

By Kathi Scrizzi Driscoll

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Dennehy on the men behind the words

On Saturday, Dennehy will be the guest star at the annual benefit gala for the Provincetown Tennessee Williams Theater Festival.

A wonderful storyteller, perhaps by vocation or his Irish heritage, actor Brian Dennehy talks about one of his first times on stage and one of his first introductions to playwright Eugene O'Neill. It was in New York, more than four decades ago, and his co-star was his teacher, the "amazing, amazing, amazing, amazing" actor William Hickey.

For a "class," Dennehy says, Hickey often simply said to him, "Do you have any money? ... Let's go to a bar." They'd talk there about the theater, then Dennehy would go to watch Hickey perform.

Eventually, Dennehy got the chance to share a stage with Hickey at a small theater. It was O'Neill's "Bound East for Cardiff," and they were playing the roles of "these two guys," Drisc and Yank.

Hickey's Yank was dying and reminiscing, asking Dennehy's Drisc "Do you remember...?" then was supposed to launch into a long speech. Instead, he said, "Well, uh, tell me about it...," leaving Dennehy to try to come up with the lines. He flailed, did the best he could to fill in the blanks, and then a few times more when Hickey pulled the same trick during the performance. Dennehy laughs to this day that it was Hickey who got the good reviews.

"We did 'the sea plays' and that started it," Dennehy says of his own link to O'Neill. "Especially when you have to learn both sides (of the conversation)."

Dennehy went on to become a busy, versatile, award-winning actor on TV and film, including "First Blood" and "Cocoon" in the 1980s; "Tommy Boy" (the role he says he's most recognized for on the street) and the Jack Reed TV movies in the 1990s; and "Knight of Cups" and TV's "The Good Wife" in the past few years. On stage, he won a 1999 Tony Award for Broadway's "Death of a Salesman" and has become today's pre-eminent actor connected to O'Neill through his work with director Robert Falls, artistic director of Goodman Theatre in Chicago.

Dennehy won a second Tony for 2003's "Long Day's Journey Into Night"; has won acclaim for "The Iceman Cometh" in Chicago (1990 as Hickey and 2012 as Larry Slade), Ireland (1992) and in Brooklyn (last year); and has starred in "Desire Under the Elms," "Hughie" and "A Touch of the Poet." Dennehy was given the Eugene O'Neill Lifetime Achievement Award in 2010 from the Irish American Writers and Artists organization.

On Saturday, Dennehy will be the guest star at the annual benefit gala for the Provincetown Tennessee Williams Theater Festival. That appearance will bring Dennehy to the town where O'Neill's "sea plays" were first performed in a theater on a wharf, and where, with the Provincetown Players, Nobel- and four-time Pulitzer Prize-winning playwright O'Neill first won recognition for his work.

That was a century ago, and the O'Neill centennial in Provincetown has inspired the theme of this year's 11th annual Williams festival: "Eugene O'Neill and Tennessee Williams: Beyond Success." The program for the four-day festival in September, the details for which will be announced at Saturday's gala, is due to include some of both writers' "most experimental, countercultural plays," organizers say interpreted by companies from England, Russia, South Africa and the United States.

The festival has connected the two playwrights not only by their time in Provincetown but because both daringly broke "through the barriers of form and language of the theater of his time" while scoring Broadway success. Dennehy will meet and dine with guests at Saturday's gala and is looking forward to a Q&A to talk about two playwrights whose work has inspired him.

In a wide-ranging phone interview, Dennehy says he has performed Williams' work, too, "but not enough," and talks especially about "the human comedy" of "Cat on a Hot Tin Roof," in which he's played both Southern patriarch Big Daddy and also troubled twentysomething son Brick. ("Years ago, I mean A LOT of years ago," says the 77-year-old Dennehy of the latter character).

Both are complex roles, and Dennehy says Brick "has always been a pain-in-the-ass part to play," largely because his character is "not available," and was written with the undercurrent of homosexuality that Williams had to be careful about in the mid-1950s.

"The thing about Williams is that he broke all the g----- rules, and he broke them right away, right from the beginning with 'Menagerie' ... and he didn't give a damn," Dennehy says admiringly. "He had to do some maneuvering, but he made it pretty damn obvious what he was trying to say and what was important to him."

Williams famously wrote plays about his family (though never his father, which Dennehy wishes he had), as did O'Neill. But Dennehy notes that Williams did so early in his career with "The Glass Menagerie" while it was at career's end for O'Neill, with the "Long Day's Journey Into Night" script that the then-nearly-forgotten writer didn't want seen until after his death.

It is O'Neill whose plays Dennehy has come back to again and again. "He was the original serious American playwright. Nobody had seen that before," Dennehy says of O'Neill's importance, noting that "an O'Neill drama" is even one of the superlatives mentioned in Cole Porter's 1930s song "You're the Top."

Dennehy greatly admires Shakespeare ("I've done some, but not a lot") and American Arthur Miller, and loves Irishman Samuel Beckett's work. But he



Brian Dennehy is shown in this 2004 photo playing Erie Smith in Eugene O'Neill's "Hughie" at the Goodman Theatre in Chicago. Michael Brosilow

believes O'Neill is a must for Americans who are serious about theater, and the playwright's work goes even deeper for him personally.

"The fact that O'Neill is two things – he's an American and he's Irish – and both of those things tap into something inside of me," he says. Adding that there are a few parallels between his own life and O'Neill's, Dennehy concludes: "I love that man."

Dennehy clearly loves the theater, too, though he says he's grateful for and enjoys all aspects of his long and wide-ranging acting career. And he greatly enjoys talking about his work -- whether for an interview or for Saturday's gala -- but says reflection and stories aren't the point.

"The point is the play, the point is me getting up and saying somebody else's words, somebody who's probably been dead for a long time, and having people listen to them and maybe find out something about their own life when they listen to them," Dennehy says. While he jokes with his stories, he says he's very serious when it comes to rehearsals and performance. "The important thing is for those things (about theater and playwrights) that we speak so casually about today to be presented the way they should be presented. That's why I'm lucky to do what I get to do."

Dennehy's already working on a January project in which he'll star in Beckett's challenging and line-heavy "Endgame" at Long Wharf Theatre near his home in Connecticut. This "might be the most difficult thing I've done," the actor says.

"I don't want to screw it up," Dennehy says. "I want to get as much as I can out of it – for him, Beckett, for me and for the audience."

Gala Event

What: Annual dinner gala for the Provincetown Tennessee Williams Theater Festival
When: Saturday, 6:30 p.m. for a cocktail hour, 7:30 p.m. for dinner
Where: Provincetown Town Hall, 260 Commercial St.
Tickets: \$175 for the cocktail hour and dinner; \$500 for the head table with Dennehy; \$1,250 for a table of eight; \$100 for the cocktail hour only
Auction: Guests will have a chance to bid on work by Provincetown artists, including John Dowd, Jeannie Motherwell, a William Papaleo painting from the collection of Chris Busa, and a surprise painting from the Julie Heller Gallery.
Reservations: www.twptown.org or 508-684-8366
What Brian Dennehy had to say about ... Making the hit movie "Cocoon": "It was the best time I had in my life. I was working with Hume (Cronyn) and Jessie (Tandy) and Maureen Stapleton ... and Gwen Verdon was in it, and we had more fun ... just sitting around telling stories. Everybody always asks me what was your favorite movie and THAT's my favorite movie. I mean, it was a good movie but it had nothing to do with the movie. But the making of the movie was just so great."
Working with Vanessa Redgrave on Broadway's "Long Day's Journey Into Night": "What she does on stage hasn't got anything to do with acting. ... It's because she is who she is -- and not because she's a big star, which she is, but because of something that she does on stage. ... The rest of us are acting, with varying degrees of success or brilliance or boredom, whatever, but what she does is something completely different. And she says ... that it doesn't have anything to do with directing, that 'I don't even know myself what the hell I'm doing.' But she does it and it's extraordinary, it's brilliant."
The effect of "Hamilton" on Broadway: "Everything changed with 'Hamilton' and I mean everything, everything changed forever, and it's a good thing that it did. It's going to be interesting what the fallout is going to be from this amazing production. ... What he (creator Lin Manuel-Miranda) did was marry narrative, the narrative story of these people ... with modern music and modern rhythms and modern interpretation. You have a cast of minorities and nobody gives a s---, with different kinds of choreography and different kinds of music, and it becomes this great narrative story. None of it gets in the way of the actual story. It enhances it. It's an extraordinary moment in the American theater and most people seem to get it, most people understand it. This guy has a long career ahead of him, but there's going to be a hell of a lot more people now coming in the direction of the theater because of what he's done. There are a lot of people my age bitching and moaning about it, but I don't know why. That's what should happen."

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