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O'Neill film captivates SR Valley crowd

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SAN RAMON - The life and times of one of America's greatest playwrights captivated an audience of about 350 people Friday night at a preview of an upcoming Ric Burns documentary on Eugene O'Neill.

The preview was staged in the San Ramon Valley because O'Neill's most acclaimed works were written during his years at Tao House in the Danville foothills from the late 1930s to 1944. Tao House is a national historic site operated by the National Park Service.

Burns, documentary co-authors Arthur and Barbara Gelb, and O'Neill's great-granddaughter actress Kiera Chaplin were on hand to answer questions from the audience after the showing at the AT&T complex of the two-hour documentary. The program will air March 27 as part of the PBS "American Experience" series.

Before the film, Burns told the audience, "This is the most meaningful film I have ever made. I tried to turn the life of O'Neill into a story."

It took Burns and the Gelbs 10 years to make the documentary. Burns shared an anecdote about its creation. He had been called upon to do a 15-minute "vanity" film about the New York Times, but was running afoul of a Times family member, who was trying to run the show.

Gelb, then managing editor of The Times, pulled Burns aside and said, "Let's forget about this and make a film about Eugene O'Neill."

The Gelbs are authors of the best-selling biography, "Eugene O'Neill: Life With Monte Cristo." Their commentary is an integral part of the documentary, which artfully follows the brooding playwright from his unhappy childhood, to his life at sea and final years battling a neurological disease that made handwriting his plays tortuous.

Burns said he worked closely with O'Neill foundation members in Danville, particularly Diane Schinnerer, "who found footage that was invaluable in making the documentary."

After the film, the Gelbs shared some humorous insights into a rare playful side of O'Neill, who was quick with a barb, loved to feed his pet chickens at Tao House and enjoyed listening to his player piano.

An audience member asked Chaplin, who flew from Switzerland for the preview, what she learned from the film.

"I did not know that much about him," she said. "Thank you for doing such a great job. He and my grandmother (Oona O'Neill) were never very close. But Oona adored her father."

Danville Councilwoman Candace Andersen was drawn to the preview because she "is fascinated by O'Neill. He is part of our heritage of Danville. How closely his work paralleled his life."

Tao House docents Marnee Sibley and Margaret Van Siclen thought the preview superb.

"O'Neill was truly a genius. The film affirms the way you feel about him," Sibley said.