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O’Neill’s *Long Day’s Journey into Night* in Action

Eugene O’Neill who is a widely successful playwright wrote *Long Day’s Journey Into Night* and it was released to the public in 1956. The play is described as largely autobiographical following what O’Neill experienced growing up. Within this play, it follows the Tyrone family with James being the father, Mary being the wife, Jamie being the oldest son, and Edmund being the youngest son. Through the play, the audience quickly finds out that there are a lot of issues within the family such as Mary’s addiction to morphine and the fact that the three males of the house have a drinking problem. Since the release of the playwright, the success has been pushed for many adaptations to be made, even to this day on Broadway. From plays to film adaptations, *Long Day’s Journey Into Night* has been interpreted many ways with different directors and with different directors comes different interpretations and because of this, there are various critiques of these interpretations. Such as what has this director focused on with their interpretation, what could be done differently, how exactly did they interpret the play, and how true did they keep to O’Neill’s original work.

Jay E. Raphael (1981, SUG-005/001-005) directed Long Day’s Journey into Night in 1980 in New York City. Due to the problems that are seen throughout the entirety of the play, he aimed to create that setting through language, strategic lighting, set design, audio, and relying on the skills of the actors. All of these components were specifically chosen to portray the tense nature to the audience. Lighting alone had several purposes, including a marker for time as the day progressed, Mary’s dislike of the home, and to complement the emotional psychological elements. Raphael noted, “We utilized an exceptionally sparse setting with the absolute minimum of furniture and
furnishings.” When talking about acting, the director said that it should be “truthful, intricately motivated, and abounding with all the detail and idiosyncrasy that communicates a family ensemble” (Raphael, 1981). Each piece came together to showcase the intensity with which each character contributes to the play overall.

Marshall Brooks (1982, SUG-005/001-006) reviewed O’Neill’s play as directed by Marco Zarattini in Boston in 1982. Brooks said that the acting overall was “uncommonly good,” and Olivia Casey’s performance of Mary Tyrone “seemed a tad too hale-and-hearty for the role of fragile Mary but was more than right for the part when it came time to recall Mary’s convent days.” For the other actors, Ed Sullivan as Mr. Tyrone was legitimate; Jim Cooke as Jamie mastered the character’s “hang dog looks, frayed psyche and rotten thoughts”; David Berti as Edmund was convincing. Brooks noted that the choice to cast Rosamond Lang Hooper as Cathleen was a brilliant decision as it added to the performance. Furthermore, the set invited audience members into the Tyrone home in Connecticut as it was the only way to be seated, which Brooks said that “had the play actually been performed in Monte Cristo cottage itself, its set could not have been more effective” (Brooks, 1982).

Gerald M. Berkowitz and Eugene K. Hanson (1982, SUG-005/001-006) reviewed productions of Long Day’s Journey into Night in Scotland and Hollywood in 1982, respectively. Berkowitz relayed that director Kate Harwood’s fifty-minute adaptation lost the essence of the play. He says that Harwood’s reimagining of dialogue “created a generally seamless stream-of-consciousness flow,” however, the characters’ personal storylines did not seem to intersect which was further exacerbated by the set design that left much to be desired (Berkowitz, 1982). Hanson described the Hollywood play as disappointing when it came to set design, costumes, director guidance, and actor performance. This critic then goes on to say that O’Neill’s play is “not meant
for just any theatre company that chooses to produce it. Surely, the great classics deserve greatness in their treatment” (Hanson, 1982).

Joedy Lister (1983, SUG-005/001-007) reviewed director Malcolm Morrison’s play that took place in the summer of 1983 in North Carolina. Lister notes that lighting, set design, and a few notes on acting could have been improved. However, all the actors that played the Tyrone men kept the attention of the audience and moved them to tears with the emotion behind their acting, particularly Max Jacob who played James Tyrone, Sr. Even more, Lister mentions that Morrison effectively directed the cast to deliver their performance and was able to incorporate the “invisible characters” such as “the vague cloud of Eugene O’Neill’s spirit, which observes the ‘journey’ and suffers all the while” (1983).

Kalson (1984, SUG-005/001-008) analyzed Long Day’s Journey into Night that took place in London in 1984. He writes that the actors take a different approach to the family by focusing on their love for each other. “This is a loving family, desperately trying to overcome the overwhelming odds of longstanding weaknesses to give support and hope to one another. Their ultimate failure as a family matters less than the majesty and magnitude of their heroic attempt.” That being said, Kalson mentions that Sean Mathias’s role of Edmund falls into the effeminate category that is commonly seen throughout. Furthermore, the critic compares Long Day’s Journey into Night to another one of O’Neill’s plays, Strange Interlude. The former takes more of an emotional toll on the audience because they can often sympathize with the Tyrones, which was achieved here (Kalson 1984).

Hanson’s (1985, SUG-005/001-009) review covered the play as directed by Bernard Kates in 1985 in Santa Maria, CA. Hanson writes that Dorothy James, who plays Mary Tyrone, showed little to no representation of the character as seen in the script because she is too “monotonous” and
lacks the complexity of Mary’s addiction. Given that, it became difficult for the other actors who played Tyrone, Jamie, and Edmund to accurately represent their characters. Each character was missing a critical part of themselves as written, which made it difficult to understand the family dynamic. On the other hand, Hanson says that the set, lights, and costumes were appropriate (1985).

Jonathan Miller directed Long Day’s Journey into Night in New York City in 1986, which was reviewed by Stephen F. Bloom (1986, SUG-005/001-010). Bloom is quick to point out that Miller’s choices cut down the play time to below three hours, but the way he goes about directing takes away from the overall picture even more. Miller reduced the length by having the Tyrones talk over each, which Bloom says is realistic within conversations, but it detracts from the repetitive nature of the dialogue. “To [take away] repetitions, is to deny what is now so well-known about O’Neill’s dramaturgy: he wrote for the theatre, not for the easy chair, and he certainly meant for an audience to experience the repetition, which is a central reality of the lives of his characters.” Another critical point is that the proceedings of the play happen too quickly. For example, Mary is made to talk in a rushed way throughout the entirety of the play which causes the audience to miss out on the verbal hints of when/how much morphine she took. “Because Mary seems too detached and cold, we have little sympathy for her, and therefore we have too much for James…it is much too easy to blame Mary.” Moreover, Tyrone, Jamie, and Edmund are not convincingly rendered to be as they were written by O’Neill: Tyrone groans too much, Jamie is too cynical, and Edmund is too aggressive. In contrast, the costumes and lighting were adequate, but the set was too big and the complete absence of fog misses out on the opportunity to create that deeper connection to the original play (1986).
Director Barbara Rosoff orchestrated her version of O’Neill’s play in Portland, ME in the late 80s. Wilkins (1987, SUG-005/001-011) offers his critique of her version and the accompanying actors. Lighting, costumes, and the set design of Tyrone’s living room were a fair representation of O’Neill’s vision that added to the audience’s experience. While Helen Stenborg and Ford Rainey, who were cast as Mary and James Tyrone, respectively, were not the best versions of the characters Wilkins has ever seen, they still brought an intensity to the theatre that moved the viewer, whether that be in how they spoke or how they moved about the stage. Unfortunately, Paul McCrane and W. T. Martin, who played the brothers, got their actions wrong in the way they too easily accused another character and were quick to get unreasonably angry (1987).

When reviewing director Malcolm Morrison’s production in 1988, Linda Ben-Zvi (SUG-005/001-013) focused heavily on the set design. She took notice of the fact that there were three separate exits from the stage that were meant to represent other rooms in the Tyrone’s Connecticut home. Importantly, Ben-Zvi observed that “the men come and go; [Mary] stays fixed but ‘goes’ in the one way she knows how: through the escape offered by morphine.” Like Miller’s play, Morrison also had the actors talk over each other which was regarded as overused since that decision took away from the play. Had it been sporadic, it would have been an artistic choice. Be that as it may, this review notes that by “making few textual cuts and adding little stage business besides compacting the kitchen and back parlor spaces, the director was faithful to the spirit of the play” (1988).

John Gillooly took photographs of the Russian production of *Long Day’s Journey into Night* in Moscow in 1995 (MS110/03.02-16). Initially looking at the photographs, it appears that the costumes and set design are a true adaptation of O’Neill’s original creation of the play. It is
easy to discern which actor is playing which character based on their dress and body language. The lighting is heavily focused on the characters while the background is dark and somewhat eerie, playing into the tense and generally stressed environment that is the Tyrone household. Even by just looking at the pictures, it is visible that the scenes are emotionally charged.

William L. Sipple (1983, SUG-005/001-007) reviewed Lumet’s film version of O’Neill’s play in 1983. Sipple recalled that “Lumet rehearsed his cast for three weeks before filming the play, in sequence, so he could capitalize on the actors’ natural emotional peaks,” which included Katherine Hepburn, Ralph Richardson, Jason Robards, Jr., and Dean Stockwell as the Tyrone family. In addition, the actors do their characters justice by bringing them to life before the camera and adding to the film rather than putting on a subpar performance as is the case with some productions. The camera itself plays an important role as it switches angle and moves around the set. “In general, during scenes of harmony the shots are relatively level, while they become more angular as tension rises between family members” (Sipple, 1983). According to Sipple’s review, it seems that Lumet’s film adaptation of Long Day’s Journey into Night fairly represents O’Neill’s vision.

*Long Day’s Journey Into Night’s* film adaptation directed by Sidney Lumet released in 1962 consisted of a star studded cast with Katharine Hepburn as Mary, Ralph Richardson as James Tyrone, Jason Robards as Jamie, and Dean Stockwell as Edmund. Following Eugene O’Neill’s written play, Lumet was able to bring the words to life and a big part of it came from the cast themselves. Each actor had brought their character to life to the point of almost over exaggeration but just the right amount, especially Katharine Hepburn who played Mary. She had the task of playing a character who is addicted to morphine and that called for a lot of mood changes which she displayed very well in each scene. The other characters had also played well off of each other
such as the concern they had for Mary, as well as displaying genuine emotion to problems involving internal family conflicts such as Jamie and James’ disagreements about how each of them live their lives.

Along with the actors being the main reason as to why the film adaptation worked so well, Lumet’s directions with each scene also had a part in the brilliance. To dramatize the scenes where it was needed, the camera would not always focus on the face of the one speaking. For example, when Jamie confronted Mary about her addiction and she was giving her excuses, instead of focusing on Mary, the camera continuously zoomed into Jamie’s face and Robards did a fantastic job at expression acting (Landau, 1962). Even without saying anything, the audience can tell what Jamie is thinking at that moment. Another direction of Lumet’s film adaptation is that he utilizes well timed music in various scenes such as the one where Mary recalls her life before marrying James to Cathleen. While she is recalling this memory, delicate piano music plays in the background to set a tone of reminiscence, as if she is looking back on a fond memory and with a scene like that, the music played a big role in how the mood was set.

As seen through many of the play reviews, there have been numerous interpretations of O’Neill’s *Long Day’s Journey Into Night* and because of that, many critics have observed a “proper” way of how the play should be interpreted. Although there may be a proper way to view O’Neill’s play, it just challenges directors’ creativity who wants to interpret it in the way they viewed the script. To some directors, they may want to put the setting and lighting at the forefront of the scenes and some may prioritize the acting with minimal background but what is important to remember is the original idea O’Neill was trying to convey. The conflict within the Tyrone family dealing with addictions and the unwillingness to address the real issues plague heavily in the plot.
so people looking to direct a play with *Long Day's Journey Into Night* should keep the original intent in mind.
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