

"A Play of Old Sorrow"

LONG DAY'S JOURNEY INTO NIGHT, a play by Eugene O'Neill; Jonathan Cape, English price 12/6.

(Reviewed by Bruce Mason)

IN Europe, despite women's suffrage and emancipating labour-saving devices, the vestiges of a patriarchal civilisation remain. Men are still in the saddle, even if their seat is less secure than it was. It is perhaps for this reason, that in the battle of the sexes it is the partner who, nominally at least, is losing who becomes the more interesting to dramatists. In European dramatic literature of this century, the most memorable creations are women. But in America, I am tempted to say that men are not in the saddle emotionally; or if they think they are, they are held up there by the skilful manoeuvrings of their women. For America is the home of formidable, invincible Mom, and of the glorified American girl who will be Mom herself in good time. And where women are dominant we would expect to find the male world the chief preoccupation of native American dramatists. I think this is so. I find evidence in the plays of the two major practising American dramatists, Tennessee Williams and Arthur Miller, and I find it in the master of them both, Eugene O'Neill, whose



EUGENE O'NEILL

"The dimensions of greatness"

posthumously published play, *The Long Day's Journey Into Night*, is the subject of this review.

In Miller's play *Death of a Salesman* and in Williams's *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*, each in my view the author's finest play, there is a crucial scene be-

tween father and son, and the drama in both consists in the enormous amount that they should have in common, yet try as they may, they cannot communicate. Each feels trapped by the unnatural discipline of family life, finds its obligations irksome and destructive, and Pop usually falls into some deep physical and spiritual malaise, Junior fails at everything and drinks like a fish, and Mom is out on a limb, alone with a private sorrow.

This is the basic material of *The Long Day's Journey Into Night*, and as it is pure autobiography, we must assume that its importance to O'Neill is crucial. He describes it in a foreword to his wife when it was completed in 1941, as "a play of old sorrow, written in tears and blood." There are four main characters: James and Mary Tyrone, and their sons Jamie and Edmund, who stands for O'Neill himself. James senior, for whom read James O'Neill, is in this play a still celebrated actor who has reached the fag-end of his career by playing only the part he became identified with twenty years before, as a matinee idol. Mary has led a miserable life with him, a whole generation of it, trailing his company, living in cheap hotels where she bore both her children, and one that died, and now, in middle age, she has taken to drugs to deaden the desperate ache in her life. Jamie is a wastrel drunkard, an indifferent actor in his father's company, and Edmund is a stifled poet with tuberculosis, expected not to live. From the tensions which four such

characters can produce, O'Neill has constructed his tale of old sorrow.

The revelations in this play seem to me too private, and painful, for acceptance in public. Moreover, the technical demands made on actors are enormous. All O'Neill's faults seem here at their grossest. The dialogue is endlessly repetitive, and nearly every speech could be cut in half without loss. There is no lightness in it anywhere, only the swift descent from the relative calm of the first act when Mary returns from the sanatorium to her sodden and abject defeat at the end. Edmund quotes not lines of poetry, but whole poems in the half-mocking, half ham-actor manner which O'Neill reserves for talented young men. Finally, as a piece of dramaturgy, it is deplorable.

Yet even this play shows clearly enough why O'Neill is still the most impressive playwright that America has produced. He knows more than any other modern dramatist the stresses that

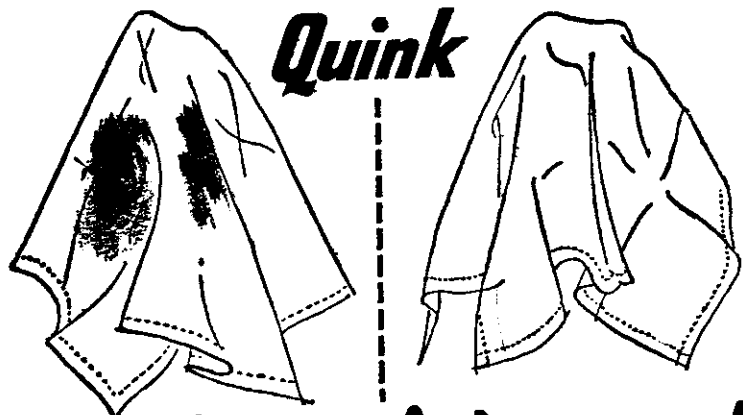
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