

PROGRAM NOTE

The four one-act plays which constitute the S.S. Glencairn cycle were among the earliest dramatic efforts of Eugene Gladstone O'Neill (1888-1953). The first American to achieve international stature as a dramatist, O'Neill was awarded during his career three Pulitzer Prizes--for Beyond the Horizon (1920), Anna Christie (1921), and Strange Interlude (1928). In 1956, he received the Prize posthumously, for Long Day's Journey Into Night. One measure of his international stature was the award in 1936 of the Nobel Prize for Literature. He is the only American dramatist to be so honored.

He wrote during his career an exceptional canon of plays, including works of "epic" scope such as Marco Millions (1928), a play based on the travels of the Italian adventurer; Lazarus Laughed (1928), a biblical epic; Strange Interlude (1928), a nine-act drama tracing the personal history of a modern American woman over twenty-five years; and Mourning Becomes Electra (1931), a trilogy based on the Oresteia of Aeschylus, but set in New England in the aftermath of the Civil War. His most ambitious effort, however, was never finished. This was a projected eleven-play cycle on American history, entitled "A Tale of Possessors Self-Dispossessed" (1935-1942), a work which he intended to trace the fortunes of an American family for over 150 years, from the Revolution to the Great Depression.

In the earliest years of his career, he concentrated on works of more limited scope, dramatic vignettes in which he tested his capacity to reveal character through setting and language. Of the short plays written during this first period of his career--after his discharge from a sanitarium in 1913 with an arrested case of tuberculosis and prior to his first major Broadway success with Beyond the Horizon in 1920--the four dramatic episodes featuring the sailors from the fictional tramp steamer S.S. Glencairn have often been judged the most significant to his development as a writer for the theatre.

These works are based upon O'Neill's experiences as a seaman during the period between 1910 and 1912--on the square-rigged Norwegian barque Charles Racine, the British tramp steamer Ikalis and the passenger ship S.S. New York. O'Neill found the people he met in the forecastles of these ships to be endowed with a kind of tragic sensibility, brought about by their prolonged contact with what the playwright regarded as the fateful presence of the sea. He wrote of the sea as representing the "impelling, inscrutable forces behind life which it is my ambition to at least faintly shadow at their work in my plays."

In the four plays of the Glencairn cycle, O'Neill sought to endow commonplace characters with a tragic significance born of contact with the sea. His achievement in these plays derives from his willingness to attribute to the lowly seamen of the Glencairn--characters who in earlier American plays, would have been treated as comic figures--a capacity for tragic insight into the nature of their own sufferings and those of others. He succeeded in these "tragic vignettes" in setting his personal course as a writer, a course which would in time reshape the history of the American stage.