

# O'Neill's *Long Day's Journey into Night* on the Romanian Stage: Valorizing the Performance Potential in Production History

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## Abstract

This paper deals with the continuing dialogue between dramatic text and audience, while resorting to the tenets of reception theory. I have focused on the moral issues resulting from the unfolding of dramatic action in Eugene O'Neill's *Long Day's Journey into Night* and analyzed the ideological implications of performance in the course of this play's stage history in Romania.

According to Herbert Blau, the function of the theater in ancient culture was coextensive with that of society, while nowadays the theater is «a dissociated and eccentric event». «Indeed, for O'Neill's Romanian audiences in the past, attending an O'Neill performance usually constituted a form of community, whose members shared certain assumptions and had common expectations, since “the audience is not so much a mere congregation of people as a body of thought and desire” whose response is initiated and precipitated by the play, as a “consciousness constructed”, something that “postulates itself and unfolds in response”»<sup>2</sup>.

The contemporary lack of substantial staging of O'Neill's plays in Romania can be considered a damaging absence in our cultural fabric, while the censorship to which O'Neill's plays have been subjected along the course of history is obviously a form of ideological abuse since «making theater without regard to a public is not only solipsistic but immoral» (Strehler)<sup>3</sup>. Indeed, one may choose to consider the present day disinterest in renewing the transatlantic connection of O'Neill's drama to our stage as yet another form of censorship, generated by the post-revolutionary cultural “libertinage”<sup>4</sup> and accompanied by the vulgarizing of “performance” and the phenomenon of artistic opportunism. In the present article I will discuss the reception history of O'Neill's masterpiece – *Long Day's Journey into Night* – in Romania and attempt an evaluation of the various concretizations of this drama in performance, including a discussion of their effect on the respective audiences. Eventually, I would

like to argue in favor of the contemporary possibility of yet another staging of this drama – or of other plays by O’Neill – on the Romanian stage.

The “aesthetics of reception” as expounded by Hans Robert Jauss in the essay *Literary History as a Challenge to Literary Theory* (1970) offers an interpretative frame for the history of performance as well as for literary history, viewing it within the horizon of a continuous dialogue between work and audience, which mediates between «passive reception and active understanding, experience formative of norms and new production»<sup>5</sup>. In this light, the drama critics may be seen as the “receptive readers” who analyze the various concretizations of the plays against the background of the expectation horizon of their times. From the beginning, reception theory evinces a preoccupation with the pragmatic, communicative side of aesthetic experience. While for Jauss, the communicative function of literature resides in providing patterns of aesthetic identification for the audience, Wolfgang Iser focuses on the communication gap at the level of form or content, turning artistic enjoyment into a blank-filling activity which sends the reader/spectator on a quest for the answers to implied (dramatic) questions. In order to explain the paradoxical engagement exacted by “reading” a performance, it would be useful to transfer to the theater frame Iser’s notion of “negativity” in literature – an unformulated double of the text, identified with the «basic force in literary communication» – a sort of «deep structure of the text»<sup>6</sup>. The presence of negativity can be felt at the level of content in dramatic literature – its manifestations, the multiple misfortunes and failures that plague the heroes, forcing the reader/spectator to ideate the “hidden cause” of their suffering – thus, negativity appearing as the textual mystery suggesting life’s mysterious complexity. As the «non-formulation of the not-yet comprehended», negativity in the text/performance enables the reader/spectator to transcend both the fictional and the real world and to «formulate the cause underlying the question of the world»<sup>7</sup>. A sort of reading between the lines, negativity is linked to the moral we should derive from all fiction, whose didactic purpose is particularly present in modernist literature<sup>8</sup>. Moreover, the “absent presence” of negativity allows for the image-making activity of the reader, for the openness of the text that requires reading/performing.

In his study, *Culture and Society*, Williams insisted on the need of a society to make its own cultural meanings through the creative agency of individual responses, while preventing the crisis of understanding by a commonality of effort and a respect for tradition. As a consequence, the role of intellectuals (drama critics, directors, stage designers and actors) would be to commend to public attention only those facts that can be successfully grafted onto the spirit of a particular community, in order to produce significant development through performance. The role of art in society would therefore be to communicate with the public, constituting itself into a repertoire of shared values and a platform for debate – a role which O’Neill’s plays undoubtedly played

at the peak of their reception history in Romania and elsewhere and could still be able to play, as I would like to argue. In terms of dramatic challenge, modernist plays expose «a sense of some originary rupture as the generic source of the theater, which could only be rectified to the extent that it was taken into account»<sup>9</sup>. Similarly, O'Neill's plays can be said to expose their negativity by reflecting a broken world and attempting to understand the cause of this rupture, since «to the degree that it [the rupture] is taken into account, the world is subject to change»<sup>10</sup>.

The pathetic and emotional side that distinguishes O'Neill's theater from that of later representatives of American drama represents the element of appeal that contributed most to O'Neill's success on the Romanian stage, a success that will never be equaled by his successors. O'Neilleian drama remains lodged in the Romanian theater memory as both melodramatic and tragic, an oscillation that provoked heated debate in literary circles but had a profound and lasting impact on O'Neill's audiences world-wide. An incorporation of the cultural "otherness" of O'Neill's performances along the historical decades starting from the 1940s, indicates the dialogic openness and expansion of Romanian culture, a process of evolution whose end-result is a more mature and refined intellectual perception. Regarding the literary challenge of O'Neill's dramatic universe, Romanian drama reviews mention several features that distinguish it and confer upon it the authority of an American artistic landmark: authentic humanism, lucid and objective analysis, psychological realism, pathos and the force of the debate over existential problems. A master of theatrical construct, O'Neill exposed the link between objective reality and the inner world, ignoring the limits of time and space. In his search for grasping the mystery of the human soul, he experimented with various methods, «explaining the unexplainable, undoing the spiritual mechanism, remaking on stage the *feeling-thought-word* process, dissecting every fiber of the human being»<sup>11</sup>. As a result of this quest, the answer he arrived at in his last play (*A Moon for the Misbegotten*) is not a transcendental one, nor is it subjective or trifling, but commonsensical: it is the consequence of their deeds that poisons people's existence.

If, for the Romanian theatrical environment, O'Neill's melodramatic structures were highly appealing in the inter-war period as was the impact of psychological theater later on (elements of public attraction to which the aura of the "anglo-saxon" culture and – during communist times – of the "American" glitter were added), for the theater connoisseurs of Western Europe O'Neill's impact was less dazzling perhaps. His first plays to reach the continent – *Anna Christie*, *The Emperor Jones*, and *The Hairy Ape* – made an impact especially through their expressionistic features and due to the associations that foreign critics were able to make with their own national playwrights (the Germans initially saw O'Neill as an emulator of Hauptmann, the Irish as an emerging artist infatuated with Synge, while the French successively failed to perceive his "charms"). For the Europeans at large, O'Neill remains the American fa-

ther of modern drama, much indebted to the culture of the older continent. However, for the British at least, O'Neill's works opened up new artistic possibilities as they inspired their own playwrights to create excruciatingly sincere drama, that shook the foundations of society.

Perhaps the greatest value of O'Neill's tragedies lies in the appeal of their characters, who are inextricably linked with their environment and yet manage, somehow, to rise above material considerations and move our souls by the sheer force of their spirit. Therefore, I consider that the most frequently used modality of identification is the sympathetic one, with instances of cathartic effect – when the two antagonistic sides of the divided natures clash and consume each other and the paradoxical situation flares up and nearly destroys the fabric of reality. The result is, not infrequently, a purging of emotion. In some cases, however, we encounter the ironic modality – when the spectator feels jolted in his comfortable seat by expressionistic outbursts. But characters from naturalistic, well-made dramas such as *Long Day's Journey into Night* also have their expressionistic moments, especially when they recite poetry that illustrates their existential attitudes. I consider this use of poetry-in-the-text extremely fit for increasing the tragic potential of the drama, by deepening the lyrical note of the action. And if we consider the fact that these characters recite poetry that encapsulates our common sorrows, than indeed we might be even more deeply moved by their suffering<sup>12</sup>. Thus, the dramatic resources of negativity in the text have a cathartic potential, leading to profound reflection on the fate of mankind.

In analyzing the play's reception, critic Ileana Popovici expressed her conviction that the public was attracted by the deeper significance of the drama and not by its superficial negative vision, focusing on the misery of alcoholism and drug addiction. Instead, she points out, the essential message of the play was experienced on the level of «understanding and describing artistically and complexly the tragic dismemberment of personality»<sup>13</sup>. Popovici's assertions are increasingly relevant to our purpose, if we keep in mind and try to counteract the negative reaction that leftist critic Mihnea Gheorghiu<sup>14</sup> had had back in the sixties, regarding the dramatic consistency of *Long Day's Journey*. The surface negativity of *Journey* is far from repelling, in my opinion, since beneath the bleak surface one can intuit the impressive amount of human feeling that was invested in this work, written by O'Neill with excruciating sincerity. We have therefore all the more reason for regarding O'Neill's contribution to the theater as outstanding, since his work is not without a moral conclusion – namely the fact that suffering elevates the human being, whose capacity for love and forgiveness constitutes a feat of endurance.

As regards the play's dramatic anatomy<sup>15</sup>, critics seem to agree that the last plays O'Neill wrote are much better than his first or even middle-period plays – and that among these plays, *Long Day's Journey into Night* is O'Neill's masterpiece: after mocking his youthful preoccupation with Freudianism and

the melodramatic clichés of his would-be tragedies, Brustein admits that in his last phase of «existential revolt», the playwright is «in astonishing control of his material – the work is a masterpiece»<sup>16</sup>. Early on, Carpenter had considered it «O'Neill's most perfect play»<sup>17</sup>, while Manheim sees it as «a model for family plays of the later twentieth century and the epitome of tragedy in our time»<sup>18</sup> – to mention just few opinions pertaining to different historical eras. What seems to win the critics' admiration at all times is the enlightened balance of the play's mood. As Carpenter noted, «*Long Day's Journey into Night* dramatizes the fundamental fact of human evil but never denounces it [...] the final result is neither sentimental pity nor moral condemnation but perfect understanding»<sup>19</sup>.

In the course of time, critics have enumerated a great number of virtues that make this drama one of the most stage-oriented in O'Neill's repertory, while even its “faults” – its pessimistic and shockingly realistic vision – are praised for their dramatic power. Petru Comarnescu, for instance, considers this «infernally vision rooted in the family experience» to be a «soul-rending trail of truths» steeped in «spiritual darkness»<sup>20</sup>, while Carpenter dwells less on the thematic negativity of the play but exalts instead its excellent characterization and “simple domestication both of tragic emotion and of human insight”<sup>21</sup>. He also directs our attention to the ultimately positive drive as regards the characters' spirituality by stating that, philosophically, the play focuses on the transcendental idealism of Edmund Tyrone<sup>22</sup>. Henry Hewes is yet another critical voice who agrees with the fact that the nightmarish vision (the play's «grim dance of life»<sup>23</sup>) is alleviated by the characters' idealistic projections of themselves: however far removed they may be in reality from these ideals, they still retain the power to evoke their “might-have-been”, as in James and Jamie's drunken laments. This dramatic feature, as I will ultimately discuss, is connected to O'Neill's tragic vision that implies an idealistic projection beyond the reach of mundane worries.

Critics have also remarked upon the play's original approach to action, which is superseded and supplanted by character development: abjuring physical action, «it dramatizes psychological action to a superlative degree»<sup>24</sup>; the play spans a diverse range of feelings for each character, advancing from «the morning's surface jocularity into evening's soul-shaking revelations of self-truth»<sup>25</sup>. This original approach nevertheless corresponds to Aristotle's definition of drama as *character-in-action*, leaving open the possibility for the play to be interpreted as a modern tragedy. The aim of the characters' development in this case would be the achievement of a mode of understanding and forgiveness that some critics have connected to O'Neill's Catholic sense of guilt. Harold Clurman, for instance, while drawing attention to the “impracticability” of the play (rendered tedious by its repetitiousness and its “stammering” characters), nevertheless connects its permanent sway between apology and despair to the work's “brooding power”, the emotional grip of the drama being trig-

gered by the magnetic dualism of each personality. Thus, the critic insists, the work's «faithful realism» is «the most eloquent and significant stammer of the American theater», superior to any theatrical form of cultivated speech<sup>26</sup>.

From the initial stage directions, the aesthetic and ethical challenges of this superb dramatic text are intertwined. As a further element of appeal not infrequently employed, O'Neill uses literature-in-the text to illustrate the various diseases of modernity, family conflict appearing as a metaphor of the capacity for aggression and destruction of the human race. The text's negativity, however, shouldn't be read as an absolute sign of despair on the part of the author but rather as a form of protest and as a device for challenging the audience by the temporary deconstruction of such time-honored notions as family, love, the integrity of the self. These notions are ultimately reinstated by the characters' ability to remain united and share the dramatic present, facing its ugly truths and seeking for solutions together, despite the bleak perspectives. Written at a time of personal and world turmoil – O'Neill was a sick, depressed man by the early forties and the Second World War was ravaging Europe – the play seeks to counteract the anxiety of loss by offering a paradigm for understanding and forgiving the past.

Having discussed the “makings” of the play, I will now pass on to the analysis of its various concretizations in Romanian performance history. The play was staged in three different historical decades and for different purposes – in the sixties, the seventies and at the turn of the new millennium, each of these productions being conditioned by the skill and requirements of the artistic team involved and by the historical background.

Despite the success of the various stage versions of *Mourning Becomes Electra*, O'Neill's most popular play in the 1960s and 1970s on the Romanian stage remains, undoubtedly, *Long Day's Journey into Night*. Staged simultaneously in Cluj and Iași, the play had its premiere in May 1968. The Cluj team was led by director Crin Teodorescu, with Liviu Ciulei as stage designer. The distribution included Silvia Ghelan (Mary), Valentino Dain (James), George Motoi (Jamie), Ștefan Sileanu (Edmund), and Stela Cosmuța (Cathleen), while the Iași team was led by director Sorana Coroamă, with Hristofenia Cazacu as stage designer. The distribution included Adina Popa (Mary), Teofil Vâlcu (James), Sergiu Tudose (Jamie), Costel Constantin (Edmund) and Silvia Popa (Cathleen). I tend to agree with the opinion critics expressed in their reviews that this decision to stage O'Neill's play simultaneously in the two cultural capitals of Transylvania and Moldavia reflected an increasingly significant interest for American drama, to which the Romanian theaters responded eagerly, in a reciprocally stimulating dialogue.

Critics and spectators alike agreed that the Cluj show was a remarkably valuable production, in which the artistic modality went from the melodramatic to the tragic. The stage direction (Crin Teodorescu) cooperated with the stage design (Liviu Ciulei) in attempting a transcendence of realism through

symbolic insertions, an artistic option in consonance with the mixture of realism and expressionism that defines O'Neill's artistic vision. The production managed to minimize the moments of pathetic violence and focused instead on a slow and diffuse surrender of the self in a narcotic dream. The play thus became «a painful effort towards harmony [...] a wise vision of the inferno», which sometimes eluded the demons summoned by the script<sup>27</sup>. The critic believes that Teodorescu tried to avoid the naturalistic burdening of performance while increasing the significance of stage symbolism. He therefore avoided the pathological and passionate outbursts and “rationalized the irrational”, making the pain and suffering appear noble and uplifting – a change in focus which eventually subtracted from the emotional intensity of performance. In order to achieve his purpose, the director eliminated the ambiguous and redundant elements in the play text, setting an equal rhythm to the performance, whose severe intensities should have varied strictly according to the alternating tensions of the inner life of the Tyrone family members.

Besides the high emotional intensity that the performance of this play requires, Mira Iosif considered that *Long Day's Journey* could constitute a valid platform for socio-philosophical debate, the vitality of its characters inviting to a realistic interpretation of stage detail. Quite contrary to these critical expectations, the conception of the show directed by Sorana Coroamă in Iași gave a metaphorical reading to the above-mentioned elements, conferring an abstract and poetical air to the performance, which – in the critic's opinion – meant risking a personal interpretation that diverged from the authorial intentions. In Iosif's opinion, the directorial reading of the text led to «a sensationalistic, spectacular expression, a continual metaphorical turn of the states»<sup>28</sup> centered around the fog metaphor that created a surreal impression maybe more adequate in modality to the plays of Tennessee Williams, which Coroamă had also been staging in the same period. The change of focus that the critic found disturbing consisted in the disappearance of the “journey” element (with its implications of struggle and revelation) and its replacement with a “floating” nightmarish state. This may have suggested a resigned acceptance of reality on behalf of the characters – an attitude which probably came closer to the mood of later American drama and therefore significantly shifted the focus of the work. Indeed, if the characters aren't shown struggling with themselves, then there is no room for development, and in this sense, no attempt at catharsis in this would-be modern tragedy. At this point, I should add that due to ideological pressures, the direction of the show may have opted for such a stasis. The director might have intended the production as a metaphor of the times, in which political stagnation and depression was mirrored by the psychic discouragement of the population. In fact, director Coroamă appreciated O'Neill's play as classical in construct, reflecting the deep structure of the human psyche and fit to be rendered in an “inner” realistic mode, with less outward turmoil. For her, staging O'Neill's play became a challenge of

revealing the abyss of human consciousness, which made the surface structure of the action reverberate with tensions in a poetical manner that the above mentioned critic found exaggerated.

As a conclusion on the critical appraisal of the 1968 performances of *Long Day's Journey*, both Mira Iosif and Ileana Popovici obviously treated the dramatic text as the supreme authority. In making their appreciations, they relied heavily on previous comments by informed *literary* critics and also abided by the requirements of a “realistic” performance which was the norm of the times. Neither excessive rationalizing nor a metaphorical approach satisfied the ideological requirements of the critical establishment in the sixties. Since the directors’ vision attempted to change the focus in performance, these commentators were quick in critically pointing out the divergence in meaning, revealing a clear bias for the dramatic truth over the theatrical, innovative readings that the directors attempted. In this sense, the critics can be said to have exhibited a de-synchronization with the evolution in performing arts, which – with the emergence of the new stage realism<sup>29</sup> – were increasingly daring in asserting their personal vision. In the seventies, another directorial reading of this drama will further emphasize the stimulating and subversive potential of American theater in Romania.

Coming close to John Gassner’s definition of poetic realism in 20<sup>th</sup> century drama<sup>30</sup>, the stage realism of the 1960s was an extrapolated form of art, capable of including all means of artistic emphasis, while focusing on observing and rendering major existential issues. The main characteristic of the new stage realism was its increased flexibility, which allowed for the presentation of “ideologically flawed” characters and rhetoric – thus making again possible the staging of O’Neill’s masterpieces: *Mourning Becomes Electra* and *Long Day's Journey into Night*. It came as no surprise, therefore, that Liviu Ciulei’s staging of the same play in the 1970s should meet with great stage success and that this production would acquire something close to a mythical status – reflected in the large number of performances and in the ideological connotations the production took on in the course of time.

In 1976, *Long Day's Journey into Night* was brought onto the stage in Bucharest, for the first time. Despite its belated acquaintance with the Romanian theater-goers, this play will come to replace *Mourning Becomes Electra* in terms of public success, in the second half of the 20th century. An excellent performance, according to Valentin Silvestru<sup>31</sup>, the Bulandra show dealt with the naturalist and expressionistic elements of O’Neillian style by hiding them in the “ample folds” of poetic metaphor – to use one of Walter Benjamin’s suggestive terms regarding cultural translation. The stage direction seems to have relied extensively on the personality of the actors, who formed a true virtuoso team. Valentin Silvestru considered Caragiu’s interpretation unique through the actor’s multiple resources of sensitivity and expression, while Clody Bertola’s acting was deemed graceful and exquisite, fascinating in her rendition



of an extremely dramatic role. Rebenjiuc as Jamie gave a well-contoured and precise performance, while Pittiș in Edmund was impeccable in rendering the complex psychological nature of his character: sensitive, retiring, tormented by pessimism, swaying under the burden of confessions heaped upon him. This complex performance didn't fail to impress the Bucharest audience who partook of the Tyrone family drama with «emotion, deep sadness and real interest, confirming yet again the amazing force of O'Neill's drama to create the feeling of authentic art»<sup>32</sup>.

In the case of *Long Day's Journey into Night*, I feel it was no coincidence that this troubling drama of passivity, in which so many ideals are thwarted and abandoned, kept the Romanian audience entranced during the Communist era. In those times, the only hope for sincerity and closeness was in the narrow circle of the family, while one felt terrorized and unable to communicate with the outside world and feared to acknowledge that they were politically maimed by an abusive regime. The Romanians understood only too well the necessity of compromise for financial interest, such as the drama of the “old miser” Tyrone, or Mary's cravings over the lost purity and beauty of her youth, when religion was an open and easy practice. Moreover, the existential tragedy of the older brother, forced to work and unable to study, and the intellectual aspirations of his younger brother – whose poetical ravings could have been interpreted as indirect comments upon the decadence of the regime – were equally familiar topoi of the Communist times. Besides and beyond these speculative matters, the sheer proportions of the drama couldn't fail to impress the audience for whom any American play (and especially one written by the foremost American playwright) was subversive and exciting in itself. Last but not least, I consider its stage success to have been the director's achievement, Liviu Ciulei being the one who managed to steer the performance towards successful public reception, by continually working with the actors to enhance its meanings and nuances.

As manager of the Bulandra team in the 1970s, Ciulei focused on promoting the theater as a «major cultural act», the repertory playing the role of a major cultural strategy<sup>33</sup>. An extremely inquisitive and original spirit, Ciulei found a means to capture contemporary sensitivity by his historical recreations, while switching from stage design to stage direction. At the same time «an artistic modality of thought» and «a political option» based on a profound analysis of society<sup>34</sup>, Ciulei understood the new stage realism as a fundamentally positive mode of thinking: «manifesting a critical position, it is not negative and stimulates man's aspiration to perfection»<sup>35</sup>. Ciulei's stage realism had its profoundly naturalistic moments with the staging of Saroyan's *Time of Your Life* or Williams' *Streetcar*. However, even in these plays, the brutal matter was attenuated by «the diaphanous veil of poetry» so that the vulgarity and cynicism of the heroes were presented in the «warm light of defeated or chained humanity» mirroring the deep degrading social causes<sup>36</sup>. *Long Day's Journey into Night*

was yet another brilliant instance of the triumph of this new stage realism, as was his staging of *The Lower Depths*. According to Silvestru, O'Neill's tragedy was turned into «a show of enigmatic silences with an intensely lyrical halo, a philosophical tragedy of great purity»<sup>37</sup> and at the same time a contemporary manifesto that managed to evade the trappings of censorship:

The modern character of the directing vision is expressed by the contemporary artist's attitude, by his awareness of the societal dialectics and aspirations...the theater we endeavor to profess constitutes an implicit manifestation of lucid politically committed art [...] We emphasize reality through our performance. And the show becomes important if it confronts the spectator with his own conscience<sup>38</sup>.

Ciulei believed in the emphasis placed on the Hero, on the value of the personality revealed on stage, because, in his opinion, the public was in need of «guarantees»<sup>39</sup>. He confessed to be preoccupied by making his shows attractive for the audience, and saw this accomplished by «the contemporary ideas that the shows contain, by the quality of their artistic emotion, by valorizing the contact between the actor's creation and the audience»<sup>40</sup>. His cultivation of realism as stage modality involved the analysis of social-historical and psychological factors, as well as the cultivation of theatrical suggestion, which made his shows extremely versatile and well adapted vehicles for navigating the troubled waters of Communist censorship and the ideological marshes: «the artist tries to reveal things that the public confronts, but does not perceive»<sup>41</sup>. I believe that Ciulei's theatrical approach corresponded with O'Neill's staging requirements: the mixture of thought and feeling, the pronounced visual character, the careful study of the nuances in the play's (sub-) text and the focus on the actors' appeal<sup>42</sup>.

By far O'Neill's most successful play at the closing of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, *Long Day's Journey* was restaged in Bucharest between the years 1998-2000, at the Nottara theater. The play was directed by Alexandru Dabija and starred Șefan Sileanu – now playing James Tyrone's part<sup>43</sup> – and Valeria Seciu as Mary Tyrone. Marina Constantinescu explained in her review that the interest for the play was most likely fuelled by the “exotic” experience of psychological theater, with which our public was less familiar (since it had grown de-familiarized with, in the last part of the communist regime). She commended the direction for reducing the text to its essentials and thus disentangling the dramatic texture of its outdated elements that could have become tedious in performance. The show's revolving axis was the total lack of communication – «maybe the most severe disease of our times»<sup>44</sup>, for the illustration of which director Dabija paid particular attention to the revealing details – such as the physical incompatibility between the portentous Sileanu and the fragile Seciu that suggested the sad reality of misunderstanding, despite their display of reciprocal affection. The critic equally remarked upon the success of the final scene, in which

water seeped onto the stage from all directions, dripping from the ceiling and gushing through the walls, suggesting «a drifting world, a house-ship that is slowly but surely sinking [...] on which the travelers have no chance, having missed them all, in time»<sup>45</sup>. The staging wanted to suggest that, as time rushes by, people tend to ignore the fundamental matters of existence in their hurry, trying to ignore the resulting problems – just as the Tyrone family tries, within the span of one single day, to deny its dispersal. To demonstrate this idea, in the first part of the play, all form of dialogue was refused, the tensions accumulating step by step and the confrontations slowly destroying the image of an honorable family just as water erodes the rocks. The stage design was realistic and naturalistic at the same time, emphasizing the tense atmosphere, while the refined use of lights accompanied “day’s long journey into night” by throwing shadows upon the averted faces to reveal their torment. Consonantly, the stage direction avoided all ostentation by the rigorous and nuanced interpretation of the actors.

Having indirectly relished the various renditions of this nearly symphonic drama, one can only regret that *Long Day’s Journey* hasn’t been restaged since the early days of the third millennium. As we could see, its poetic meanings have been transformed and shaped by the various stage readings it encountered along the decades. In the 1960s and 1970s the ideological pressures gave birth to convoluted, frequently metaphorical visions (more intricate and pessimistic in the 60s and more daringly revealing in the 70s), while the year 2000 brought about the vision of collapsing individual and collective integrity under contemporary pressures. Given these multiple possibilities, one may wonder what its theatrical valences would be today since maybe its truest embodiment is yet to be seen: the emphasis on the power of love, the restlessness of understanding and the redemptive force of forgiveness – thus featuring the dramatic act as therapy. This could be, in my opinion, a sound and rewarding contemporary approach to O’Neill’s masterpiece.

Ultimately, the greatest lesson O’Neill’s characters can teach a modern audience is the one about human nature, whose potential for fulfillment is as great as the one for (self-) destruction. If these characters fail and are defeated, we are still the wiser for knowing ourselves better through their reflection, and there is a chance that we may avoid their mistakes or make the amends that they couldn’t do. I do believe that O’Neill’s drama fully demonstrates its tragic potential by keeping the audience entranced and giving rise to a series of questions that trouble the soul and instill the heart with a «fertile uncertainty» (Alice Voinescu’s phrase), which liberates our imagination and allows the minds to dream of a better future.

Returning briefly to the content of O’Neill’s works as a whole, one must be reminded of the fact that «theater is desire»<sup>46</sup>, being connected to the audience’s need to witness a mystery that incorporates the originary “tabu” of performance, the ancient tragic ingredient that modern drama found a way of

disseminating. In this sense, it could be argued that O'Neill's plays incorporate their own censorship of sorts, which definitely contributes to the public fascination they will continue to exert:

What speaks to those who understand is also the truth that had to be repressed. Here the archaic is quintessentially modern [...]. What an already destabilized audience has encountered since Ibsen is a drama whose consciousness not only has absorbed destiny but is specifically divided by the desire to tell it and, to forestall the pain of recognition, a recovered grace of revelation which would rather hold something back. The late plays of Eugene O'Neill, *The Iceman Cometh* and *Long Day's Journey into Night*, are painfully situated in this division, the pain intensified by the impossibility of ever telling it<sup>47</sup>.

## Notes

1. H. Blau, *The Audience*, The Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore-London 1990, p. 12.
2. Ivi, p. 25.
3. Ivi, p. 35.
4. The term is taken from an interview given to Lidia Vianu by writer Stefan Augustin Doinas, who – while deploring the present state of cultural affairs in post-communist Romania, chose however to preserve a “well tempered” optimism, stating his belief in the subsistence of human complexity and the eagerness for values (L. Vianu, *Censorship in Romania*, Central European University Press, Budapest 1998, p. 34).
5. H. R. Jauss, *Toward an Aesthetic of Reception*, trans. T. Bahti, Harvester Press, Brighton 1982, p. 19.
6. Cfr. R. C. Holub, *Reception Theory. A Critical Introduction*, Methuen, London-New York 1984, p. 95.
7. Ivi, p. 96.
8. Even avant-garde works “desire” to communicate with their readers, in that they require good, proper reading so that they may teach their “lesson”. Beckett's prose thus helps us reach an understanding of “finiteness as the basic condition of our productivity”, while Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury* points to the “senselessness of life” (cfr. Holub, *Reception Theory*, cit., p. 97).
9. Blau, *The Audience*, cit., p. 208.
10. *Ibid.*
11. I. Popovici, *Prin teatrele din țară – Cluj: O viziune tragică a degradării*, in “Teatrul”, n. 7, iulie 1968, p. 75.
12. If we should compare the effect of an O'Neillian drama to a fact of life, I believe the best similarity would be with passing through an emotional crisis, that leaves you drained yet somehow fortified and eager to try again.
13. Popovici, *Prin teatrele din țară – Cluj: O viziune tragică a degradării*, cit., p. 75 (my transl.).
14. Gheorghiu exposed his derogative views in studies such as *Orientări în Literatură Străină* (1958).
15. A notion I have coined which implies the features of a play that make it engaging to perform.
16. R. Brustein, *The Theater of Revolt. An Approach to Modern Drama*, Methuen & Co., London 1965, p. 350.
17. F. Carpenter, *O'Neill*, Twayne Publishers, New York 1964, p. 79.
18. M. Manheim (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Eugene O'Neill*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1998, p. 216.
19. Carpenter, *O'Neill*, cit., pp. 78-9.
20. P. Comarnescu, *O'Neill și Renașterea tragediei*, Ed. Dacia, Cluj-Napoca 1986, p. 323.

21. Carpenter, *O'Neill*, cit., p. 159.
22. Both Edmund and his mother Mary can be said to display a form of suffering which leads to illumination. Their experience of meaning, of "the secret of life", is a revelation that captivates the spectators, since it is an experience desirable and easily identifiable for all of us, be it romantic pantheism or religious ecstasy.
23. Quoted in O. Cargill, N. Bryllion Fagin, W. J. Fisher (eds.), *O'Neill and His Plays. Four Decades of Criticism*, New York University Press, New York 1961, p. 217 (the original article was printed in "The Saturday Review", April 13, 1956).
24. Carpenter, *O'Neill*, cit., p. 160.
25. Quoted in Cargill, Bryllion Fagin, Fisher, *O'Neill and His Plays. Four Decades of Criticism*, cit., p. 217 (the original article was printed in "The Saturday Review", November 24, 1956).
26. Ivi, p. 216 (the original article was printed in "The Nation", March 3, 1956).
27. Popovici, *Prin teatrele din țară – Cluj: O viziune tragică a degradării*, cit., p. 76 (my transl.).
28. M. Iosif, *Prin teatrele din țară – Iași: O viziune tragică a degradării*, in "Teatrul", n. 7, iulie 1968, p. 80 (my transl.).
29. The main promoter of this artistic trend became, early in the seventies, Liviu Ciulei. Nominated as director-in-chief of the Bulandra Theater Company in Bucharest, he staged many performances that had a wide international appeal – such as *Leonce and Lena* (1970).
30. See *Formă și idee în teatrul modern*, Ed. Meridiane, București 1972.
31. *Clio și Melpomena*, Ed. Eminescu, București 1977, pp. 227-33.
32. R. M. Pioariu, *Dramaturgia Americană în România*, Risoprint, Cluj-Napoca 2004, p. 168.
33. Other plays staged in the same period with *Long Day's Journey* at The Bulandra (1974-1975) were *Ivanov* and *The Seagull* by Chekov, *The Night Asylum* by Gorki, *Hedda Gabler* by Ibsen and *Titanic Vals* by Tudor Mușatescu. Excepting the Romanian drama, all the other three plays have connections with O'Neill's dramatic universe, constituting themselves into a resonant whole relevant for the audience.
34. V. Silvestru, *Dimensiuni clasice în tragedia modernă a lui O'Neill*, in *Prezența teatrului*, vol. 1, Meridiane, București 1968, p. 55 (my transl.).
35. Ivi, p. 57.
36. *Ibid.*
37. Ivi, p. 58.
38. Quoted in Silvestru, *Dimensiuni clasice în tragedia modernă a lui O'Neill*, cit., pp. 57-8 (my transl.).
39. L. Ciulei, *Teatrul prezentului. Prezența teatrului*, in "Contemporanul", n. 15, 1965, p. 1.
40. Ivi, p. 4.
41. *Ibid.*
42. Over the years, another director similarly understood the necessities of an O'Neill's performance, and, given the chance, would have proved the present-day relevance of O'Neill theater. I am here referring to Alexa Visarion in his failed attempt to stage *Anna Christie* and *A Touch of the Poet* at the Bucharest National Theater in 2004.
43. In the 1968 performance of the play he had interpreted Edmund's role.
44. M. Constantinescu, *Cronica la "Lungul Drum"*, in "Amurg Sentimental", n. 3, 2000, p. 4.
45. *Ibid.*
46. Blau, *The Audience*, cit., p. 191.
47. Ivi, pp. 190-1.

