

Tough guys don't dance

O'Neill gets the Dennehy treatment

By Loren King
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For filmgoers, Brian Dennehy is one of those he's-the-best-thing-in-it character actors. Who can forget his bigoted sheriff in "First Blood," his gentle alien in "Cocoon," or his corrupt sheriff in "Silverado"?

But Dennehy is best known as a two-time Tony Award winner and a foremost interpreter of the works of Arthur Miller and Eugene O'Neill. After winning his first best-actor Tony in 1999 for his portrayal of Willy Loman in Miller's "Death of a Salesman," he played James Tyrone in a 2003 production of O'Neill's "Long Day's Journey Into Night," a role that won his second best-actor Tony. Dennehy also starred as Hickey in "The Iceman Cometh" at both the Goodman Theater in Chicago and the Abbey Theater in Dublin. Reuniting with director Robert Falls, he later played Larry Slade opposite Nathan Lane's Hickey in "The Iceman Cometh" revival at the Goodman in 2012. He also starred in productions of O'Neill's plays "Hughie," "A Touch of the Poet" and "Desire Under the Elms."

That's why Dennehy will be the guest of honor on Saturday, June 4 at the Provincetown Town Hall gala to support the 11th annual Provincetown Tennessee Williams Theater Festival, which runs Sept. 22 to 25. This year's theme is "Eugene O'Neill and Tennessee Williams: Beyond Success." The full program will be announced at the fundraiser, which will feature Dennehy in a conversation with O'Neill scholar Robert M. Dowling, author of "Eugene O'Neill: A Life in Four Acts."

Dennehy may not be known for Williams's plays — although he did star opposite Helen Mirren in a 2003 TV movie of "The Roman Spring of Mrs. Stone" — but his extensive stage resume includes a couple of productions of "Cat on a Hot Tin Roof."

"I did two productions years ago," says Dennehy by phone from his Connecticut home. " 'Cat on a Hot Tin Roof' was a staple for community theater in those days. I played Big Daddy, of course, but also Brick when I was younger and good-looking. One of the great roles is Maggie the Cat. I was lucky enough to see Elizabeth Ashley in 1974 and she was by far the best Maggie because she is Maggie. We've had great conversations about it over the years and she'd say, 'She's just a Southern slut, honey, and God knows I know how to play that.' She's a great woman, great sense of humor and an amazing actress."

Dennehy calls "Long Day's Journey Into Night" his favorite play.

"It's all about [O'Neill's] life and his family," he says. "I love that play. I was proud to be part of that 2003 production. It was great. [Vanessa] Redgrave was amazing [as Mary Tyrone]. She was fantastic. She took so much of that character to heart. I love Vanessa and would work with her again in a minute."

It's fitting that a new production of "Long Day's Journey" is now on Broadway, Dennehy adds.

"It's like Shakespeare or any classic — you never go see 'Hamlet' just once. [Revivals of] 'Long Day's Journey' and 'Death of a Salesman' with the best actors and directors means that a whole new generation hopefully learns something about this country that needs to be learned. It's a fluid art which doesn't mean it goes away. It's reborn with the vision of a different director and actors. It's not enough to read the play — it has to be experienced."

Dennehy continues to challenge himself by taking on difficult roles. He'll star in Samuel Beckett's "Endgame" with



Brian Dennehy as Eric Smith in Eugene O'Neill's "Hughie." PHOTO COURTESY OF THE GOODMAN THEATRE

John Douglas Thompson, which will run from Jan. 4 to Feb. 5, 2017 at Long Wharf Theater in New Haven. Dennehy frequently performs at Long Wharf, most recently opposite Mia Farrow in A. R. Gurney's "Love Letters."

"I've done most of Beckett's well-known plays, but 'Endgame' is a whole new story," Dennehy says. "It's a major play, very difficult. The language is complicated. It's terrifying."

But this great actor channels his emotions into his performances. He remembers that during the exhausting run of "Long Day's Journey" there were times when he thought, "I can't do a second show in a day. I have no defense — no way to protect myself. But exhaustion forces you to explore the part in a way. It should be a struggle. You have to explore the truth of the play. That's all you've got."