AND GIVE US THE SHADOWS
BY LARS NORÉN
TRANSLATED BY MARITA LINDHOLM GOCHMAN
DIRECTED BY MONI YAKIM
THE SCHOOLHOUSE THEATER,
CROTON FALLS, NY
OCTOBER 17–NOVEMBER 10, 2013

During a career that, to date, has yielded over seventy plays, Lars Norén, Sweden’s preeminent contemporary playwright, has embraced his country’s legacy of appreciation for Eugene O’Neill. And Give Us the Shadows, first staged in 1991, five years after Norén had completed his autobiographical trilogy, which, he has said, was influenced by Long Day’s Journey Into Night, had its belated American premiere in 2013 at The Schoolhouse Theater, north of New York City in Westchester County.

O’Neill’s motives for attaching prohibitive conditions to Long Day’s Journey and the crusade against them waged by his third wife, Carlotta Monterey O’Neill, provide occasion for imaginative speculation in the play, which emulates O’Neill’s synthesis of naturalism and the classical unities in Long Day’s Journey. Set in the parlor of O’Neill’s last home, in Marblehead, Massachusetts, on the dramatist’s sixty-first birthday, October 16, 1949, And Give Us the Shadows comprises a fictitious account of what might have happened if Carlotta had hosted Eugene Jr. and Shane, both sons from Gene’s previous marriages, to commemorate the day with their father. Unlike, for example, A Blizzard on Marblehead Neck (2011), the innovative one-act opera by Tony Kushner and Jeanine Tesori, which shares characters and a common setting with And Give Us the Shadows, Norén, whose plays, as well as his accomplishments as poet, novelist, and director, exemplify a range of styles and experiments in form, has strictly adhered to O’Neill’s conventions in Long Day’s Journey. Unfortunately, The Schoolhouse production often
reduces Norén’s psychological complexity to a straightforward performance style that seemed like a throwback to a bygone era.

Marita Lindholm Gochman’s translation offers ample opportunity for the attractive Hollis McCarthy to capture Carlotta’s quirkiness and humor, as when she declares that with a little scotch “the world takes on a rosy hue,” for instance, or pointlessly suggests her husband “go upstairs and write some goddamn masterpieces, so that we can get some money!” Although McCarthy avoids the sort of caricature of Carlotta as a campy viper that Zoe Caldwell created in 1986 for PBS in Eugene O’Neill: A Glory of Ghosts, her exchanges with Saki, the household’s Asian servant, given deadpan delivery by Ray Sheen, are played for laughs often generated by racial and sexist stereotypes. McCarthy also showcases Broadway chops that Carlotta likely never possessed, singing and dancing to “The Sunny Side of the Street” with such joyful aplomb that the audience responded with the most enthusiastic applause of the evening.

Director Moni Yakin and his cast refrain from deifying O’Neill, thus giving Gene and Carlotta equal footing as they square off against one another. Although Norén’s conception of the O’Neills relies upon similar surface contrasts between the couple that marked Jo Morello’s E.G.O.: The Passions of Eugene Gladstone O’Neill (2013) and My Gene, Barbara Gelb’s one-hander starring Colleen Dewhurst (1987), And Give Us the Shadows bestows ambiguity on Gene and Carlotta that frees both characters from the hackneyed portraits history has painted of them. Partly as a result, the production’s finest achievement is its compelling study of the aging O’Neill. Acted with convincing bitterness and rueful smiles of regret by Len Gochman, script in hand, who took over the role when Broadway veteran Jerry Lanning left the production after collapsing onstage early in the run, this O’Neill is a portrait of the frustrated artist as a forgotten old man, his eyes still flickering with inspiration and his shaking body still harboring some deep place of creation known to him alone. As Eugene Jr., Paul Michael Valley creates a pompous professorial windbag who still craves his father’s approval. Gochman’s O’Neill turns a deaf ear to the confidences his namesake shares, such as “I also have a touch of poet in me,” sardonically advising him instead, “Become an alcoholic—that suits you.” Jack Berenholtz endows Shane with so many nervous tics and such a listless and halting voice that his claims of kicking his heroin habit seem unintentionally ludicrous. “For God’s sake, Shane, can’t you sit still,” Carlotta scolds in an exasperation the audience seemed to share: “You keep bouncing up and down like a Jack-in-the-box!”
Jason Bolen’s scene design, which recreates a pleasant 1949-era parlor, and David Pentz’s lighting, which bathes the room in warmth, establish an ironic contrast with the private, thorny world of Carlotta and O’Neill. Their sharp exchanges echo the psychological battles in the plays of August Strindberg, Norén’s Swedish predecessor to whom both he and O’Neill have been compared. To O’Neill’s lament that “I don’t belong anywhere,” Carlotta retorts, “You’ll find a home—somewhere in hell.” Trading insults like pleasantries—“You make me shake, you wrinkled old bitch,” snarls a trembling O’Neill—the two soak up the pauses between affronts with guarded moves and suspicious glances. “You’ve been impotent for the last ten years,” Carlotta gleefully reminds O’Neill while pouring herself another scotch: “Add that to the list of things you can’t do anymore.”

Although the trajectory of the piece shifts to dysfunctional family dynamics with the arrivals of Eugene Jr. and Shane, *Long Day’s Journey* itself remains the play’s central battlefield. Asserting her claim on O’Neill’s autobiographical masterwork as “our child,” Carlotta repeatedly attacks her husband for withholding the play to deny her a secure financial future from its potential profits. With Eugene Jr. as an inebriated ally, O’Neill counters that damaging revelations deterred him from publishing “this play of old sorrow.” Arguments fuel *And Give Us the Shadows* with a cornucopia of detail about O’Neill, including, for example, his expulsion from Princeton, his admiration for Charles Gilpin in *The Emperor Jones*, his visit to Monte Cristo Cottage with Carlotta on their return from Europe in 1931, and his failure to see Shane’s son, named Eugene III, before the three-month-old baby died in his crib. Yakim wisely stages such material with a brisk pace that spared the non-O’Neillians in the audience from an information overload.

Less effective are the thematic parallels imposed on the hypothetical—and not very likable—O’Neill family of the play and the haunted Tyrones of *Long Day’s Journey*. O’Neill, for example, repeatedly loses his reading glasses, and after sneaking a strong drink, Shane shows Eugene Jr. how to disguise the loss of whisky by adding water to the bottle. Revealing late in the play that she has lost her church and her faith, Carlotta says in despair: “I can’t even go to confession! I can’t even get forgiveness—for his sins!” Eventually, a dense fog surrounds the house, a nod to the New London weather of *Long Day’s Journey*, but Norén’s pairing of Shane and Edmund is undermined each time Shane wanders upstairs for a heroin fix. These problematic connections culminate in a drunken Eugene Jr., having just finished reading the manuscript of *Long Day’s Journey*, revealing to his father that Jamie and Edmund are alive in him and Shane, thereby giving voice to Norén’s theme of inherited horrors.
Those familiar with O’Neill’s biography might find Norén’s theatrical shorthand appealingly inventive at times, appalling at others. In fact, Eugene Jr. first read *Long Day’s Journey* during a visit to Tao House in 1943. O’Neill and Carlotta had in fact severed all contact with Shane after he pled guilty for heroin possession in August 1948, over a year before the action of Norén’s play. By squeezing disparate events into a single day, a technique O’Neill used in *Long Day’s Journey* to better effect, *And Give Us the Shadows* resorts to hackneyed devices, such as the melodrama of Carlotta and Gene, consumed by a shared madness, feeding the pages of *A Tale of Possessors Self-Dispossessed* to a roaring fire, which deprives the play of both impact and accuracy in its final moments.

With financial support from the American-Scandinavian Foundation and the Barbro Osher Foundation, The Schoolhouse succeeded in making *And Give Us the Shadows* a worthwhile, albeit often confusing, addition to literature about O’Neill. Ultimately, however, Norén’s play suffers from the powerful shadow cast by its antecedent. Nothing yet created for the theater has taken to another level the deep revelation of his own character and family that O’Neill himself has given us in *Long Day’s Journey Into Night*.

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