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Emperor Jones

JAMES O'NEILL, who was a popular American actor of the 1880s, knew which side his bread was buttered on. For the greater part of his acting life he stayed in one money-spinning show, *The Count of Monte Cristo*. It was perhaps not surprising, therefore, that his son had a thirst for adventure. Eugene Gladstone O'Neill, the son, served as a seaman, prospected for gold in Honduras, beachcombed in Buenos Aires, before making his name as the most virile and adventurous playwright in America. When he died in Boston late last year the obituary writers named only Shaw and O'Casey as his peers.

One of Eugene O'Neill's finest plays, *The Emperor Jones*, will be broadcast shortly by National stations. An expressionist work, produced first in 1920, the play centres round a Negro ex-convict named Brutus Jones. By exploiting the superstition of the natives, Jones has, in two years, succeeded in making himself emperor of a West Indian island. In this position he robs and cheats his subjects, intending, when retribution threatens, to flee abroad and live in luxury. By taking swift advantage of an incident in the early part of his "reign," Jones has fostered the belief that he can be killed only by a silver bullet. When the inevitable rebellion comes, therefore, the natives waste no time in melting coins to forge the appropriate weapons. While they are doing so Jones attempts to escape through the jungle. There, lost and without food, he is seen in a series of symbolic scenes in which he relives his own and his race's past. The denouement comes swiftly on silver wings.

Adapted for radio by R. D. Smith, *The Emperor Jones* was produced at the Wellington Studios of the NZBS. The part of Brutus Jones is played by Selwyn Toogood, with Kenneth Firth as Smithers, a Cockney trader who helped him to power. The narrator is Earle Rowell. The play will be heard first from 1XN at 9.30 p.m. on Wednesday, February 10, and later from other National stations.

After his period of knocking about the world, O'Neill joined Professor George P. Baker's famous drama "workshop" at Harvard University, and it was there that his first published play *The Web* was written. From then till 1934, he published nearly 40 plays, including such important ones as *Anna Christie*, *The Emperor Jones*, *Strange Interlude* and *Mourning Becomes Electra*. For these works he received three Pulitzer Prizes and the Nobel Prize for Literature. The latter was the second to be awarded to an American, the first going to Sinclair Lewis. From 1934 till the time of his death, only one new play, *The Iceman Cometh*, was staged. It was generally regarded as disappointing, and one critic said of it: "The characters all start out as a bunch of drunken bums and finish the same." Eugene O'Neill is reported to have left three plays in manuscript when he died. One of them, *Long Day's Journey Into Night*, is thought to be autobiographical, but the playwright's will specifies that it may not be produced until 1978.

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