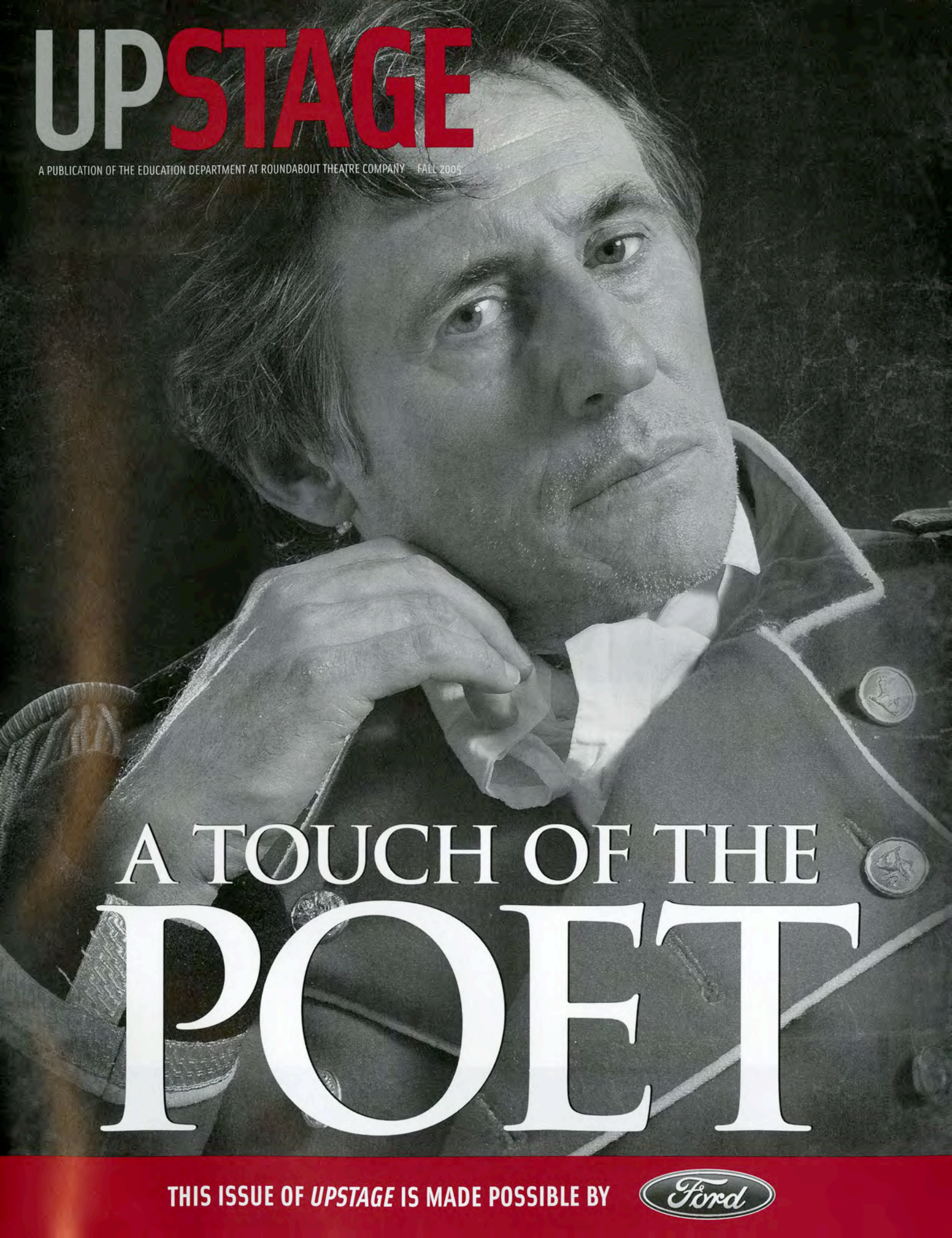


# UPSTAGE

A PUBLICATION OF THE EDUCATION DEPARTMENT AT ROUNABOUT THEATRE COMPANY FALL 2005



# A TOUCH OF THE POET

THIS ISSUE OF *UPSTAGE* IS MADE POSSIBLE BY



**I have not loved the World, nor the World me;  
I have not flattered its rank breath, nor bowed  
To its idolatries a patient knee,  
Nor coined my cheek to smiles, - nor cried aloud  
In worship of an echo: in the crowd  
They could not deem me one of such - I stood  
Among them, but not of them...**

Lord Byron

*Childe Harold's Pilgrimage, Canto III, Stanza 113*

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**COVER:** Artwork for the Roundabout Theatre Company production of *A Touch of the Poet* Photo by Jean-Marie Guyaux

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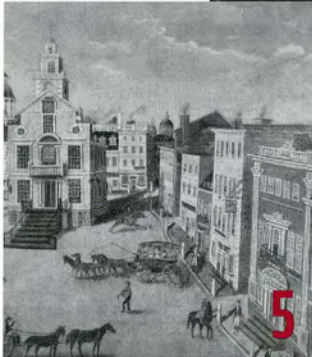
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# A TOUCH OF THE POET



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**3** THE DIRECTOR:  
DOUG HUGHES



**5** THE WORLD OF THE PLAY:  
BOSTON, 1828

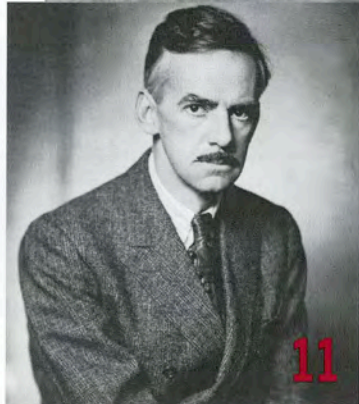


**7** THE ACTRESS:  
EMILY BERGL

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SANTO LOQUASTO



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EUGENE O'NEILL



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# DIRECTING WITH A POET'S TOUCH

## UPSTAGE DISCUSSES A TOUCH OF THE POET WITH DIRECTOR DOUG HUGHES

In *A Touch of the Poet*, Eugene O'Neill introduces us to a family who holds strong ideas about themselves and the world. Set in the dining room of a rundown tavern in a village a few miles from Boston on July 27, 1828, *A Touch of the Poet* tells the story of the final demise of Cornelius (Con) Melody, a former decorated major who fought against Napoleon's forces at the Battle of Talavera nineteen years prior. It is on this day in 1828 that the ideals and self-identity of the members of this family will be greatly challenged.

### Why have you chosen to do this play now?

Well, I believe that it is a great play that people don't really know, from a great playwright. I look at the play as this phenomenal notation of games being played, huge problems being denied, and love just being turned upside down but still as ardent as it was at its inception. It is an incredibly dynamic demonstration of how we need masks, we need lies, we need versions of ourselves that make us heroes. Everybody needs that. That, to me, is the meaning of *A Touch of the Poet*. We all require that touch of the poet to make life bearable, to make life comprehensible. And, I believe Con Melody exemplifies the 'touch of the poet,' I believe Simon, who we never meet, upstairs, does as well. I think everybody in the play recognizes the fact we need to be made noble, by poetry, whatever poetry means, whether it's a love affair, whether it is one's strategy to escape from the life one is living, or whether it is the heroic stance that sets one apart from the crowd. The play zeros in on that 'touch of the poet' that we all require. As much as we say we'd like to live without illusion, we've got to have our illusions!

### What are some of the challenges you anticipate in directing this production?

Well, I feel as though I spent many mornings doing my dramaturgical pushups to prepare for rehearsals. I am humbled by the ambition of the play, the breadth of the play, the courage that's in the play. There's an eagerness to make sure the play doesn't become generalized, that it does not become about rhetoric, which I think, with the Irish politics of it all, is a deadly temptation. I want the production to feel as though this language is the patois, the everyday speech of these people. The family is trying to get something back from each other. They use language as weapons. They use language as smoke-screens. They use language as a defense. I want a production that doesn't feel "sung" and I think that it will take a lot of imaginative work on the actors' parts.

### There's a lot of passion in the triangular relationship between the mother, the father and the daughter.

It's a play in which a father denies his daughter in front of company, says, 'oh that's the waitress, that's not my daughter'—denies his parenthood because of the horrible class anxiety, the anxiety of that status. That's something that people don't talk enough about in this country, how crippled we are by status. This is also a play in which a wife who dearly loves her husband comes to soothe his ego after his advances have been rejected by another woman. I mean, these are wild events and it's important to me that we reveal how wild they are and how necessary it is for the characters to cover their tracks, for them to deny what's really happening.

**Do you think that's defined as suffering?**

I sure do. And, somehow the sense of the inadequacy of self that everybody feels. So much of life is constructed around that horrible aching feeling of inadequacy and so much false behavior is generated from it.

**Do you see pride as integral to this play?**

Oh, it's a huge deal. It's rooted in the world of the play, Boston 1828. I mean, what was Andrew Jackson about? He was the son of an Irish immigrant and the Irish who were treated horribly, contemptuously, by those who considered themselves the "landed" citizens of America, the Yankee-English descendants. The Irish loved the idea that Jackson, of Irish descent, would ascend to the highest office in the USA and thereby somehow legitimize them. He was the first American president not to come from the landed, Yankee aristocracy like Jefferson, Adams, Washington. There is this big democratic tussle that's going on along with the idea that there is very little love and justice in a world where power and position are made the supreme goal. That's the world we're living in. And that's the world Con is living in.

**And how about you, do you consider yourself a poet?**

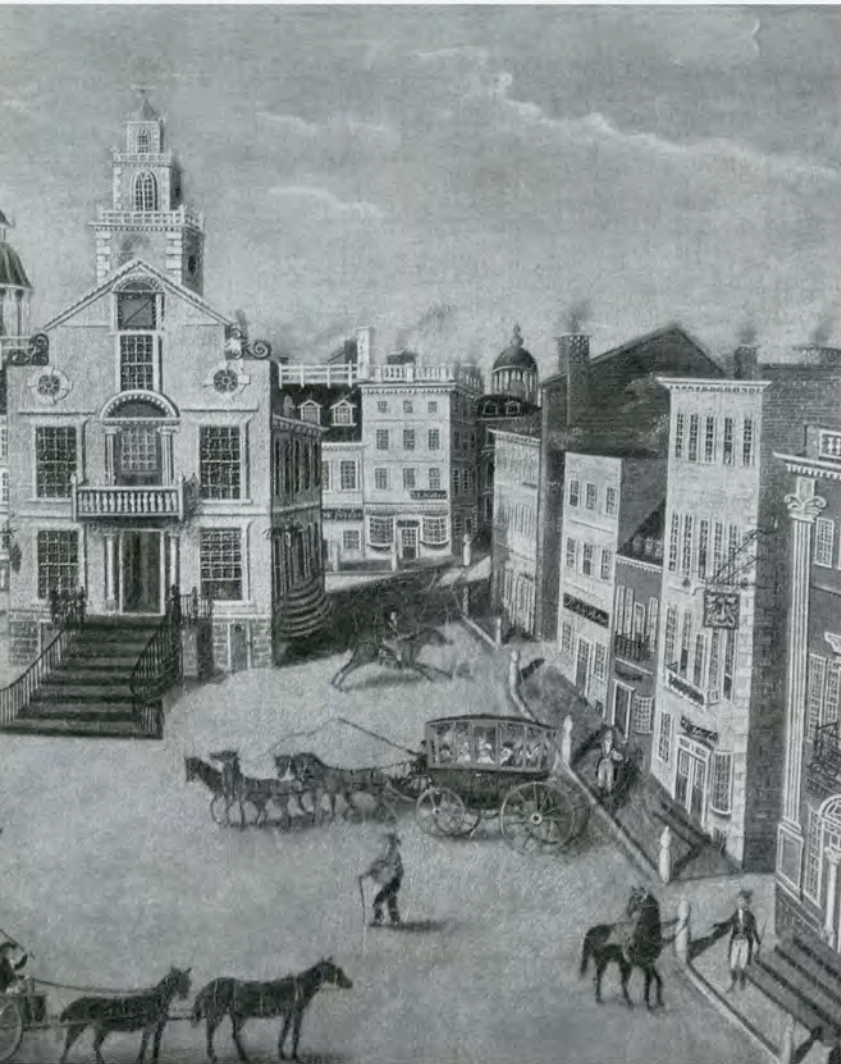
Well, as I said earlier, I think that all of us have a requirement for a touch of the poet. Life has to be made extra heroic, extra vivid, extra noble, extra sharp – the wonder of it. We all have to find ways of getting at the wonder, even if it's the wonder of our sorrow, a heroic way of conceiving our miserable luck in life, or the glorious significance of the love we feel for someone. We need poetry, and you can find poetry everywhere; so in that sense, I think all human beings have a touch of the poet and I qualify that way. ●

## WITH YOUR VOICE

### BEFORE YOU SEE THE SHOW, THINK ABOUT:

- In this interview, Doug Hughes tells us how he defines "a touch of the poet." Name a person in your life who has "a touch of a poet," as you would define it.

# A TOUCH OF THEIR WORLD

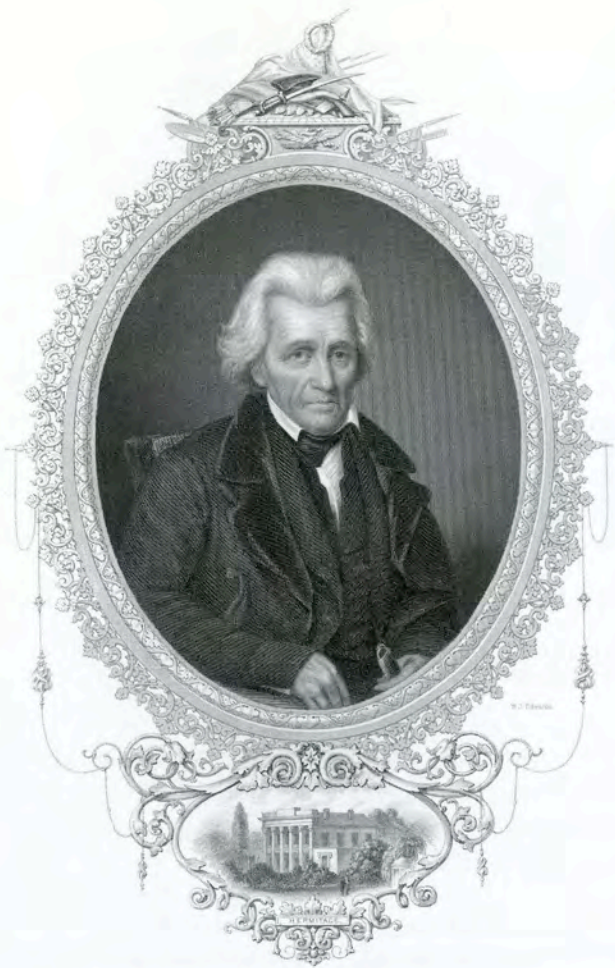


Boston, 1801

## **Boston 1828**

The United States between the Revolutionary and Civil Wars was a fascinating place. Technology spread and expansion out west continued at booming speed, the population grew at astonishing rates, and the economy skyrocketed.

- Most nineteenth century Irish immigrants worked as laborers, expanding railroads and working in textile factories. Many “landed people” (first generation Americans mainly of British extraction) looked down upon these new immigrants, citing them as “inferior” and “ignorant,” and discriminating against their Catholic belief system.
- The term Yankee was used to describe landed people of New England in the nineteenth century.
- The class structure in the North in the 1820’s were very defined, despite the democratic spread across the region. The highest class consisted of rich, white, Landed people; on the bottom were newly freed slaves. New immigrants, like the Irish, were placed on various levels. Those who were able to establish themselves as prominent businessmen were regarded more highly than those who labored on the railroads.
- In 1828, Andrew Jackson was elected as the seventh President of the United States. Andrew Jackson was a war veteran and the son of Irish immigrants. The only region of the United States that did not strongly support his campaign was “Yankee” New England. Jackson’s presidency was associated with populist democracy, westward expansion, and a strengthened federal government.
- Slavery was abolished in Massachusetts in 1783; it was the first state to do so. Despite this, anti-black sentiment was still felt throughout the region.



Andrew Jackson, Seventh President  
of the United States, 1829-1837

### Ireland and Immigration

- In the 12th century Pope Adrian IV granted overlordship of Ireland to Henry II of England. With this invasion began an English-Irish struggle that continued for nearly 800 years. Ireland remained largely Catholic in direct conflict with England's protestant monarchy. The Act of Union joined Ireland with the Kingdom of Great Britain in 1801. In 1921, the island was split into the independent Irish Free State (now Ireland) and Northern Ireland, which is still part of Great Britain.
- Loss of land rights, limitations in agricultural advancements, religious persecution and the hope of new opportunities were all reasons that led Irish citizens to immigrate to the United States. In 1828, when the play is set, only a few hundred Irish were immigrating to Boston a year. In the 1840's, when England's politics and agricultural policies over Ireland shifted, over 100,000 Irish immigrated to Boston with thousands more landing on the shores of New York City.

### Con's Past Glories

- The Battle of Talavera took place during The Peninsular War (1808-1814). The play takes place on the anniversary of Con fighting at Talavera. The French, led by Napoleon Bonaparte (French military leader from 1786-1815), attacked Spain, Portugal, and Britain, in an attempt to impose the Continental System: a plan to stop all shipping of British goods into Europe. ●



Newburyport, MA, 1800

# PLAYING THE POETRY

BEFORE REHEARSALS BEGAN, *UPSTAGE* DISCUSSED  
A TOUCH OF THE POET WITH ACTRESS EMILY BERGL



**When you first read the play, how did it affect you?**

I first read the play when I was 19 years old. I was sitting in my library in college and I actually ended up reading it straight through to the end in one sitting. I was embarrassed because I was in the middle of the library and I burst into tears. I was really moved.

**With rehearsals starting next week, how do you plan to enter the world of the play?**

For this play, I decided that the first thing I would do is read all of Eugene O'Neill's work. It was extremely helpful because I feel that his view on the world and the human condition remains so relevant. There is a great quote from *More Stately Mansions*, the sequel to *A Touch of the Poet*, that sums things up: 'I've always found the means becomes the end, and the end is always oneself.'

**Do you think that quote provides insight to Sara's journey in this play?**

Yes, I do. I think Eugene O'Neill believed a lot in accountability. The fascinating thing about Sara and her father is that he operates in a kind of dream world of his own making, and Sara isn't able to realize her own fascination with that dream world, or even how much she has come to believe in it. A large part of O'Neill's work is about facing the truth. I think that when Sara forces her father to face his truth, she is forced to face her own truth.

**What's on your mind as you plan to start rehearsals?**

There is a scene in which Sara reveals that she really understands what love is now. I just have a lot of questions about that scene because I think that there might be more than what Sara says on the surface.

She says a lot of dreamy, wonderful things about love, but I wonder, what was her experience upstairs with Simon? And what exactly has she learned about love and how exactly has she changed?

**Tell a bit about your career path and the choices you have made. Do you have any advice for students who may want a career in theatre?**

I was always the little kid putting on plays in the living room, probably a bit too much. I think that my audience got a little tired of me. Which is funny, because now I'm not really the type who likes to get up and sing at a party. But I always had a natural interest and inclination and I always acted in school plays. I think one of the most helpful things I did, and I would suggest it for people who are interested in a career in the theatre or acting in general, was that in high school I read a lot of plays and poetry. I think the more you read the more you discover and that means reading plays, great books, books about math or history. I think the more that you are able to understand those words, the more you are able to bring them to life for people.

**Where were you trained?**

I went to a liberal arts college in the middle of Iowa called Grinnell. When I went to college, I decided that I didn't want to go to a conservatory; I wanted a good well-rounded education. Sometimes I would laugh at myself; I'd be taking calculus and thinking, "When will this ever come in handy? I know I'm going to be an actor." But then a few years later I did the play *Proof*. I was playing a math genius. ●



## WITH YOUR VOICE

### WHILE WATCHING THE SHOW, THINK ABOUT:

- Drawing from your own definition of what makes someone a poet, how do you see "a touch of the poet" in the characters Sara, Nora, Con and Simon?
- How does your definition of what makes someone a poet differ from the way the characters live in the world of this play? How is it the same?



# POETIC

## UPSTAGE DISCUSSES A TOUCH OF THE POET

### How did you approach the process of creating the set design for the play?

I had never read or seen the play, but I knew the general gist of it. I read the play and had an instant response to it. To begin the design process, I first collected the details of Studio 54, the text, the budget and the requirements from within the script such as where the entrances and the exits go. If I were to fulfill all of these requirements in the most literal, realistic way, it would be unaffordable for one thing and ultimately less interesting. I initially presented a very rough sketch to the director that illustrated my ideas. I then created a scale model, though I decided that what I had designed thus far was not very interesting, so I just sort of ripped it apart and glued it back together. I felt it was more interesting. And that design is essentially what we wound up with; that's the design that we're executing.

### How do you create the world of the play?

In this case, I thought that minimizing and stripping away unnecessary details might ultimately allow the play to emerge in a way that would perhaps be fresher for the audience. It has a slightly more operatic mood in that the scenery works more sculpturally. By that I mean that the wall and ceiling become a kind of vice that traps the action. Granted, you can provide that feeling in a realistic way as well, but it was more interesting for me to allow the set to be what I consider poetic realism. You take the elements and you distort them slightly in order that they become a more visually exciting piece of stage design.

### You mentioned that you draw design elements from the text. What in particular for this production?

It's set in 1828, which is the Empire period in furniture. The furniture is very classic Early American and simple. There is a mirror that is often referred to in the script. I originally had it on the side wall, so that Con comes down the stairs and looks at himself. As the design shifted, the mirror did too. I have put the fireplace center stage – a cold fireplace on a summer day, and the mirror now hangs above it. It will be a classic early 19th century mirror with sconces bracketed off the sides and maybe an eagle on top.

Boston in the 1800's.



# REALISM

## WITH SET AND COSTUME DESIGNER SANTO LOQUASTO

**Now you also designed the costumes. What happens after you've drawn the rendering? How does it become a garment that someone can wear?**

I start by talking to the director. I show him my sketches, the colors, the fabrics and usually the research from historic references, pictures from movies, all sorts of things. Then when I start to make the costumes, I assemble the fabric swatches in terms of the palette and texture of the show. I look at things I like, things that I know will work, things that I know will do what I want, things that I think are different from what I might normally do. Also I have to think about the costumes in contrast to the set. In case the set seems a little bold, I can balance it with costumes that are as realistic as possible. Once I choose my fabrics, I talk to the people who are going to make the costumes. In this case, it's being made in a shop that I've worked with for years. So when I talk about the subtleties of it, the realism of it, the shop can make its contribution as well. Next I take into account the actor's opinion, their comfort, heat and other issues of practicality. Then I have, in this case, the breakdown and the aging of the clothes to make it really feel as though these people have lived in them for years.

**Can you tell us about the use of fabrics? Is Con a bit of a peacock compared to the rest of them?**

He's in this red and white uniform! The rest of the cast is more earth-born. I talked to Gabriel Byrne and he said, "I thought I might have a green vest," and I did give him a green and black vest. Even though it's summer, the clothes are a little woollier than one would have expected. It wasn't as hot in 1828 as it is in 2005. There are companies who recreate fabrics from the period, who have the patterns, and who duplicate the same soft lightweight cotton. They are authentic reproductions of early 19th century fabrics and they are marvelous though very expensive. ●



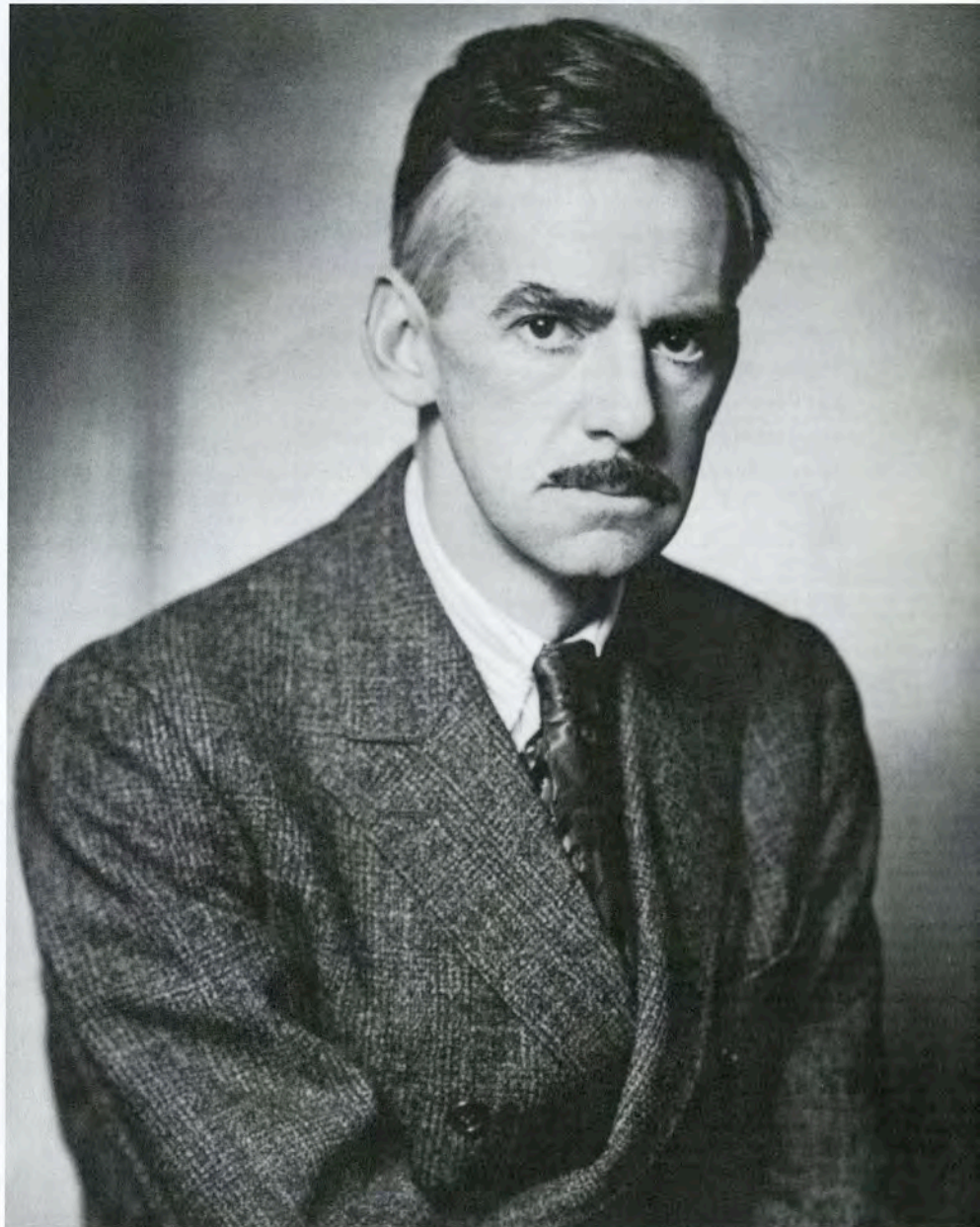
# EUGENE O'NEILL

## AN AMERICAN PLAYWRIGHT

Eugene O'Neill is one of America's premiere twentieth century playwrights. While O'Neill was the son of an Irish immigrant, he was born in America and his plays reflect uniquely American influences. Throughout his plays, we meet characters who struggle to maintain their hopes and aspirations before ultimately tumbling into disillusionment and despair.

Born in New York City on October 16th, 1888, O'Neill spent his early childhood hanging around Broadway theaters; his father, James, was a popular actor. He was well educated in Catholic and boarding schools, but left after finishing just one year at Princeton University. O'Neill married at age 21 and was divorced three years later. O'Neill worked in the theatre as an actor and a stage manager touring the United States and sailed to Honduras and Buenos Aires, Argentina. Through these travels, he came in contact with the sailors, dock workers and outcasts that would populate his plays, the kind of characters the American theatre had heretofore passed over. In December 1912, he contracted tuberculosis (an often fatal respiratory disease) and returned home. During his recovery, he took to reading plays by the classic dramatists. It was then that he decided to become a playwright.

O'Neill's first one-act play was published in 1913, but it was not until 1920 that his first full length play, *Beyond the Horizon*, was produced in New York; impressively, this early work was awarded the Pulitzer Prize for Drama later that year. O'Neill won three additional Pulitzer Prizes for *Anna Christie* (1922),



*Strange Interlude* (1928), and *Long Day's Journey into Night* (1957). He was also awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature — the only American playwright to receive this honor — in 1936. Intended to be the fifth play in an eleven-play cycle, *A Touch of the Poet* was completed in 1942.

At age 54, O'Neill contracted cortical cerebellar atrophy, a debilitating neurodegenerative disease, which forced him to stop writing. In 1952, O'Neill burned nine of the eleven plays from the cycle; they were never published. He died several months later on November 27, 1953, in Boston.

*A Touch of the Poet* premiered in 1958 in Stockholm, Sweden and came to Broadway later that year. ●

## DIRECTOR DOUG HUGHES ON O'NEILL

This is my first time directing O'Neill. I have found in my research that this was a man who needed to write this fascinating body of work in order to write through all his pain. He is a man who understood the contract we make with each other and ourselves simply to get through life and its sorrows.

## ACTRESS EMILY BERGL ON O'NEILL

The wonderful thing about O'Neill is that I think he really understood women and saw them for who they are. It is a rare thing and I think that's what attracts me to this play; Sara and Nora are both such fully realized characters. Sara is not just a daughter or the ingénue; Sara is one of the only ingénues that is also a leading lady; we see the life of a young woman fleshed out. Reading O'Neill again has made me realize how pertinent and how relevant what he writes is, particularly what he writes about relationships between men and women. I think you could set so many of these plays today and you would still be dealing with the same issues.

## WITH YOUR VOICE

### AFTER THE SHOW, THINK ABOUT:

- O'Neill originally called the play you just saw *The Hair of the Dog* before he decided on the title *A Touch of the Poet*. Why do you think the playwright titled this play *A Touch of the Poet*?

# Playing Your Part

BELOW ARE SOME HELPFUL TIPS FOR MAKING YOUR THEATRE-GOING EXPERIENCE MORE ENJOYABLE.

## TICKET POLICY

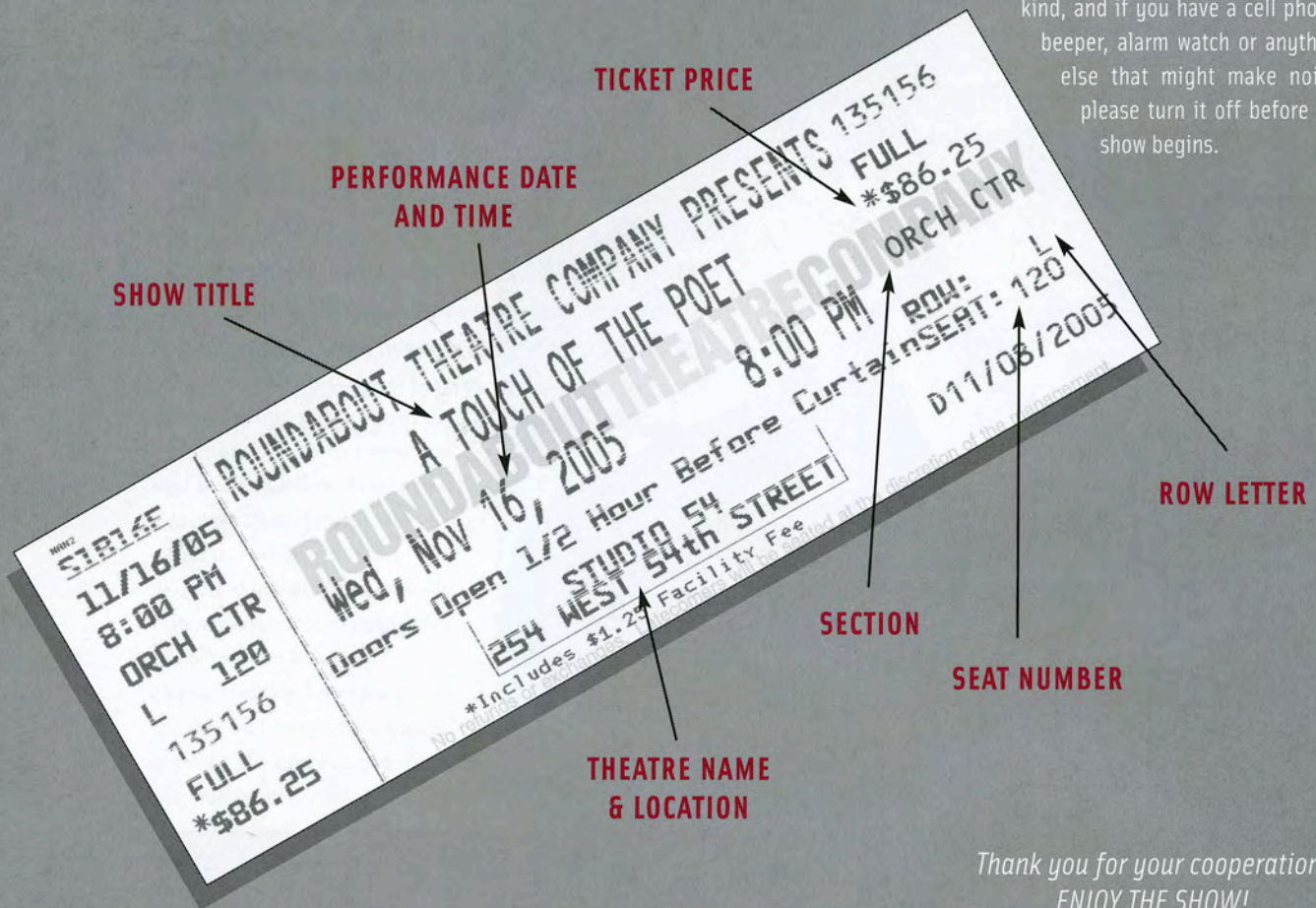
As a student participant in *Page to Stage*, *Producing Partners* or *Theatre Access*, you will receive a discounted ticket to the show from your teacher on the day of the performance. You will notice that the ticket indicates the section, row and number of your assigned seat. When you show your ticket to the usher inside the theatre, he or she will show you where your seat is located. These tickets are not transferable and you must sit in the seat assigned to you.

## PROGRAMS

All the theatre patrons are provided with a program that includes information about the people who put the production together. In the "Who's Who" section, for example, you can read about the actors' roles in other plays and films, perhaps some you have already seen.

## AUDIENCE ETIQUETTE

As you watch the show please remember that the biggest difference between live theatre and a film is that the actors can see you and hear you and your behavior can affect their performance. They appreciate your applause and laughter, but can be easily distracted by people talking or getting up in the middle of the show. So please save your comments or need to use the restroom for intermission. Also, there is no food permitted in the theatre, no picture taking or recording of any kind, and if you have a cell phone, beeper, alarm watch or anything else that might make noise, please turn it off before the show begins.



Thank you for your cooperation.  
ENJOY THE SHOW!

## WITH YOUR VOICE

### AFTER THE SHOW, SHARE YOUR VIEWS:

- O'Neill wrote *A Touch of a Poet* as one play in a cycle of plays. The theme of the play cycle was, "What will it profit a man if he gain the whole world but lose his own soul?" How does this question relate to your world? Create a visual collage that reflects how it is present in contemporary society. You can pull images from newspapers and magazines.
- Throughout the play many of the characters tell us about their view of the world. How do you think Simon would describe his world? Write a monologue from Simon's perspective about the world and his relationship with Sara.
- Con quotes the poetry of Byron to his reflection in the mirror. Write a poem that expresses Con's true sense of himself based upon the events in the play.

### SEND YOUR WORK TO ROUNDABOUT, AND WE'LL SHARE IT WITH THE ARTISTS WHO CREATED *A TOUCH OF THE POET*.

Mail to: Education Department  
Roundabout Theatre Company  
231 West 39th Street, Suite 1200  
New York, NY 10018

Or e-mail to: [education@roundabouttheatre.org](mailto:education@roundabouttheatre.org)

## TO FIND OUT MORE ABOUT THE WORLD OF THE PLAY, CHECK OUT THE FOLLOWING RESOURCES:

The Eugene O'Neill Society, [www.eoneill.com](http://www.eoneill.com)

The Boston Historical Society and Museum, [www.bostonhistory.org](http://www.bostonhistory.org)

iBoston, [www.iboston.org](http://www.iboston.org)

The National Parks Service, [www.nps.gov/boaf/slaveryinboston.htm](http://www.nps.gov/boaf/slaveryinboston.htm)

The History Place, [www.historyplace.com/worldhistory/famine/before.htm](http://www.historyplace.com/worldhistory/famine/before.htm)

Oracle Thinkquest, [library.thinkquest.org/20619/Irish.html](http://library.thinkquest.org/20619/Irish.html)

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O'Connor, Thomas H. *The Boston Irish; A Political History*. New York: Back Bay Books, 1995.

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