

O'Neill's *Ah, Wilderness!*

The original production of *Ah, Wilderness!*, brought together two of the most significant figures in American theater history : Eugene O'Neill and George M. Cohan. Cohan played the role of Nat Miller, a character based on a newspaper editor O'Neill worked for as a cub reporter. In an interview shortly before the play opened, O'Neill said,

"I cannot overemphasize how delighted I am at having Mr. Cohan in a play of mine at last. I think he likes the comedy, too. But he did tell me that one of the things that first attracted him to it was the fact that the first act takes place on July 4. I really didn't mean the setting as a shrewd device to lure Mr. Cohan to a part I wanted him for, but I realize now that he was amused at the connection the date has with his own career."

Regarding O'Neill, a few days after the play opened Cohan said,

O'Neill's regular. I've known a lot about him since he's been coming along, but I never met him before. His father and my father were pretty good friends. They practically started the Catholic Actors Guild. O'Neill knows a lot of stories. He knows all the old circus jokes. I picked him for a winner in that first play he had, *Beyond the Horizon*. I knew right away he had the goods. Jeez, he's written a pile of them, hasn't he? Well, if this play doesn't make a hit, I'll take the kid into vaudeville with me. But I come first. It's got to be Cohan and O'Neill. That's *my* game.

Ah, Wilderness! was the hit of the 1933 season, running for 289 performances. It was passed over for the Pulitzer Prize in favor of Sidney Kingsley's forgettable *Men in White*. Had O'Neill won, he would have accumulated five Pulitzers in his career. Shortly after the play closed in New York, a California cast was assembled starring Will Rogers in the role of Nat Miller.

Cohan's success in *Ah, Wilderness!* apparently went to his head and soon he began embellishing his performance with bits of extra business and ad libs. The running time of the show continued to lengthen until it was finally running twenty-five minutes overtime. The Theater Guild sent a note to Cohan asking him to see to it that the curtain came down at eleven o'clock. Cohan responded by sending his valet to the Guild office and warning them that if any member of the management entered the theater while the play was in progress, he would walk off stage. The Guild never interfered, and Cohen continued bringing down the curtain at 11:25.

O'Neill called *Ah, Wilderness!* a "comedy of recollection." As he later explained,

My purpose was to write a play true to the spirit of the American large small-town at the turn of the century. Its quality depended upon atmosphere, sentiment, an exact evocation of the mood of a dead past. To me, the America which was (and is) the real America found its unique expression in such middle-class families as the Millers, among whom so many of my own generation passed from adolescence into manhood.

Upon completing his only comedy, a fit and vigorous O'Neill began making ambitious plans for future projects, which he began outlining in his head and on paper. His greatest plays and darkest despairs lay ahead.

Michael Abbott, director