Introduction

Dramatic criticism implies a four-fold approach: literary, psychological, sociological, and scenic. Every play has a theme i.e. it speaks of something. Then, as written by someone it is useful to know as much about the writer as possible. Next, as created in a country, at a certain time, it helps us to know about the circumstances which prompted it. And last, but not least, it is written for the stage.

The most obvious difference between drama as a written text and drama as performed before an audience is the presence or absence of the stage. The stage or visualisation is, thus, the most important presence in our imagination as readers, as it is in the playwright's mind. For the director who interprets and visualises the play the idea is most vivid and pressing. The reader also is seized of its importance. For him the play as enacted on the stage is setting, characters, dialogue, as well as many other things unless, however, he equates drama with poetry or fiction, which are meant for closet study and private enjoyment. But even the German-born "Leserdrama" or closet drama does not deny the validity of the stage: a "Leserdrama" is simply a play written and read with a vague idea of the stage.

Critics of modern drama, on several occasions, show deplorable want of knowledge about the mechanics of the theatre. In the words of John Gassner:

> the acting possibilities are in the play rather than outside for anybody who knows how to look for them in texts for the theatre.

Harley-Garville-Jarker defined the text of a play as "a score-waiting performance" and applied an actor's viewpoint to Shakespeare, paying due attention to visual and sound effects.

However, the 'idea of the stage' is too vague and general a term to be of considerable value in itself unless further defined and clarified. Ronald Peacock in his perspective study The Art of Drama calls drama "an art ... imagery for eye and ear and mind ... a characteristic intertexture". Basic to drama are,
thus, images or pictures, which are highly evocative and whose response is both sensory and emotive. The "intertexture" or interaction of scenic pictures (setting) - the verbal patterns (dialogue), and facial design (acting) - the principal constituents of a play - in its proper base. The interaction in drama, however, need not follow any rigid formulas.

But to ignore the place of Plot (as pointed out by Aristotle in The Poetics) is to conceive of a body without the soul. As the first of the six "essential parts" of drama, according to Aristotle, there could not, in fact, be a tragedy without an action, although without character there could be. That the playwright has to say, to write about, is as indispensable a part of drama as the manner in which or the medium - conventional or iconoclastic - through which he says it. From this point of view drama as art is a fusion of content and form or an interpenetration of matter into manner. To divorce stylisations of decor from textual shifts, which is the contemporary styles of extreme theatricalism climaxed by the theatre of the Absurd or anti-theatre and which is advocated by certain critics (cf. for instance Horace Cutler Gorelik in New Theatre for Old) is a misconception.

Now, this study of Eugene O'Neill (1888-1953) who was nothing but an "artist of the theatre", 7 assesses his contribution to theatrical art as a dramatist. Its hard core is the presence before him of the 'idea of the stage' in all notable drama. It is common knowledge that Eugene O'Neill, the dramatist, was brought up in the wings and he mobilised all the resources of the modern theatre - scenery, lighting properties, costumes, sound effects - to write plays memorable for both bold imaginative conception and execution. Even where there are traces of other models (as for instance in his Expressionism) the final product remains typically O'Neillian.

The theatre that first came to the United States "was a foreign theatre, pure and simple ... imported direct from England" 8 in its plays, players, costumes, sets; the theatre which O'Neill inherited was a commercial theatre - the very antithesis of art. But the theatre which he bequeathed to posterity was as truly
American in content and form as universal in vision. This was the logical consequence of his experimentation:

Experimentalism in the arts always reflects historical conditions, always indicates profound dissatisfaction with established modes, always is a groping towards a new age. Modernist experiment is no longer so young that it has nothing but freaks and abortions to show.

It is universally acknowledged that the "imperatives of troubled mind drove him (O'Neill) to experiment with so many forms and styles" which run the entire gamut from the Realistic to the Absurd and from the patently Naturalistic to the extreme Theatricalist. His experiments may be mere attempts, his works flawed, and his failures great, yet his conception, in each case, was unquestionably bold and new. In his own words:

only through the unattainable does man achieve a hope worth-living and dying for ....

This study tends to probe deep into O'Neill's works to present drama and stagecraft as coordinate parts of one overall art of the theatre. With over two decades' practical experience of play-production and stagecraft as his background, the present writer is fully convinced that if drama "grew directly out of the Dionysian celebrations", then the dramatists, actors, and the audience ask for "no more than participation in the spirit, the emotional exaltation" of these celebrations.

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References

1. According to Hall "every dramatist" expects the critic to put him "on the stage of public opinion". H. H. Hall, Dramaturgical Theories (Cambridge University Press, 1960), p. 73.

2. John Gassner: "Out of three critics (one critic) one but inadequately trained to deal with drama; they are only animals... moreover, if they are American they are likely to have inherited some of the prejudice of the theatre the "best people in America have always had". John Gassner, Theatre at the Crossroads (New York, Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1960), p. 111.


5. Ibid., pp. 11, 25-27, 442.


7. C. M. "The Artist of the Theatre - A Colloquy between Piranesi (Ucelli) and Oliver Jay, "Con, Art, 41, 6 (June 1951), 35-36, 26.


