

## The Other Side of O'Neill: The 1956 production of *The Iceman Cometh*

Kei Hibino

Throughout the production history of Eugene O'Neill's plays, the director José Quintero's 1956 rendering of *The Iceman Cometh* has often been referred to as one of the most significant events, in the sense that its critically acclaimed staging with fairly commercial success renewed both national and worldwide interests in O'Neill as America's greatest dramatist. It is also true that with this success the Circle in the Square, of which Quintero was one of the cofounders along with Tedd Mann and Leigh Connel, vaulted from a promising off-Broadway company that just started off to one of the best professional theaters in America.

Until Edwin J. McDonough published *Quintero Directs O'Neill* in 1991, however, no one had ever attempted to document the working process of Quintero's staging of *The Iceman Cometh*. McDonough, who himself performed twice under Quintero's direction in the 1970s, reconstructs in his book Quintero's thirteen productions of O'Neill, by drawing largely on personal interviews and memoirs as well as critical reviews. Still, basically a source book, *Quintero Directs O'Neill* does not pass any value judgement such as explaining why a particular production was a success or a failure, though McDonough makes sure that the arrangement of compiled data speaks for itself.

On the other hand, some O'Neill scholars have made comments on this historic production and undertaken the analysis of the reason(s) for the success. One of the earliest specimens is Travis Bogard's remark in 1972, where Bogard attributes its success to the change of the backdrop against which the play was produced, namely, the proliferation of the artistic premises the Theater of the Absurd advocated at that time.

When *The Iceman Cometh* was originally produced in 1946, it was little understood, despite its *succès d'estime*. Its revival in the spring of 1956, when its run overlapped that of the first professional New York production of Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*, was a triumph and started an O'Neill renaissance. In the decade between the two productions, the philosophical shape of mid-century intellectual life in the United States had taken form, and in the perspective of what American theatre-goers had learned of Sartre, Camus, and Genet, among others, *The Iceman Cometh*, which O'Neill had written in 1939, made complete philosophic sense.<sup>1</sup>

In *Eugene O'Neill*, Normand Berlin follows Bogard in pointing out the sweeping impact of Beckett's play, while he offers other interpretations to consider: its setting in an arena stage and its distinctive acting style.

José Quintero's production in 1956, performed by a newly formed company, the Circle in the Square, in a former Greenwich Village night club before a small audience of two hundred, began the O'Neill revival, three years after O'Neill's death. It had the longest run of any O'Neill play ever, 565 performances. One can only speculate as to why the play was so successful this time. Perhaps it was the intimate setting, allowing the audience to feel it was part of Harry Hope's saloon; perhaps it was the sympathetic direction and acting; perhaps—and this may help to explain the great interest in O'Neill's other late plays since 1956—the times had changed and America was ready for an O'Neill who was ahead of his time. (1956 was the year that Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* came to Broadway.)<sup>2</sup>

As it will be shown, however, these approaches the two distinguished O'Neill scholars have adopted in appraising the success of the 1956 production of *The Iceman Cometh* are not so unique or novel. Some of the critics who reviewed Quintero's production were quick-witted enough to recognize these factors in it. McDonough's book, based on these reviews, naturally goes along these lines. In this paper, thereupon, I will examine how these "official" views have been formed (with or without justification) by using published criticism and reviews as well as McDonough's reconstruction work, and then will explore another possible reason for the success of Quintero's production. My hypothesis is that *The Iceman Cometh* has two opposing aspects—I tentatively call them the "literary" aspect and the "theatrical" aspect—and Quintero, not having read any of O'Neill's plays before<sup>3</sup> and thus being free from "literary" influences of O'Neill's scholarship, succeeded in eliciting fully his theatrical aspect, which most scholars and critics have long overlooked.

Perhaps Thomas R. Dash was the first critic to link *The Iceman Cometh* with Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*. In *Women's Wear Daily*, he observed these plays' resemblances in theme and structure as early as May 9, 1956, the day following the first public performance.

"The Iceman Cometh" is in the genre of Gorki's "The Lower Depths."<sup>4</sup> It also anticipates Beckett's "Waiting for Godot." In the Beckett play we have two tramps, whereas in the O'Neill play we have a roster of 17. Instead of waiting for Godot, who never shows up, in "The Iceman," every one at Harry Hope's disreputable shelter is waiting for Hickey, the jovial hardware drummer who visits annually to cheer everyone up with his frivolity and his jests at Harry's birthday. Hickey does

show up, however.<sup>5</sup>

About two weeks later, on May 25, George Oppenheimer's review in *Newsday* likewise addressed the question of the relationship of the play to *Godot*, though Oppenheimer seems to have been more enthusiastic about presenting his own view that "Tennessee Williams' 'Camino Real' is nearer to 'The Iceman Cometh.'" <sup>6</sup> Interestingly enough, the similarities with Tennessee Williams' play have never been mentioned since then, while the play's affinity to *Godot* has been a favored topic whenever critics seek to account for the philosophical qualities of the play. For instance, Bogard, careful to include in his book all the major subjects that have been discussed within O'Neill scholarship, summarizes:

After the long, poetically oriented quest which he had conducted through the plays of the 1920's, seeking a God to which men could belong, O'Neill at last has come to agree with Nietzsche that men live in a Godless world . . . . In the wake of Hickey's teaching, men are left as walking corpses wandering in an icy hell; all they can do is to wait for death. In *Waiting for Godot*, Samuel Beckett describes the same interminable course of life, as Gogo and Didi indulge in senseless repetitious discourse and vaudeville routines to pass time. The pipe-dreams of O'Neill's characters have the same function: they make life tolerable while the dreamers wait for Hickey or Death.<sup>7</sup>

It seems highly probable that in the minds of theater people in those days Beckett's impact was so overwhelming that they could not help creating a certain association between them when they saw Quintero's production. Nevertheless it is rather strange that a play was explained in the same terms in which another posterior play could be best understood, especially when the two plays are otherwise so remotely related to each other. In other words, it points to the fact that the philosophical qualities of *The Iceman Cometh* are not appealing nor convincing unless other external references are made, though those qualities have been supposed to be the hard-core of the play.

Back in the 1946 premiere, there was no such outside referential system (the system either of literary criticism or of cultural representation, in this case) that would have made the "hard-core" part of the play more accessible, while O'Neill's "literary" achievements of presenting such a gloomy vision of life was obvious in the eye of anyone who saw the production. Instead of citing from the reviews of the 1946 production several representative samples which registered bewilderment of those critics who had suffered a "split" between the haunting presence of the philosophical theme and the absence of its dramatic realization, I will refer to yet another review of the 1956 production to show how the same conclusion could be deduced from the play if the external referential system didn't work well. The very title of the review by John McClain of *New York Journal-American* is suggestive: "*The*

*Iceman Cometh*: Its Message Too Elusive But a Competent Production By an Extremely Gifted Cast." The critic repudiates the dramatist's view of mankind, saying "To me, [*The Iceman Cometh*] seems an utterly futile and unrewarding consideration of mankind which doesn't go anywhere, and I came away depressed and bewildered: I didn't get the message, if any." Moreover McClain complains about its length, claiming that "there is no reason in the world why [O'Neill] should take so long to tell us that people are no good," while he applauds Hickey's dragging confession of his murder of his beloved wife Evelyn as one of the achievements of both O'Neill's and the production.

There is a prodigious part of a salesman (he talks non-stop for something like fifteen minutes at one point) and this is performed with force and brilliance by Jason Robards Jr.<sup>8</sup>

Is it only because McClain, for whatever reason, just couldn't understand O'Neill's in-depth query of humanity but enjoyed the most obvious theatrical effect of talking non-stop almost fifteen minutes in a soliloquy? It could be, but at the same time it is to be remembered that neither Dash nor Oppenheimer stated the semblances of the play to *Godot* in terms of their experiences in the theater or Quintero's line of direction. They may have mentioned the title of a play that had by then gained enough of its theatrical triumph, just for *The Iceman* to borrow its legitimacy and authenticity. Unfortunately, on the other hand, McClain couldn't think of such a useful referent or theatrical icon that could have enabled him to refrain from stating straightforwardly that his dramatic experience of the play was not enriched by the play's philosophical content.

In the published documents, there is no trace that Quintero recognized or articulated the metaphysical questions Bogard and other critics would claim there are in the play, such as the meaning of living in a Godless world or the acquiescence to the fate of waiting for death. Rather, the director's constant interest seems to have been in the physical or concrete conditions in which the characters are living. In *Quintero Directs O'Neill*, McDonough cites an actor's recollection of a reading of the play, after which "Quintero turned to each of us and asked 'Why are you in this bar?'"<sup>9</sup> a typical question that would lead actors to understand the characters' specific situations. As another actor's observation of the director's general attitude toward the players McDonough reports: "When you got into trouble, then he would help you *physically* or he'd actually suggest things. He stood apart unless he felt that you were getting tied into knots and then he would try to find ways to relax you and give you something *physical* to do"<sup>10</sup> (italics mine). Where Quintero seems to have philosophized the theme of pipe dreams, he interpreted it in a unique manner.

If their pipedreams are shabby, it's because they're a tiny piece of the mirage of the

institutions they represented. They didn't get kicked out because they cheated or killed, but because they got caught. Getting caught is the cardinal sin. It can destroy the whole mirage. So go, run, before we all get caught. There's a lot of places to hide and they're all called Harry Hope's bar. Find it, and there you can continue to live. Sure, you'll be able to come back, and soon, very soon. Because you are, that never changes. How can it? A man's got to be in order to be.<sup>11</sup>

The style and content of this passage of Quintero's reminds me more of D. H. Lawrence's than O'Neill's. It may sound strange to mention the English novelist and literary critic who is supposed to have exercised no apparent influence on Quintero, but it is easy to hear in Quintero's emotionally heightened tone in short simple sentences and "You-should-be-rolling-stones" message, an echo of Lawrence's book review of *In Our Time*, Ernest Hemingway's first collection of short stories published in 1925.

Nick is a type one meets in the more wild and wooly regions of the United States. He is the remains of the lone trapper and cowboy. Nowadays he is educated, and through with everything. It is a state of consciousness, accepted indifference to everything except freedom from work and the moment's interest. Mr. Hemingway does it extremely well. Nothing matters. Everything happens. One wants to keep oneself loose. Avoid one thing only: getting connected up. Don't get connected up. If you get held by anything, break it. Don't be held. Break it, and get away. Don't get away with the idea of getting somewhere else. Just get away, for the sake of getting away. Beat it! "Well, boy I guess I'll beat it." Ah, the pleasure in saying that!<sup>12</sup>

Whether Quintero had read this or other writings of Lawrence's remains to be seen, but it is quite possible that, somehow familiar with a popular version of that principle of representation of the totality of "Life" with the capital L, which F. R. Leavis originally found and formulated in Lawrence's novels,<sup>13</sup> Quintero conceived in his mind the theme of *The Iceman Cometh* as a recovery of humanity or the untutored soul. The message Quintero read into the play was, of course, totally different from other "traditional" readings of O'Neill's "most philosophical and abstruse" play as are epitomized in Bogard's work, and may have been wide of the mark. But it may have helped create Quintero's original way of directing, which oriented itself toward the representation of living humans rather than symbolic meanings in the play.

Based on this supposition of Quintero's line of direction, I will hereafter consider the formulation of Berlin's locutions of "the intimate setting" and "the sympathetic direction and acting." The first phrase should be understood primarily as a reference to the physical likeness of the setting of the play to the venue where the play was produced, the converted night-club. It is most explicitly documented in Brooks Atkinson's review.

If "The Iceman Cometh" seems to belong in Mr. Quintero's theatre, there is a good reason. For Circle in the Square was a night-club originally, and all four of the acts of the O'Neill drama are set in a saloon. The audience has the sensation of participating. The rows of seats are only an extension of David Hayes' [*sic*] setting of the battered, blowzy waterfront saloon and flophouse that is under the fabulous proprietorship of Harry Hope. A few tables and chairs, a squalid bar, a flimsy door leading into the street, a handful of fly-blown chandeliers and a few ranks of benches for the audience—they are all part of the same setting and closely related on that account.<sup>14</sup>

According to McDonough, the basic idea of using a three-quarter stage instead of a proscenium was accredited solely to the designer David Hays, who had designed all the Circle productions since the 1952 revival of Tennessee Williams's *Summer and Smoke*. In response to McDonough's interview, Hays states that Quintero made few suggestions about the stage design of *The Iceman*, if any, saying "You have a lot of leeway with José."<sup>15</sup> As far as McDonough's documentary and Quintero's own book are concerned, the director has said nothing of the set in the production except in an interview, where he succinctly answered "it only cost us a hundred and some-odd dollars. Tables, chairs and as stained-glass window, a light fixture like a wheel . . . and that was it. We had our bar."<sup>16</sup>

Considering Quintero's complete confidence in Hays, which is obvious from his tributes in his memoir like "the greatest and most resourceful designer I have worked with,"<sup>17</sup> Quintero had no specific idea about the stage design of the production but let the designer take the full initiative. Indeed, it might well be that Quintero was inspired by Hays's stage design to realize his then unfulfilled plan of the production, not the other way around. Of course, no further information is available to ascertain the nature of their relationship, and even though Quintero did not say anything about the stage plan in producing *The Iceman Cometh*, it is reasonable to assume that some tacit understanding of what kind of stage designs would have been appropriate for the production had already been made between them through several years' collaboration. However, it can at least be said that it was not just "Mr. Quintero's theatre," but also Hays's theater since Quintero's directorial feature of representing humans was further emphasized by the proximity of the set or the audience's "sensation of participating."

The second phrase needs some contextualization to be understood clearly. One possible clue is found in Oppenheimer's review.

Circle in the Square in its brilliant production has been as truthful as Mr. O'Neill and Jose [*sic*] Quintero, the director, has seemingly whipped his actors into such reality that they seem less to act than to be.<sup>18</sup>

And if the sense of their real existence was acutely felt on the stage, it must have owed much to Quintero's unique casting method. When he cast a role in an audition, he trusted his first impressions and usually didn't even ask the actor to read the role. In *If You Don't Dance They Beat You*, Quintero's memoir published in 1974, he described how the part of the former English army officer Cecil Lewis was decided.

We were halfway down the stairs when the door opened and a man came in. He was in his late fifties. Seeing Isabel [Quintero's secretary], he immediately removed his hat with trembling precision.

"I am very sorry," he said in a quietly modulated voice with a vague touch of an English accent. "I know you stopped [the audition] at three and resumed at four. I thought I would make it, but as usual I didn't. I am sorry. Good-bye."

"Just a moment, please." He turned around. He was an extremely handsome gentleman, but not in an obtrusive way. On the contrary, there seemed to be a strong desire not to be noticed.

"Do you know this play?" I asked.

"Yes, I do . . . very well."

"Do you remember the part of Cecil Lewis? The one . . ."

"Excuse me for interrupting you. You were going to say, 'The one they call 'The Captain.''"

"You know that unfortunately we can't afford to pay more than fifteen dollars a week."

"Yes," he said.

"We start rehearsals a week from Monday. Are you free?"

"I am free. But are you offering me the chance to read for the part?"

"No I am offering you the part."

"Just like that?"

"Just like that. And now if you'll excuse me, Miss Halliburton will take your name and number. See you a week from Monday." We shook hands.<sup>19</sup>

In the following part of the book, Quintero explains why Phil Pheiffer, who had not had any professional stage experience before, was chosen to play the role of Ed Mosher in this production. In the audition, Pheiffer demonstrated a lot of tricks he could do with his hands with his frustrated pride that made him look an oddball. In Quintero's mind, his character fit that of Mosher, the one-time circus man.

In this sense, the casting of Jason Robards Jr. as Hickey was an exception. Robards was first offered the role of Jimmy Tomorrow, and when he asked Quintero to let him read for the

part of Hickey which happened not to have been taken at that time, the director and he had the following conversation.

“But Jason, I know you, and you know that I never . . .”

“Please, I know I don’t look like the way O’Neill describes him, physically. . . .”<sup>20</sup>

Although after Robards’ reading Quintero was soon to know how deep insight the now legendary O’Neill actor had acquired into O’Neill characterization of Hickey and to decide to offer the part to him, this and other episodes suggest Quintero’s concern in the actors’ physical appearances and natural dispositions rather than in their potential capacity as an actor.

In *Quintero Directs O’Neill* McDonough goes on to reveal how Quintero proceeded with his intuitive and rather happy-go-lucky selection of a variety of actors. Here I will confine myself to citing the most significant remark from McDonough’s personal interview with Jimmy Green, the actor playing the role of James Cameron, to see what Quintero’s unique way of casting ultimately brought about in the production.

[S]o many of the actors were much like the characters they were playing. The kind of fights that broke out on stage were often happening offstage as well, people would be bickering all the time and pricking at each other. The life just seemed to flow from the dressing room to the stage and back again.<sup>21</sup>

From these facts, the meaning of “the sympathetic direction and acting” is clearly known; Quintero’s production succeeded in creating an atmosphere in which the audience hardly distinguished the playing roles from the players; they saw the real bums in Harry Hope’s bar, not the actors on the stage.

Another reason why “the sympathetic direction and acting” was salient in the Quintero production may have been that it was in a marked contrast to the “stylized” performance of *The Iceman*’s premiere in 1946. Stark Young of the *New Republic* voices such an opinion on the Theatre Guild production, directed by Eddie Dowling.

Eddie Dowling has directed in his by now well known style. His is a method sure to be admired; it consists largely in a certain smooth security, an effect of competence, of keeping things professional and steady, and often of doing nothing at all. To this he adds in *The Iceman Cometh* a considerable degree of stylized performance, actors sitting motionless while another character or other groups take the stage. Since there is a good deal of stylization in the structure of *The Iceman Cometh*, this may well be justified. But in my opinion the usual Dowling method brought to the direction of



this O'Neill play would gain greatly by more pressure, more intensity and a far darker and richer texture.<sup>22</sup>

Although most of the reviews responded largely to the fact that it was the first presentation of O'Neill's work since the 1934 Theatre Guild production of *Days Without End*, and therefore Dowling's direction was not paid due attention to,<sup>23</sup> this and some other comments endorse a factor of stylization in the production. In the October 19 issue of *Cue* it reads: "Eddie Dowling's direction always achieves natural and interesting visual arrangements within the generally static outline"<sup>24</sup>; and much later in 1984, Gary Vena in his reconstruction work of the 1946 production demonstrates that "[t]he leave-taking [of the derelicts in Harry Hope's bar in the third act] became 'ritualized' in Dowling's carefully orchestrated staging."<sup>25</sup>

Nevertheless it would be unfair to blame only the director for the stylization. It may have been ascribed partly to the setting designed by the perfectionist Robert Edmond Jones, which, according to the *Times* critic Brooks Atkinson, "glow[ed] with an articulate meaning, like a Daumier print."<sup>26</sup> Compared to Hays-Quintero low-budget setting, it must have looked much more authentic and sophisticated, but less sympathetic or approachable.

Furthermore it must not be overlooked that O'Neill's repeated authorial intervention in the production tended to stifle the animated, genial mood the directors and the actors strove to build within the play. The dramatist had demanded that during the auditions and rehearsals he be with the director Eddie Dowling and other Theater Guild members, which resulted in his frequent clash with the director. Both Sheaffer and Vena give interesting accounts of the tense relationship between O'Neill and Dowling during the rehearsals,<sup>27</sup> but it would be pertinent here to cite the following description to see how O'Neill's uncompromising stand against any deviation from the written text prohibited the director's and the actors' spontaneous reactions to it.

At first Eddie Dowling tried to enliven the leisurely drama with some movement and pieces of "business," but every afternoon the playwright eliminated what the director had introduced in the morning. The playwright wanted no unessential action that might distract, even momentarily, from his words.<sup>28</sup>

What O'Neill sought for may not have been a certain acting style, but his essentialism and adherence to his own text yielded a kind of negative stylization in the sense it allowed no playfulness nor liveliness. On the other hand, when Quintero directed his production, "You have a lot of leeway with José," as Hays frankly acknowledges. In the eye of those who had seen the premiere, Quintero's *Iceman* must have looked less strained and more cordial, freed from O'Neill's authority and tireless commitment.

Of course, it could be argued that ten years' lapse between the Theatre Guild premiere

and Quintero's revival would make their comparison almost impractical; after all, not so many people could have seen both productions and even though one was fortunate enough to be able to attend both of them, one's memory was not to be counted on so much. Their difference in the style of directing may not have been as striking as when one compares and contrasts the two productions through the process of reconstruction.

Nevertheless, it is interesting to find Brooks Atkinson, who had seen the 1946 premiere and declared that "the only thing that matters is that [O'Neill] has plunged again into the black quagmire of man's illusions and composed a rigadon of death as strange and elemental"<sup>29</sup> in his review then, emphasized the lively and funny aspect of *The Iceman Cometh* rather than its philosophical content when he saw the 1956 revival.

[The play] seems, not like something written, but like something that is happening. Although it is terrible in its comment on the need for illusions to maintain an interest in life, it is also comic. Some of the dialogue is pretty funny.<sup>30</sup>

Although he did not mention the premiere to compare and tried to maintain his appraisal of the dramatist's great achievement in philosophical inquiry into the human illusion, it is clear that he refreshed his memory of the play by attending Quintero's production.

Thus far, it seems that Normand Berlin's attribution of the success of the 1956 revival to its setting in an arena stage and its sympathetic acting and directing style has successfully been established; and at the same time, by comparing and contrasting the two productions, it is known that Quintero's line of direction addresses the question of how the real life and vivacity of the bums in Harry Hope's bar should be represented on the stage, while in the Theatre Guild production the director Dowling, under the authority and oversight of none other than O'Neill, had to follow the script scrupulously, which brought about a stylized stillness; in this sense, Atkinson's remark on the play as "not like something written, but like something that is happening" sounds ironical.

Still, it remains doubtful whether what Quintero did in his production constituted a saccharine coating of the hard-core philosophical inquiry of the human illusion, or alternatively, a bold but perhaps unintentional dismantling of an ideological construct of O'Neill's authorial position as "the playwright as thinker." In other words, it is still difficult to tell whether the success of the 1956 production should be attributed either simply to Quintero's ignorance of O'Neill in the literary context and yet his brilliant talent in creating an alluring atmosphere on the stage, or to his unique reading of *The Iceman* that would debunk all the other authoritative ones that have obsessed not only the critics but also O'Neill himself. In the last few pages, I will consider this question, in the hope that I can demonstrate that the latter is the case, which is to say that Quintero did not make his production out of nothing but succeeded in eliciting what had been hidden in O'Neill's "most philosophical" work.

At first sight, the question may appear to be a revised version of the time-honored question of O'Neill's dubious self-positioning as a thinking dramatist. There have been critics who claim that O'Neill's thoughts are a mere bundle of cheap and undigested borrowings from Nietzschean philosophy and Freudian psychology among others. Some of them, like Francis Fergusson<sup>31</sup> and John Henry Raleigh,<sup>32</sup> further suggest that the essence of the dramatist, whose father was a famous melodrama star, is one of a melodramatist, always turning to displaying the extreme state of emotions for theatrical effects. Philosophical doubts and psychological tensions O'Neill attempts to stage in his plays may seem to be serious enough, but after all, it turns out that they are employed to render emotional intensity and impact.

Although it seems to be a common understanding that in his later works O'Neill "successfully transcended melodrama"<sup>33</sup> and returned to the realism mode, there certainly remain some elements of theatricality in *The Iceman Cometh*. For instance, the last monologue of Hickey can be seen not so much as a psychologically incisive analysis of the ambiguous love-hate relationship of Hickey to his wife as a histrionic *tour de force* in front of which the audience holds their breath as they wait for the actor playing Hickey to finish up his lines.

Yet there is no evidence that Quintero made full use of those theatrical or melodramatic devices embedded in the play. Rather credit should go to him for the fact that he found a musical structure in the play, which is opposed to the plot-oriented, tightly woven structure that characterizes melodramas. After the production, Quintero himself explained the musical quality of the play.

My approach in directing *The Iceman Cometh* was different from that used in any play I had ever done. It had to be, for this was not built as an orthodox play. It resembles a complex musical form, with themes repeating themselves with slight variation, as melodies do in a symphony. It is a valid device, though O'Neill has often been criticized for it by those who do not see the strength and depth of meaning the repetition achieves.

My work was somewhat like that of an orchestra conductor, emphasizing rhythms, being constantly aware of changing tempos; every character advanced a different theme. The paradox was that for the first time as a director, I began to understand the meaning of precision in drama—and it took a play four and one half-hours long to teach me, a play often criticized as rambling and overwritten.<sup>34</sup>

Of course, as Bogard astutely points out, it may be "after all, only an analogy,"<sup>35</sup> to analyze the structure of a play in musical terms, and it is difficult to tell how Quintero actually approached the play from these vague accounts. When he mentions rhythms and tempos, is he suggesting the language the characters employ or more than that? What does he mean by

the theme of each character? The past life the characters tell?

Furthermore, McDonough, by conducting private interviews of the actors and other staff in the 1956 revival, proves that they never heard Quintero mention the musical quality of *The Iceman Cometh* when they were rehearsing. Quite naturally, no reviewers observed any hint of musical features in Quintero's direction. It would seem that Quintero's musical references should be much discounted, as they were published after it proved that the production was both critically and commercially successful. They are, as it were, a declaration of triumph by the director, and contain much justification by hindsight.

Nevertheless, Quintero's intuitive grasp of the play as a complex form constituted by repetitions rather than a plot-based linear structure is worth considering. For, O'Neill never allowed himself to prune and trim *The Iceman* for the sake of story-telling. In response to Kenneth Macgowan's suggestion of cutting the play short, O'Neill stresses the importance of depicting the characters thoroughly.

You would find if I did not build up the complete picture of the group as it now is in their first part—the atmosphere of the place, the humour and friendship and human warmth and *deep inner contentment* of the bottom—you would not be so interested in these people and you would find the impact of what follows a lot less profoundly disturbing. You wouldn't feel the same sympathy and understanding for them, or be so moved by what Hickey does to them.<sup>36</sup>

In another interview held by Barrett Clark, O'Neill even deemphasizes the plot in favor of representing the real life of each character: "Mere physical violence—mere bigness, is not important. You'll see that *The Iceman* is a very simple play: one set; I've certainly observed that [*sic*] Unities all right, characterization, but no plot in the ordinary sense; I didn't need plot: the people are enough."<sup>37</sup>

I have already described Quintero's unique interpretation of the derelicts in *The Iceman Cometh* as people who alienate themselves from the totality of life. By placing this reading side by side with O'Neill's remarks, I think I can corroborate my conclusion that Quintero's success was actually owed to the fact that he created a plotless and thus timeless dramatic world in which the characters drink, laugh, and cry in their repressed, but vital way. This world must have been funny to see, as Brooks Atkinson witnessed it. In other words, Quintero proposed a new vision of the play that is tediously long and repetitive in terms of plot-construction by focusing on representing living humans in his production. By contrast, critics and scholars, familiar with the philosophical content O'Neill refers to in the play, respond to this literary aspect, perhaps because they feel uncomfortable with O'Neill's way of story-telling and yet they need to condescend America's foremost dramatist.

One such academician is Eric Bentley, who directed the German language premiere of

the play in 1952 in Switzerland and cut “about an hour” out of the play whose usual performance time is four to five hours until some of the characters “had no effective existences” in order to “get at the core of reality in *The Iceman*.”<sup>38</sup> In a kind of documentary criticism, “Trying to Like O’Neill,” Bentley describes his own experience in the Swiss production and blames O’Neill for imposing what he believed on Hickey instead of realistically depicting him.

It seems to me that O’Neill’s eye was off the object, and on Dramatic and Poetic Effect, when he composed the Hickey story. Not being clearly seen, the man is unclearly presented to the audience: O’Neill misleads them for seven hours, then asks them to reach back into their memory and re-interpret all Hickey’s actions and attitudes from the beginning. Is Hickey the character O’Neill needed as the man who tries to deprive the gang of their illusions?<sup>39</sup>

Yet when Bentley writes this, he overlooks the possibility that the physical presence of the actor playing Hickey might overwhelm the meaning of the written text. It is easily imagined that in Quintero’s production Jason Robards portrayed Hickey so realistically that the philosophical or literary message (at least Bentley suspects) Hickey is supposed to convey faded into the background. Furthermore, the audience need not recall their memory of Hickey’s actions and attitudes when they are rightly led to understand that the plot is not so important in the play. They may enjoy what they are now watching; the real life the characters/ the actors represent.

It is truly difficult to decide what factors make a production successful, and the case of Quintero’s revival of *The Iceman Cometh* is not the exception. Although I believe that my conclusion that its success was chiefly due to the fact that Quintero did not take the philosophical content of the play seriously and divulged O’Neill’s hidden dramatic world is well founded in this paper, there are other possible reasons for the success. For instance, it may have been because “[O’Neill’s] audience is often more interested in the author than in his plays,” as Francis Fergusson pointed out as early as 1930. It is possible that the news of the dramatist’s death in 1953 had already been an impetus to his reevaluation Quintero’s productions were to trigger; people may have an unjustified feeling that they had been ignoring the father of American serious drama too long and grasped the best chance to recover O’Neill’s reputation. Yet more extensive researches into the socio-political context in which American theater was then placed are necessary to demonstrate this, so I will consider this question in the future.

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Travis Bogard, *Contour in Time: The Plays of Eugene O’Neill* (1972; New York:

Oxford UP, 1988) xvi.

<sup>2</sup> Normand Berlin, *Eugene O'Neill* (New York: Grove Press, 1982) 143.

<sup>3</sup> See José Quintero, *If You Don't Dance They Beat You* (Boston: Little, Brown & Company, 1974) 24, in which the Panamanian-born director candidly acknowledges that he had never read or seen any of Eugene O'Neill's work until 1956.

<sup>4</sup> A comparative study of the play with *The Lower Depths* had been made as early as 1951 by Helen Muchnic. See "Circe's Swine: Plays by Gorky and O'Neill," *Comparative Literature* 3 (1951): 119-128.

<sup>5</sup> Thomas R. Dash, "'The Iceman Cometh': Circle in the Square," *Women's Wear Daily* May 9 1956.

<sup>6</sup> George Oppenheimer, "On Stage," *Newsday* May 25 1956.

<sup>7</sup> Bogard 420.

<sup>8</sup> John McClain, "The Iceman Cometh: Its Message Too Elusive But a Competent Production By an Extremely Gifted Cast," *New York Journal-American* May 9 1956.

<sup>9</sup> Edwin J McDonough, *Quintero Directs O'Neill* (Chicago: a cappella books, 1991) 34.

<sup>10</sup> McDonough 37-38.

<sup>11</sup> Quintero 153.

<sup>12</sup> Edward D. McDonald, ed., *Phoenix: The Posthumous Papers of D. H. Lawrence* (New York: The Viking Press, 1936) 366.

<sup>13</sup> See, for instance, F. R. Leavis, *D. H. Lawrence: Novelist* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1956). The date of the publication is very crucial here, for the New York edition of this book was published in May, 1956, exactly when Quintero's production was being presented. If it was published just before the production, it was highly likely that Quintero had been well acquainted with Lawrence's philosophy of life through Leavis's famous criticism. Anyway, further research is necessary to clarify their relationship.

<sup>14</sup> Brooks Atkinson, "Theater: O'Neill Tragedy Revived: 'The Iceman Cometh' to Circle in Square," *New York Times* May 9 1956.

<sup>15</sup> McDonough 26.

<sup>16</sup> McDonough 27.

<sup>17</sup> Quintero 157.

<sup>18</sup> George Oppenheimer, "On Stage," *Newsday* May 25 1956.

<sup>19</sup> Quintero 160-161.

<sup>20</sup> Quintero 168.

<sup>21</sup> McDonough 37.

<sup>22</sup> Stark Young, "O'Neill and Rostand," *New Republic* October 21 1946.

<sup>23</sup> See for the critical responses to the premiere of *The Iceman Cometh* in 1946, Louis

Sheaffer, *O'Neill: Son and Artist* (Boston: Little, Brown & Company, 1973) 582-586 and Gary A. Vena, *Eugene O'Neill's "The Iceman Cometh": A Reconstruction of the 1946 Theatre Guild Production* (Ann Arbor, MI: University Microfilms International, 1984) 273-291 and 335-350.

<sup>24</sup> Vena 338.

<sup>25</sup> Vena 234.

<sup>26</sup> Sheaffer 583.

<sup>27</sup> Vena 49-54.

<sup>28</sup> Sheaffer 574.

<sup>29</sup> Sheaffer 583.

<sup>30</sup> Brooks Atkinson, "Theater: O'Neill Tragedy Revived: 'The Iceman Cometh' to Circle in Square," *New York Times* May 9 1956.

<sup>31</sup> See Francis Fergusson, "Melodramatist," *Eugene O'Neill and His Plays*, eds., Oscar Cargill and et. all (1930; New York: New York UP, 1961) 271-282.

<sup>32</sup> See John Henry Raleigh, "Eugene O'Neill and The Escape From the Château d'If," *O'Neill: A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed., John Gassner (Englewood Cliffs, N. J.: Prentice-Hall, 1964) 7-22.

<sup>33</sup> Michael Manheim, "The Transcendence of Melodrama in O'Neill's *The Iceman Cometh*," *Critical Essays on Eugene O'Neill*, ed., James J. Martine (Boston: G. K. Hall, 1984) 145.

<sup>34</sup> José Quintero, "Postscript to a Journey," *Theatre Arts* 41 (1957): 27-29.

<sup>35</sup> Bogard 415.

<sup>36</sup> Jackson R. Bryer ed., "*The Theatre We Worked For*": *The Letters of Eugene O'Neill to Kenneth Macgowan* (New Haven: Yale University, 1982) 257.

<sup>37</sup> Barrett Clark, interview with O'Neill in March 1943, *Twentieth Century Interpretations of The Iceman Cometh*, ed., John Henry Raleigh (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1968) 20. No further data was given.

<sup>38</sup> Eric Bentley, "Trying to Like O'Neill," *Eugene O'Neill and His Plays*, eds. Oscar Cargill and et. al. (1952; New York: New York UP, 1961) 335.

<sup>39</sup> Bentley 339-340.