Eugene O’Neill offers a very detailed description of the setting for *A Moon for the Misbegotten*. He describes a clapboard (timber) house that imposes itself upon the Connecticut landscape. It is run down and uncared for. Its poverty is made clear in the detail of missing windowpanes, peeling and jaded paintwork and a tarred and papered roof to an extension. In theatrical translation it is clear that the playwright envisions a traditional end on setting, probably a proscenium arch stage.

**Activity**

With either reference to the script or having seen the current production of the play in the round, design your own interpretation for *A Moon for the Misbegotten* in an end on theatre or in another configuration such as traverse or thrust. You may want to adapt some of the ideas to offer a setting that captures the spirit, if not the detail of O’Neill’s suggestions. How do you create the ugliness and the shabbiness of the house and its environment? What textures, colours, materials help you to achieve this dilapidation? How do you accommodate the exterior and interior scenes?

In *A Moon for the Misbegotten*, whiskey is a significant issue in the lives of Hogan and Tyrone. It oils social interaction; it feeds humour, fuels laughter and provokes fights. Hogan is described as one of those people who can drink an enormous amount and be absolutely plastered when they want to be for their own pleasure, but at the same time are able to pull themselves together when they wish to be cunningly clear headed. Tyrone is described as often falling prey to a *queer drunkenness*. This queer drunkenness seems to suggest something private and unavailable, a mood of introspection or moodiness. Towards the end of the play we learn that Tyrone’s *queer drunkenness* is his despair at drunkenness itself.

Matthew Lloyd, the director of the current Royal Exchange production, suggests that the issue of alcohol is “woven very subtly into the moment by moment action of the play. The characters use it to release stuff they keep bottled up or use it as an excuse to say things that are difficult to say”.

**Activity**

Drunkenness is notoriously difficult to act. Often people indulge in stereotypes of exaggerated physical lurching and slurred speech. In pairs you might like to try realising the different moods suggested by O’Neill in the play. Try to achieve realism and don’t be tempted to go for cheap laughs. You may want to discuss why these moods are important to the themes of the play to help with your thinking. What might the difference be in the moods of drunkenness offered in the play?

As drunk as a loon / As full as a tick / Cunningly clear-headed / Glazed & vague / Miserable & hurt

In Act 3 and 4 we begin to uncover the pain and anguish in Tyrone’s life and the history of his drinking, his mother’s death and the events with the blonde woman on the train returning from the coast, with his mother’s corpse in the baggage car. Alongside this, there comes the

“the play is an insight into the plight of the dispossessed and the classic mindset of immigration”
knowledge that Josie is not who she pretends she is and that Hogan masks his motives and his love. These three characters appear to have difficulty in revealing truths about themselves.

Activity

As a group you may want to discuss the underlying motives for each of the characters. What is it that they hide from the people around them, or even from themselves? Why is this mask necessary? Is alcohol always the issue or is it sometimes a mask in itself? Why is it that Tyrone and Josie cannot resolve the past to be together at the end?

Despite being set in Connecticut in 1923, Eugene O’Neill’s play hinges strongly on Irish identity. In part this is found in the language and the characters. It is also there in the way that Tyrone, Hogan and Josie talk about the world in which they live. The director, Matthew Lloyd, notes that “the Hogans are a very cynical and disillusioned take on the American dream...the play is an insight into the plight of the dispossessed and the classic mindset of immigration where, in being uprooted from their native land, they (the Hogans) identify ferociously with Irishness.”

Eugene O’Neill often uses a poetic voice in his writing. His dialogue frequently moves beyond being simply conversational. The same is true of his character descriptions in the script. Consider the following description of Josie: She is so oversize for a woman that she is almost a freak...her sloping shoulders are broad...she has long arms, immensely strong...the map of Ireland is stamped on her face...black hair as coarse as horse’s mane...it is not a pretty face, but her large dark-blue eyes give it a note of beauty... Obviously, in this production of the play, Josie was nothing like this. Inevitably, it is impossible for a director to follow such precise casting, and often there are good reasons for not doing so. In casting Helen Schlesinger in the role of Josie, the director suggested that he was interested in “the interior, spiritual nature” of the character and that this is more important than the physical realisation.

Activity

Having seen the play, and without reference to a script, write your own character descriptions for the three principal characters of Josie, Hogan and Tyrone. Start with a physical description but also try to encapsulate something of their personality. Imagine that this piece of writing has to be included in a future edition of the script for A Moon for the Misbegotten. Your style needs to be brief but quickly evoke a sense of this person as a physical being and as a character.

“These characters have invented a persona to get them through life - they’ve celebrated it and really ‘gone for it’, but they also know it’s a falsehood, nothing more than a way of coping.”

Matthew Lloyd

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