

AMERICAN EXPERIENCE™

Eugene O'Neill

A Documentary Film

Directed by Ric Burns

Premieres Monday, March 27, 2006 on PBS (check local listings)

pbs.org/americanexperience

"What I am after is to get an audience to leave the theater with an exultant feeling from seeing somebody on the stage facing life, fighting against the eternal odds, not conquering, but perhaps inevitably being conquered. The individual life is made significant just by the struggle."
Eugene O'Neill

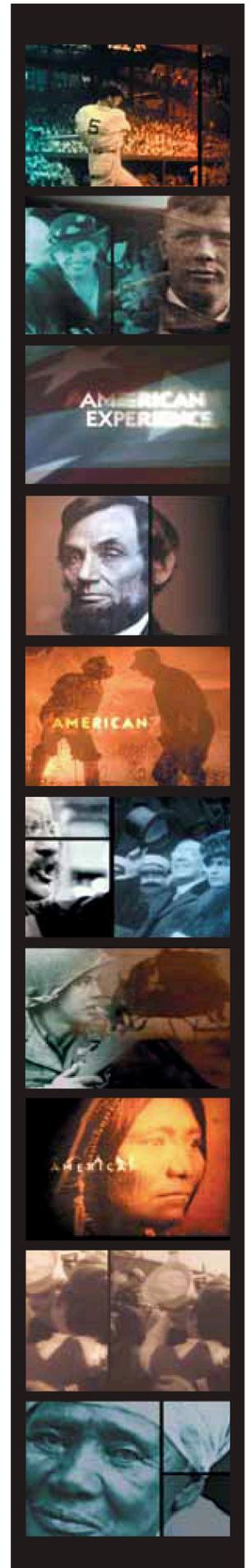
"What does it cost to be an artist? What did it cost to be Eugene O'Neill?" the Tony Award-winning director Lloyd Richards asks in the opening moments of American Experience's Eugene O'Neill. "It cost Eugene O'Neill a mother, a father, a happy marriage, children. It cost the many wives that he tried to have because he didn't know how." And yet from that harrowing experience would come one of the most ground-breaking careers in the history of American theater—and three of the greatest tragic masterpieces ever written by an American.

Premiering Monday, March 27th on PBS's American Experience, Eugene O'Neill takes its viewers on an extraordinary journey into the turbulent life – and ultimately redemptive art – of America's greatest and only Nobel Prize-winning playwright. The two-hour film is directed by Ric Burns, written by Burns in collaboration with acclaimed O'Neill biographers Arthur and Barbara Gelb, and narrated by Christopher Plummer.

More than a biography of one of America's greatest literary geniuses, Eugene O'Neill is a moving meditation on loss and redemption, family and memory. It is also an exploration of the masterpieces O'Neill created only at the very end of his career – The Iceman Cometh and Long Day's Journey Into Night pre-eminent among them – brought to life in scenes performed especially for the production by some of the most gifted actors working in theater today—including Al Pacino, Zoe Caldwell, Christopher Plummer, Liam Neeson and Robert Sean Leonard.

The documentary features interviews with Pulitzer Prize-winning playwright Tony Kushner, Tony Award-winning dramatist John Guare,

more



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Academy Award-winning director Sidney Lumet, director/critic Robert Brustein, and actors Zoe Caldwell and Jason Robards – the latter in one of the last interviews he ever gave.

“This year marks an extraordinary milestone – the fiftieth anniversary of the first Broadway production of *Long Day’s Journey Into Night*,” Burns observes. “It was a watershed moment—reviving O’Neill’s faltering reputation, transforming forever the nature of American theater, and bringing him posthumously an unprecedented fourth Pulitzer Prize.”

In many ways, the story of Eugene O’Neill’s life unfolded more tragically than that of his own darkest plays.

“From his earliest childhood, he used to stare out to sea,” Barbara Gelb observes in the film. “He had no real home. He was a very lonely child, and the only thing that he took any pleasure in or consolation in was reading and staring at the sea.” Indeed, his whole life, as O’Neill himself once remarked, would be a kind of “seeking flight”—a restless search for meaning and identity—at once an escape from and a search for the ghosts of his past.

The brooding youngest son of a celebrated actor who failed to fulfill the early promise of his career and of his long-tormented, drug-addicted wife, O’Neill spent a lifetime plumbing the depths of his own turbulent psyche, leaving a swath of broken lives and personal destruction in his wake.

“I want to be an artist or nothing,” he declared in 1913, not long after a suicide attempt at the age of 24. Propelled by the sheer scope and uncompromising drive of his artistic ambition, he revolutionized the American stage during the 1920’s and 30’s – almost single-handedly giving rise to the first serious dramatic theater in America, with such ground-breaking plays as *The Emperor Jones*, *Anna Christie*, *The Hairy Ape*, *Desire Under the Elms*, *Strange Interlude* and *Mourning Becomes Elektra*—winning three Pulitzer Prizes and the Nobel Prize itself along the way.

Late in his career, on an isolated hillside in California, as his reputation declined and illness threatened to silence him forever, he would wrench from himself three of the greatest plays ever written by an American. He died in a hotel room overlooking the Charles River in Boston without ever seeing the greatest of his plays, *Long Day’s Journey Into Night*, published or performed. Summing up the debt of every American dramatist to follow, the playwright Tennessee Williams once said that Eugene O’Neill “gave birth to the American theater, and died for it.”

“In O’Neill, there’s this absolute, sort of God-ordained mission, which is to keep searching, even if in the process he discovers that there is no God,” playwright Tony Kushner remarks in the film. “It’s a terrifying sort of mandate, but it also I think should be the mandate of all artists, and in a way, of all people.”

CREDITS

A Steeplechase Films production for AMERICAN EXPERIENCE

Directed by
RIC BURNS

Written by ARTHUR GELB & BARBARA GELB
and
RIC BURNS

Edited by
LI-SHIN YU

Produced by
MARILYN NESS &
STEVE RIVO
with
ROBIN ESPINOLA &
MARY RECINE

Executive Producers
RIC BURNS
and
DONALD ROSENFELD

Narrated by
CHRISTOPHER PLUMMER

Actors & Voices
AL PACINO
ZOE CALDWELL
CHRISTOPHER PLUMMER
ROBERT SEAN LEONARD
CALLIE THORNE
VANESSA REDGRAVE
LIAM NEESON
NATASHA RICHARDSON
JASON ROBARDS

Senior Editorial Consultant
& Creative Advisor
JUDY CRICHTON

Senior Producer
KATE ROTH

Cinematography
BUDDY SQUIRES
PETER NELSON
ALLEN MOORE

Music by
BRIAN KEANE

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Any views, findings, conclusions, or recommendations expressed in this program do not necessarily represent those of the National Endowment for the Humanities.

AMERICAN EXPERIENCE is a production of WGBH Boston.
Sharon Grimberg, series producer
Mark Samels, executive producer

ACCESSIBILITY

AMERICAN EXPERIENCE is closed captioned for deaf and hard-of-hearing viewers, and described for people who are blind or visually impaired by the Media Access Group at WGBH. The descriptive narration is available on the SAP channel of stereo TVs and VCRs.

ABOUT AMERICAN EXPERIENCE

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ABOUT WGBH BOSTON

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Press contacts

Daphne B. Noyes

WGBH Boston

617/300-5344

daphne_noyes@wgbh.org

Lauren Prestileo

WGBH Boston

617/300-5329

lauren_prestileo@wgbh.org

Photo contact

Jen Holmes

WGBH Boston

617/300-5388

jen_holmes@wgbh.org