Eugene O’Neill in Madrid, 1918-1936

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Eugene O’Neill was well known but practically invisible in Madrid during the 1920s and 1930s. The reception of his work in the Spanish capital was enthusiastic and limited at the same time. In this essay we hope to explain this seeming contradiction as we chart O’Neill’s profile on the Spanish theatrical horizon between the wars.1 Using solely a textual criterion, it would be fair to say that this profile captures only a minor facet of O’Neill’s work. Nevertheless, when the texts staged in Madrid are placed in their theatrical context, O’Neill’s presence there takes on a significance that surpasses first impressions.

In measuring O’Neill’s reception in Madrid, one may divide the historical data into two broad topics, namely textual and performative criticism. The first includes the editions of O’Neill’s works translated into Spanish and published in Madrid as well as their critical reception. The second category takes up the question of how O’Neill’s plays were received by the Spanish critics who saw them performed.

The first edition of an O’Neill play published in Madrid appeared in 1929, when Ricardo Baeza translated The Emperor Jones for Revista de Occidente, the monthly founded by the Spanish philosopher José Ortega y Gasset. The date is significant for being so late and for coinciding with a shift in Madrid’s theatre toward modern currents in staging and repertory. But before that date, O’Neill’s name had appeared in the press associated with theatrical innovations. In 1926, for example, Manuel Pedroso, a mainstay of the weekly Theatre Page of Madrid’s Heraldo de Madrid, listed playwrights who were in the vanguard of modern drama. The first author named was Eugene O’Neill, a “good example of dramatic dynamism” according to Pedroso. Two years later, O’Neill was profiled in the conservative daily ABC, as “the only North
American playwright who has triumphed on European stages" and the creator of the modern drama in the U.S. "With O'Neill," ABC's unnamed informant claimed, "the most vigorous figure in the theatre of this decade, U.S. drama is beginning to be a factor in the cultural circles of the Western World."

O'Neill's reputation in Madrid, late in the 1920s, was clearly based on a limited knowledge of his dramatic texts reinforced by his fame in the European theatrical press that circulated in Spain. Not until 1929 was a translation offered to the Madrid reading public—The Emperor Jones, mentioned above; and it would be two years more before one of his plays would be produced in the capital. Coinciding with the translation of Jones, Ricardo Baeza published, in the same review, Revista de Occidente, an extensive essay on O'Neill that set the critical issues by which the playwright would be judged up to the outbreak of the Civil War in 1936. That essay also became the introduction to the only volume of O'Neill's plays published in Madrid during the period. Besides The Emperor Jones, it contained Before Breakfast, both works having been translated directly from English by Baeza.

In his critical introduction to O'Neill's work (up to 1929), Baeza noted three currents that fed his plays: the rise of groups, like the Theatre Guild, that offered an alternative to the capitalist structure of the theatre industry; the efforts of municipal groups, like the Provincetown Players, to popularize theatre in the United States; and the influence of university seminars and departments of theatrical arts, notably those at Harvard, Yale and Princeton. As a consequence of these activities, all of which shaped O'Neill's career, puritanical morality lost some of its hold on the American stage, according to Baeza, and literature was restored to the theatre.

As for the plays themselves, Baeza examined each in turn, finding in the early one-act plays a tendency that would shape O'Neill's oeuvre throughout the 1920s. This development was a shift from men and women with "primitive, elemental souls" to studies in human, and especially sexual, psychology; and a theatrical naturalism that gradually gave way to "intece poetic sentiment" (40) and symbolist staging. In the longer works, other concerns stood out: the linkage of personal and collective drama (The Emperor Jones), disaster arising from contravening natural laws and individual destiny (Beyond the Horizon), the duality of the human soul (The Great God Brown), and, beginning with Anna Christie, a struggle to establish a "philosophy of conciliation" (51). Baeza also charted periodic efforts by O'Neill to break with his own work and explore new techniques, as in The Fountain, where his theatre, "until then naturalistic and psychological, becomes poetic and ideological, with the symbolist formula predominate openly" (71). Finally, for this critic Strange Interlude marked the zenith of O'Neill's achievement, representing both a synthesis of his earlier concerns and a major statement of the tragic sense of life.

If Baeza sought to define the major dramatic lines in O'Neill's work for a reading public that had almost none of his texts available in Spanish, José Díaz Fernández enlisted the American playwright in his polemic against mainstream Spanish theatre. Díaz Fernández belonged to the generation of "new Romantics" who sought to turn Spanish letters to social concerns in the 1930s and called for a "rehumanization" of literature in the wake of Ortega y Gasset's earlier celebration of its "dehumanization." In his book El nuevo romanticismo (The New Romanticism), published in 1930, Díaz Fernández argued that the authentic vanguard lay in a theatre of and for the masses. On the theoretical plane, this idea was exemplified by Piscator, whose Political Theater, translated into Spanish, had appeared the year before. On a textual plane, the idea was born out by Eugene O'Neill. Following Baeza, Díaz Fernández situated the American playwright in the current that brought to the stage the problems and discourse of the masses (215-217).

Turning to the plays actually produced, only two found their way to the stage during these years: Anna Christie, winner of the Pulitzer Prize in 1921, was premiered by the Lola Membrives Company in 1931, and Before Breakfast, a one-act monologue, was produced twice in 1934, first by Elvira Moría, and then by the avant-garde group founded by Cipriano Rivas Cherif, the Teatro Escuela de Arte. In the latter productions, Ricardo Baeza's translation was used.

The two plays, and the critical reception accorded them, pose a number of problems for the theatre historian. Why those two plays when others, like The Emperor Jones, were available? Why those companies? What kind of success did the plays have? And what place did they occupy on Madrid's theatrical horizon in the 1930s?

It is no surprise that Anna Christie was the first O'Neill play premiered in Madrid. As Ricardo Baeza noted, the play was the first by O'Neill to "end well, from the audience's point of view" (51), and we can add that the taste of that audience ran decidedly to comedies and dramas that did not challenge audience assumptions. L. Bejarano commented in Ahora that the "redefining ending" was a "climax that swelled the breasts of the audience with satisfaction." But not all the critics were satisfied. Bernardo G. de Cándamo claimed that Anna Christie offered "none of the technical innovations for which O'Neill is known, as in works like The Emperor Jones or Strange Interlude." And according to José de la Cueva, neither the theme of the redeemed prostitute nor the "realism" of the staging offered anything new to a European audience familiar with dramatizations of the topic by Ibsen and
Strindberg. The critic of El Socialista (E.M.A.) disagreed, however, arguing that O’Neill’s play had special meaning in Spain: “In questions of passion and conflicts arising from love, only a few aspects have been dealt with here, while infinitely more remain unexplored.” For this critic, O’Neill’s frank treatment of prostitution and his willingness to set love above morality was a welcome “broadening of Spanish horizons.”

Thematically speaking, Aida Christie was thus a controversial play for Madrid in 1931. It was therefore fitting that Lola Membrives, the Argentine actress who later premiered García Lorca’s Blood Wedding in Buenos Aires, take on the challenge. As Luis Gabaldón observed, she was noted for being on the lookout for “anything in the dramatic arts that offers a new direction.” On the other hand, the staging was received as altogether conventional and even somewhat dated. The insistence on “naturalism” and “realism” in the dressing of the characters, the acting and the mise en scène marked theatrical discourse as anything but new. Only the set for Scene Two, with its symbolic seascape, brought praise for diverging from the esthetics of realism.

The second play, Before Breakfast, was clearly situated in the sphere of the international avant-garde. Its production by Elvira Morla in February 1934, was part of an experimental program in which she offered “monodramas” in the style defined by English actress Ruth Draper. These short pieces involved a single actress who presented only half of a dialogue, allowing the audience to fill in the missing speeches, as if overhearing only one side of a telephone conversation. Rather than a conventional theater, a cinema was chosen for the play’s premiere. The brief performance was prefaced by a lecture in which Cipriano Rivas Cherif explained the notion of “monodrama,” a practice he had followed in other avant-garde productions in the middle 1920s (A.M.A. 26).

In March, 1934 – just a month later – Rivas Cherif took the play to his own Actor’s Studio Theatre (Teatro Escuela de Arte), where Anamor Reyes won praise for her solo work during three performances. The play received little attention, but Juan Chabás’s review in Luz is indicative of the response it provoked in those who followed the experimental productions of the Teatro Escuela de Arte, perhaps the most important contribution to the European avant-garde by a Spanish director. Identifying Before Breakfast as a “synthetic drama in one act” and describing it as a “small domestic tragedy, bitter and hard, that culminates in the pathetic violence of a suicide,” Chabás stated that “within this difficult dramatic genre, O’Neill’s play is perfect.” Once again the staging drew on realist codes, but the openness of means in O’Neill’s discourse was seen as a challenge to a young actress willing to break away from conventional acting practices.

To sum up, it is evident that the Madrid press habitually placed O’Neill in the same league with Shaw, Pirandello, Lenormand, Evernoff and Kaiser. The relatively minor presence of his plays in Madrid’s theaters was significant nonetheless for their being received, or associated with, experimental trends in Spain’s modern theater. Moral controversy, a challenge to the conventional repertory, an author prized by avant-garde theater groups, and a playwright who spoke forcefully of human passions and love: this constituted O’Neill’s profile in Madrid during the 1920s and 1930s.

NOTES

1. The data for this study are taken from the research project, “Historia del teatro madrileño entre 1900-1936: Texto y representación” (A History of the Madrid Stage between 1900 and 1936: Text and Performance) co-directed by Dru Dougherty and María Paola Vilches de Frutos and financed by the Dirección General de Investigación Científica y Técnica of Spain’s Ministerio de Educación y Ciencia. All translations are our own.


3. This emphasis reappeared later during Spain’s Civil War, as confirmed by Manuel Anez (Dougherty and Vilches, 1992, p. 422).

4. Translated by Isabel Oyarzabal de Palencia, the play opened on January 20, 1931. Lola Membrives, the head of the company, was in the lead role with Ricardo Puga taking the part of Ana’s father. Luis Rosas was cast as the sailor Mat, and Anamor Astorg excelled as the drunken prostitute. Sets were by Fernando Mignoni. The drama in 4 acts ran for 12 days in the Teatro Fontalba.

5. The Elvira Morla Company premiered the play on February 25, 1934, with a single performance in the Pleyel Cinema.

6. Directed by Rivas Cherif, the play opened on March 5, 1934, in the State-owned María Guerrero Theater. Anamor Reyes, as Mrs. Rowland, gave three performances of the one-act drama.
7. Gallén notes that *Anna Christie* was also the first O'Neill play premiered in Barcelona, on May 17, 1924.

8. For a full checklist of plays produced in Madrid between 1918 and 1926, see our study *La escena madrileña entre 1918-1926: Análisis y documentación*. The "hits" for the period are discussed on pp. 85-112. Documentation for all plays produced in Madrid between 1926 and 1931 will appear soon in volume two of the study.

9. Melchor Fernández Almagro, theatre critic for *La Voz*, situated Anna in the romantic tradition of the "esthetic salvation of the fallen woman" and, in contrast to José de la Cueva, found one original note in O'Neill's rendering of the cliché: "What O'Neill brings to the theme is his personal focus, discernible in the diffuse action of a character who never utters a word but is always on stage: the sea." Guillermo Díaz Plaja found the play more successful than its cinematic adaptation (directed by Clarence Brown with Greta Garbo in the leading role), which had recently opened in Madrid, but unlike Fernández Almagro, remembered precedents for O'Neill's use of the sea in Víldar's *Paquebot Temptaci*ón and Simon Gantillon's *Maya*.

10. For Luis Gabaldón, writing in the conservative *ABC*, the moral question was whether one could overlook the heroine's past so blithely: "In *Anna Christie* it is impossible to witness the revealing force of instinct and its disregard for moral discipline without acquiring a certain skepticism regarding virtue... Should the past make us stop and cast doubt on a new life that is beginning?" Enrique Díez-Canedo, theatre critic for *El Sol*, stated that the question was not morality but the protagonist's self-revelation: "This is not the play of a corrupted woman but of the obscure soul that discovers its revelation in the sea."

11. This is supported by photographs of the sets published in *Blanco y Negro* (Madrid), No. 2071 (25 Jan. 1931): 63.

12. We have confirmed reviews only in *Heraldo de Madrid*, *El Socialista*, *La Voz* and *Luz*.


14. See Marroquin 148, and Olmedilla's interview with Henri-René Lenormand, in which the French playwright named Pirandello and O'Neill as the most significant authors writing for the stage in the late 1920s.

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**WORKS CITED**


Baeza, Ricardo. "El teatro de Eugenio O'Neill." *Revista de Occidente*, Vol. XXIV, No. LXXI (May 1929): 189-234. The essay was reprinted soon after, as the introduction to Baeza's translation of The Emperor Jones and Before Breakfast listed below (pp. 9-93).


Rivas, Enrique de, Juan Aguilera Sastre and Manuel Aznar Soler, eds. Cipriano Rivas Cherif: Retrato de una utopía. El Público (Madrid), Cuaderno No. 42 (December 1989).
