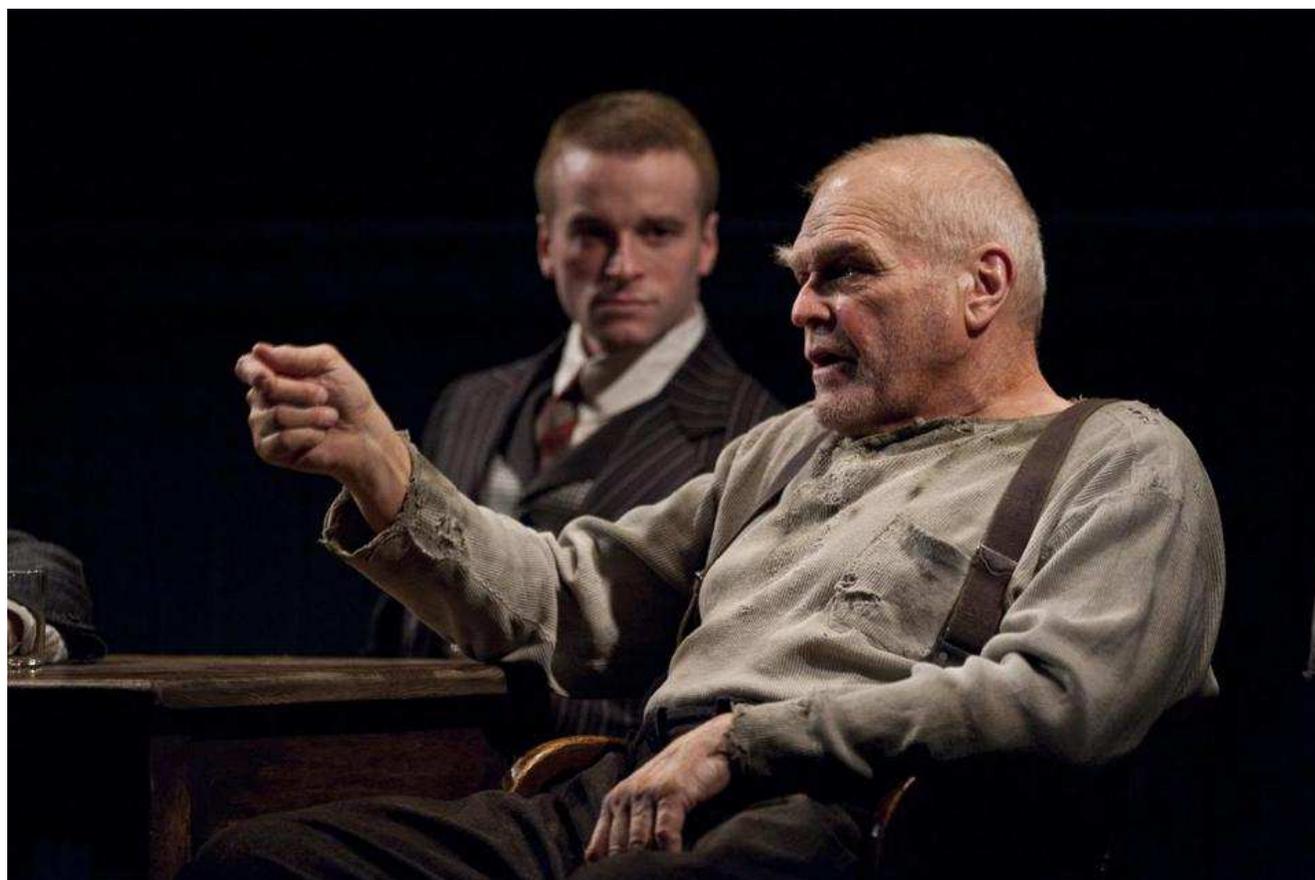




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Dennehy's connection to O'Neill goes soul deep



GOODMAN THEATRE/FILE

Brian Dennehy (front) and Patrick Andrews in "The Iceman Cometh" in 2012.

By Joel Brown | GLOBE CORRESPONDENT JUNE 02, 2016

They were both born in the United States, but Brian Dennehy says he and Eugene O'Neill share conflicted feelings about their Irish roots.

"My grandfather was an Irish immigrant and had equal amounts of love and hatred for his background," Dennehy, 77, says on the phone from his home in Connecticut. "There was a pain, a scar associated with being Irish, maybe inflicted by the Brits, certainly inflicted to a great extent by poverty. He had a great bitterness, and I

absorbed a lot of that, because I was exposed to it so much.”

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And yet, “I love that country in a way I can’t really describe. We had a home there for a time, a small cottage. And I always feel different there.”

O’Neill never went to Ireland, but it is a hovering presence in his plays, including his masterpieces “The Iceman Cometh” and “Long Day’s Journey Into Night.” And Dennehy has become one of America’s greatest stage actors with performances as Hickey and Larry in “Iceman” and a Tony-winning turn as patriarch James Tyrone in “Journey.”

“I’ve been saturated with O’Neill now for 15 or 20 years,” the actor says.

“He is the titan of O’Neill interpreters at this point,” says scholar and biographer Robert M. Dowling, who wrote “Eugene O’Neill: A Life in Four Acts.”

On Saturday, Dennehy will be the guest of honor at the annual Provincetown Tennessee Williams Theater Festival Gala fund-raiser at Town Hall, mingling at the cocktail party and being interviewed on stage after dinner by Dowling. Among other things, he can talk about the challenge of long, complex parts like Hickey and James Tyrone, as well as Willie Loman in Arthur Miller’s “Death of a Salesman,” for which he also won a Tony.

“What I have done in the past with these parts is just sit someplace and read it over and over and over again,” Dennehy says. “Something just seeps into you. There’s some kind of connection in the soul, I get it, I feel it.”

He recounts a backstage conversation at an awards show with another great O’Neill interpreter, Jason Robards Jr., when they agreed their favorite of the playwright’s works is the lesser-known “A Touch of the Poet,” in which they’d both performed. “And we both agreed we had failed!” he says and laughs.

The theme for this year’s 11th annual festival, to be held Sept. 22-25, is “Eugene O’Neill and Tennessee Williams: Beyond Success,” examining how each of the Pulitzer Prize-winning playwrights found that their more challenging work had a

hard time getting a fair shake from critics and audiences. Although the playwrights exchanged correspondence, they never met, Dowling says, but the parallels between them are legion, including in their writing and philosophy.

“They were both very much what we would call moral relativists. The idea of villain and hero kind of goes out the window for them,” Dowling says. “They’re both naturalists, in that there are external and internal forces beyond their characters’ control that defines their destinies.”

The festival will also celebrate the time both writers spent in Provincetown and the centenary of the first production of an O’Neill play there, 1916’s “Bound East for Cardiff” (with the playwright directing and playing a small role). The maritime drama was only enhanced by the sounds and smells of the makeshift theater, a fishhouse on the wharf, and the fog that enveloped it on opening night. O’Neill was deeply connected to the sea, including long voyages in the Merchant Marine, Dowling says, and he was also an avid swimmer, “so he felt very much at home being surrounded by the sea in Provincetown.”

Dennehy has his own fond memories of Cape theater, as the place where he earned “my first great review,” from legendary Boston critic Elliot Norton. “I was doing, believe it or not, ‘Bus Stop’ with John Travolta, I think it was 1976, and we were at the Falmouth Playhouse,” Dennehy says. “I played the sheriff, a pretty good part but a small part, and for some reason Norton picked me out and gave me this great review. I liked him and respected him a lot.”

Dennehy’s career encompasses dozens of roles in film and TV, using his burly frame and stern mien to play cops and politicians and generals. His imposing presence would seem a disadvantage in playing Miller’s beaten-down salesman Loman, in a production that passed through Boston in 2000, but his performance was unforgettable.

“He has that perfect blend of hangdog defeat but with a gruff self-confidence in the face of it,” Dowling says. “He can do the kind of

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emotional reversals that are demanded by O'Neill plays, crying in his beer one minute and shouting like a lion in another.”

Dennehy's appearances in Williams plays include both Brick and Big Daddy in different productions of “Cat on a Hot Tin Roof.” In 2009, he appeared on Broadway in

a short-lived “Desire Under the Elms.” An acclaimed South African version of that play from the Abrahamse & Meyer Productions troupe is expected to be a highlight of this year's Provincetown festival. But Dennehy's roles in O'Neill — including the lead in “Hughie,” another Dennehy favorite — are his hallmark.

“It's a great responsibility and a great task, and now it's pretty much over. I mourn it, I miss it. I wish I could do it all over again, but I can't,” Dennehy says.

“Every once in a while I would walk off stage and some switch was turned on inside me, a glow,” he says. “The other actors may say that was a great performance, but it's something that only you feel: I got it that time. And you don't get the whole thing, you get fragments of it. But important fragments, fragments which make the audience not only be quiet but lean forward, because they want to hear the next words. If you get 800 people absolutely silent because they're desperate to hear what's next, that's the best feeling of all in the theater.”

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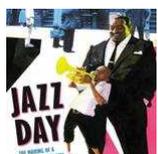
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