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By Bess Rowen

O'Neill and Williams in Provincetown, Part 1: Women Directing O'Neill

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One of my favorite moments in [Target Margin Theater's Iceman Lab](#) was when Julia Sirna-Frest said that she and her collaborators had merged all of the female characters in the play into one woman, "just like O'Neill would have wanted." Don't get me wrong, I'm a scholar writing about

stage directions in the works of Eugene O'Neill, among others, and I know that he wrote a great many excellent plays. But, though he created some excellent parts for women on stage, behind the scenes he was emotionally, verbally, and physically abusive to the women closest to him. If you don't know this history, it's because it's rarely mentioned in discussions of America's Shakespeare. To mention any relationship between O'Neill and female theatre artists without discussing this troubled past is a dereliction of duty, in my opinion. It is also what makes every production of O'Neill directed by a woman radical at its very essence, albeit for unfortunate reasons.

In case you couldn't tell, my condemnation of the man as a person does not mean that I don't find his work important and fascinating. When I found out that the [Provincetown Tennessee Williams Theater Festival](#) is taking a special interest in looking at some of O'Neill's genre-defying works in relation to Williams's genre-defying works, and that it included three O'Neill productions directed by female directors, I wanted to know more.

These three artists are Talya Klein, of the Vermont company [The Here & Now](#), directing [Marco Millions](#), Brenna Geffers, of Philadelphia's [EgoPo Classic Theater](#), directing [The Hairy Ape](#), and Alla Korovkina, of the Russian company Dr. Chekhov's Theater Ensemble, directing [Tango Christie](#). I asked each of these directors several questions about their productions. Their responses speak to complicated and layered issues surrounding gender, representation, universal stories, and theatrical aesthetics. I can't wait to see these productions for myself! This is the first of a series of pieces I will write about the festival, which runs from September 22nd through September 25th in Provincetown, MA.

Bess Rowen: What drew you to the play you are directing?

Talya Klein: For me, it was the stage directions, especially the epilogue. O'Neill is pretty infamous for his long, detailed, practically cinematic stage directions. In *Marco Millions*, they are so elaborate and over the top in scope and size that they enter the realm of the impossible. At one point he calls for an entire ship and hundreds of Mongolian extras on stage, and I began to think, "He's totally messing with us." Most notable, however, are the phrases and images that feel eerily relevant to our current political climate. At one point he describes Marco Polo arranging his face "*into the grave responsible expression of a Senator from the South of the United States of America about to propose an amendment to the Constitution restricting the migration of non-Nordic birds into Texas, or prohibiting the practice of the laws of biology within the twelve-mile limit.*" When I read that stage direction my jaw dropped, in part because it's so timely and apt, but also because in a sense, this play is about history repeating itself. It was really the epilogue, however, that gave me goosebumps. It's essentially a full page of stage directions in which O'Neill describes a fictional member of the audience, (who is in fact the real Marco Polo,) and as he climbs into his limousine and drives off, he proceeds to forget the play and just resumes his life as normal, with no consequence. My whole body felt electrified when I read it. It wasn't just the part of me that loves a challenge and thought "game on": I could feel that O'Neill was trying to write a feeling or an idea that transcends the limits of the written page, his purview as a playwright, and even the medium of theatre itself. And I thought, "I want in on that."

Brenna Geffers: I think this piece [*The Hairy Ape*] resonates with people on many different levels. O'Neill's language can be profoundly beautiful and filled with a deep longing. I think longing is quintessential to human experience; some of our best stories find a way to tap into it. Yank longs to understand his place in the world, as many of us do. To me the play asks us to consider that there is no place in the world that is carved out for us. Our need to find meaning in our existence, to find our place within the larger world, is at odds with a larger world that goes on without us, unconcerned by our sense that we are unique individuals worthy of unique consideration. That doesn't mean that it is wrong to seek meaning in the world, or indeed even unavoidable. I think that is at the heart of Tragedy.

Alla Korovkina: I'm especially touched by the theme! I find the plot of this story relevant to our everyday life. People prefer desires and passions to weighing things out. They go after them. Someone leaves a family because of his/her career; someone is compromising honor and duty in pursuits of easy-going life; someone gives up his/her true love because of blind faith in morality. These all are the works of devil, who manipulates people like marionettes. And only when people find strength to forgive and love they become happy.

BR: How do you feel about directing O'Neill as a woman? (Your answer could very well be: this isn't a factor for me.) Did this affect your direction or experience of the play? Do you think about the play in terms of gender, or do you think the plot describes a universal experience that doesn't have a gender?

TK: I don't tend to consider my own gender when it comes to selecting material: either the piece speaks to me and through me or it doesn't. I never thought of this play as "male-dominated" and perhaps it's because so many of our canonical plays are by men and about men that I've had to learn to look beyond that. If O'Neill plays can only be understood and accessed by men, why do them at all? When I first read a play, I consider the gender of all characters in any play as "character description", a construct of the playwright which can live independently from the genders of the actors I work with. It's no different from saying, "this character is a doctor," or "this character is 120 years old." An actor doesn't have to male to play a male character. I believe that the character on the page is one layer of text, one story, and the body of the actor portraying that character is yet another layer you get to play with. Sometimes it's a richer experience when the two layers of story aren't the same. I've found that an actor that identifies as female might have a really original way in to a male character that brings that character and his role in the world alive, (and vice versa,) so it's important not to be closed off to that possibility. In *Marco Millions*, Princess Kukachin is in love with Marco, and Marco cannot see her or her love even though it is right in front of him. Which of us does not understand unrequited love, regardless of gender? So much of the play has to do with the quest for power and influence; I daresay that women and genderqueer individuals have a lot to say on that topic. A lot of people let their idea of gender (or race or age or size) limit their imagination. It doesn't matter if you are an artist or audience member, all it takes is empathy and a good imagination to enter the world of any play and inhabit it.

BG: I would like to say that my gender has nothing to do with the way I interact with scripts and that *The Hairy Ape* is a universal story but that is not the case. Not yet.

In theater and film, when we say a universal story, we often mean a story where the character is a straight, white, cis-man. Any other central character becomes a specialized story or a niche genre. We do not afford “universality” to women yet. Stories with women protagonists are considered women’s stories, while male protagonists occupy “universal” stories at this point in our mainstream society. We assign an everyman status to Yank and expect women to put themselves into his body and his perspective to come along. We do this a lot with women audience members. Yank and his fellow stokers speak about Women as “other” at times in the piece. As a woman, I am expected to also see women as “other” and so have to pretend to be a universal man in order to go on the journey.

That act of pretending is an essential part of storytelling; an audience might have to pretend that they are an engine worker or a mastermind criminal or a wizard in order to go along with story. But when an audience member is expected to pretend to be a superhero for example, the story is crafted in a way that acknowledges that jump the audience takes. That jump becomes an essential part of the story; we experience a fantastical escape from our own identity. This is not the case when women audience members must pretend to be men in order to go along with the character’s journey. It is just an assumed act. That assumption is a big part of classic texts, and is still deeply ingrained in our storytelling now.

The stage directions describe the first scene as “*all the civilized white races are represented*” and the characters speak of other races pejoratively at best. Women are also called out by the men in the first scene as being useless, sexual objects. I am not going to create that world and expect that my audiences find it to be a “universal” place. I am not going to ask them to lie and say “I am not the other” in this world. As the script is in public domain, I was able to remove the racist slang and sexist implications. Removing a few words goes a long way for me. I know other theater artists may have an issue with removing sexist and racist language from public domain scripts and that is their choice.

I also cast more than men from the “civilized white races” to be part of the ensemble. Women worked the engine alongside their male counterparts in the engine room. When a character used a racial epitaph, a person of color was there in the room to hear it and respond to it. With men and women working together, showering together and bunking down together, Yank’s context changes. The female body is not “other” in the world any longer and when Yank has an encounter with a wealthy young woman, the notion of class and masculine pride are allowed to read sharper to the audience since it is no longer just about Yank being by a woman’s body for the first and only time in the play.

When working with the text, it was my intention to remove the assumed male-ness from the audiences. This does not come easily; like everyone else, I was brought up to with the implied idea of what the “universal” means. Seeing how women operate as “other” in stories is a muscle I am still developing and have to work out like any other muscle. In terms of race and sexuality, my muscles on that are even weaker and more personal effort must be made, but that effort is not only entirely worth it, but completely necessary to tell truly good stories. It is a requirement of any good storyteller in my opinion. I am not there yet, but I am not going to give up yet.

I would like to get to the point where I am not a “female director” just a “director” but we are not there yet and I don’t think I am doing my audiences or my collaborators any favors by pretending that we are. I love doing classic text, but I am not going to ask my audience to lie to themselves when watching it and pretend that the rules of sexuality, gender, and race are the same as they were 100 years ago. I am not going to ask them to forget their own world in order to justify the world I am showing them. To me, it is bad art when an audience member must lie to themselves in order to participate in the world.

AK: I think only a woman could call this play “*Christie’s Tango*.” In tango, a woman’s role is to feel her partner. Similarly, while staging this piece, my objective was to follow the original authentic voice of O’Neill as well as to leave some room for my interpretation. This play is a tango - very sensual and passionate. There are three characters in our play and they are all equally important. Be it a man or a woman, first of all they are humans!

BR: Is there anything else you want people to know about this production?

TK: The Here & Now thrives off of the belief that approaching impossible things with an attitude of curiosity allows some pretty amazing things to happen. I couldn’t think of a better play to test that idea than O’Neill’s *Marco Millions*. I would say “this won’t be your typical production of *Marco Millions*,” but there is no typical production of *Marco Millions*. Maybe that’s part of the fun...

AK: I am hoping to challenge our audience to consider whether it is worth swapping one’s family for career, honor for pleasurable things, and love for pride. And, hoping for our audience to join us in dancing this tango tale of love and passion.

You can purchase tickets for these, and any of the other Williams and O’Neill shows from the Festival at their website. This series will continue with a day by day account of the Festival in September.