

PHOTOGRAPHS OF O'NEILL AND
HIS PARENTS



1.
Ellen Quinlan O'Neill
circa 1883



2.
James O'Neill
at the time
he met Ellen Quinlan

1921 - the year of production of "Anna Christie", for which O'Neill received his second Pulitzer Prize. The play's popularity disturbed him and he listened carefully as his associates George Jean Nathan, Arthur Hopkins, and the designer, Robert Edmond Jones, spoke of theatrical art, and of new directions the American theatre could take. He met the critic Kenneth Macgowan and formed with him and Jones a producing "Triumvirate" that took over The Provincetown Playhouse and set out to domesticate European methods of stagecraft in a series of plays startlingly revolutionary in their production styles. The playwright who best exemplified Macgowan's prediction of the shape of theatrical things to come was Strindberg, whom O'Neill called "the precursor of all modernity in our theatre". In imitation of Strindberg's major styles, O'Neill wrote quasi-expressionist plays he called "Behind Life" drama, and plays characterized by an intensified realism he called "Supernaturalism". His new image reflected the tastes of the proponents of the Art Theatre as he expounded his theories of theatre to the press and posed for photographs whose carefully arranged backgrounds might have been designed by Jones himself.



1922 a year of turn and change, things dying, things new-born. For the first time, Eugene met his elder son, Eugene, Jr., and was introduced to the handsome actress, Carlotta Monterey. Suddenly, in Los Angeles, his mother died; Jamie, who was with her, despairing at her loss, began to drink again. The train bearing the bodies of the dead mother and drunken brother arrived in New York City the night "The Hairy Ape" opened. His plays prospered, but personal strains told: He drank, sometimes almost uncontrollably, and a nervous tremor manifested itself in his hands. His family gone, he began a restless search for a home, first in Ridgefield, Connecticut, then in Bermuda, where in 1925 his daughter, Dona, was born. Determined effort finally enabled him to stop drinking. Honors came to him: in 1925, a gold medal from The National Institute of Arts and Letters, in 1926, an honorary degree from Yale University. And the plays, in spite of personal tragedies and emotional difficulties, came rapidly - faster, in fact, than the "Triumvirate" could stage them. O'Neill, left with a backlog of unproduced scripts, began to seek a fully professional producing organization.



1927 - the "Triumvirate" disbanded and O'Neill signed with the Theatre Guild in an association that lasted the rest of his life. In Bermuda, the heat, the water-bound world seemed native elements, and he found pleasure in his children who were often there. But there was marital trouble. Returning to New York for rehearsals, O'Neill saw much of Carlotta Monterey. He asked Agnes to divorce him. She refused, and long legal struggle began that made Eugene an Carlotta "copy" and forced them to spend much of their time dodging scandal-sniffing reporters. They left the United States, vowing not to return until they were married. A pursuing press followed them chronicling "mysterious disappearances", private quarrels, illness, and once, even reporting Eugene dead. In 1929, the year "Strange Interlude" won his third Pulitzer Prize, the year of his divorce and of his marriage to Carlotta, he settled in France in a chateau near Tours, where he began to live in the isolation of work that was growing in scale, increasing in depth. What he asked was that Carlotta create a home like a fortress and that she undertake the guardianship of his creative life and join him in his solitude. He asked for sacrifice;

she gave him her life.



1931 - He returned at last to the United States. At Sea Island, Georgia, he built "Casa Genotta" and settled in to work on the long cycle of plays on American historical subjects. There too, with the writing of "Ah, Wilderness!", he began the group of autobiographical plays that would crown his career. Work continued with small interruptions through the 1930's, but his health was failing and at times he was too ill to write. He moved to California and in the hills near San Francisco built Tao House, the last of his stately mansions. In 1936, he won the Nobel Prize for Literature. Eugene, Jr., now a meritorious classical scholar, married in 1931. In 1943, Oona, who had been a well-publicized New York debutante, married Charles Chaplin, a man of her father's age. Despite his distinguished reputation, Eugene turned inward, desperately trying to shut the world away, battling sickness in his solitude, fighting the tremor that concentrated in his hands and threatened to destroy the one reality in his life, his writing. The year of Oona's marriage, he fell gravely ill and was bed-ridden for six months. The world darkened, but some light emerged.

In 1945, Shane married, and his son, born the next year, was named Eugene III.



1946 - The good years were gone. Eugene, Jr., was divorced and Shane's baby, two months old, smothered in his crib. Two years earlier, Eugene had sold Tao House and returned to New York City. Now, his health comparatively stable, he busied himself with rehearsals of "The Iceman Cometh". The tremor, however, persisted and writing was impossible. He cancelled plans for a New York opening of "A Moon for the Misbegotten" and a production of "A Touch of the Poet". In 1948, he was living in Marblehead, his health slightly improved. But Shane, that year, was picked up on a dope charge and from that time on was known as an incurable addict. As for his elder son, in 1950 he committed suicide, slashing his wrists, Roman-fashion. In 1951, Eugene quarreled seriously with Carlotta, but after a separation during which both were hospitalized, they were reconciled, and he gave her control of his literary trust. Although his literary reputation was at its lowest ebb, it was an important legacy, for shortly an O'Neill renaissance would win him his fourth Pulitzer Prize and place him among the three or four great dramatists of this century. But for O'Neill himself, nothing remained. The long journey ended in a Boston hotel room, November 27, 1953.

