

Provincetown: Where America and its Drama Begin

by Con Chapman

Provincetown is the town on the outermost point of Cape Cod, and while a cartographer might argue the point, by leading into the Atlantic with its chin it is where America begins. It is also the place where, nearly a century ago, a little band of vacationing artistic types turned the tide of American drama away from a handed-down formalism towards a freer, looser style that more accurately reflected the rhythms of everyday speech and themes drawn from life as it was then lived.

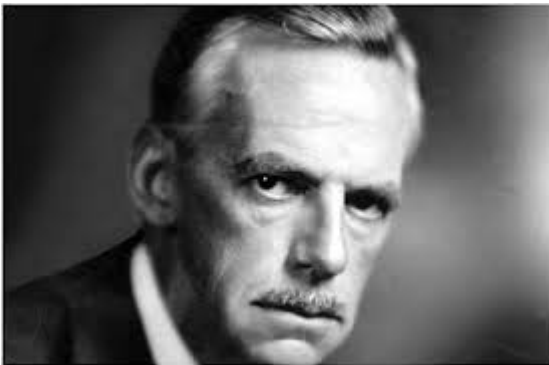
The first performance of the Provincetown Players had been scheduled as a social event in the home of Susan Glaspell, a playwright; two sets were constructed, one facing the ocean, one opening into her living room. When interested friends and neighbors who had heard of a prior staged reading at Glaspell's house promised to swell the crowd beyond its limited capacity, the performance was moved to a rickety building on a wharf.



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The Provincetown Players performing Eugene O'Neill's "Bound East for Cardiff."

That humble inaugural was a success, and members of the group staged two more plays on the wharf before returning to Greenwich Village that fall. Enthusiasm for the experiment in summer theatre grew over the winter, and the next year newcomers joined the group, including Eugene O'Neill.



Eugene O'Neill: Notice how his eyes follow you when you start to click on another post.

O'Neill is remembered today as a troubled, brooding artist, an image that is not dispelled by the many glowering poses he struck in photographs, but he had grown up in the theatre and was a hustler for the business of himself as well. Far from a chance

vacation encounter on the Cape, O'Neill had heard of the Players and came to Provincetown with the express intent of persuading them to perform his plays.

The Players rejected O'Neill's work at first, but when they agreed to hear him read *Bound East for Cardiff*, they knew, as Glaspell later wrote, what their group was for. The play has a simple plot: a dying sailor talks in a crude, poetic tongue to one of his ship-mates as the work of sailing in a storm goes on around him.

"If you folks would hurry up and finish your pizza, we could get the show started."

From such humble beginnings are artistic careers launched. In the meantime, communities are enriched by artists willing to cast their bread upon the water for nothing in the hope that it will be returned to them after many days.

Humble beginnings and casting bread--or at least pizza crust--are two subjects I know something about as a not-yet-successful playwright. If you're a musician you can stand on a street corner and play for change tossed into your guitar case. As a playwright, you need people, which does not, *contra* Barbra Streisand, make you the luckiest person in the world.



Streisand

If you want to see your work performed, you have to find people to play your characters, so you go wherever there are actors willing to give tongue to your words. Writers tend not to be "people persons," so the task is intrinsically harder for those most in need of performing it.

Hockeyus Daddyus Americanus

I've had plays performed in real theatres--including one in New York with head shots of notable alumni such as Dustin Hoffman on

the walls--but also in former warehouses and church basements. In what surely was the nadir of my theatre career, I had a play about a hockey dad and his son performed in a pizza parlor in Salem, Mass., the place where they burned the witches. Since the place was normally filled with hockey dads, for once I didn't have to scrounge for extras.



The Ho Chi Minh gas tank by nun-artist Corita, Southeast Expressway, Boston

I don't take my better half along to these lesser venues; it would confirm her view that I'm wasting my time starting my assault on the capitals of culture from the provinces, like Ho Chi Minh making his way through the dramatic jungle to the Broadway of Saigon. But starting next weekend, I can say that I'm having a play performed where O'Neill's characters first came to life.



On November 5, 6, 7 and 14th you can see my play, *The Uncle Binky Show*, at The Provincetown Theatre. *Binky* combines two elements that I have always found to be simultaneously disturbing and entertaining: ventriloquism, and adult kids show hosts.

I admit, it's not *A Long Day's Journey Into Night*. On the other hand, name one Eugene O'Neill play that includes a ventriloquist's dummy.

