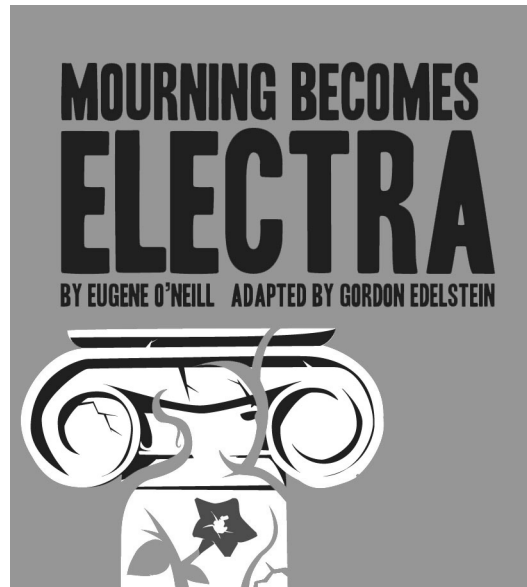


**REMY BUMPPPO**

*think theatre*



**Directed by Timothy Douglas**

Featuring Annabel Armour, Kelsey Brennan,  
Veronda G. Carey, Stephanie Chavara, Luke Daigle,  
David Darlow, Nick Sandys, and Scott Stangland

**September 21 – October 30, 2011**

Greenhouse Theater Center, 2257 N. Lincoln Ave, Chicago  
[www.remybumppo.org](http://www.remybumppo.org) / 733-404-7336

Field Guide Created by Chelsea Keenan,  
Jim Manganello, and Topher Soltys  
With Articles by Elizabeth Rice

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## Introduction

**Topher Soltys, Artistic Intern**

Personal revelation and the quest for redemption propel the protagonists of our first production – which begins the day after the Civil War ends. Just as a new American Union rises out of the killing fields of the Civil War, the Mannons try desperately to start anew. Ezra returns newly devoted to his wife, Christine, Christine wants to start a new life with her new lover, Lavinia tries to give her family a new sense of dignity.

Written by Nobel Laureate and Pulitzer Prize winner Eugene O’Neill, Mourning Becomes Electra was penned primarily as an adaptation of the classic Greek Oresteia by Aeschylus, but O’Neill provides a compelling profile of a privileged New England family, whose legacy is ravaged by ancestral secrets and the effects of a nation divided against itself. In this adaptation, Gordon Edelstein has streamlined O’Neill’s tragic opus by more fully exposing mankind’s frailty at the hand of Fate.

This season at Remy Bumppo, we invite you to discover The American Evolution: from Civil War to Civil Rights to Civil Disobedience beginning with our gripping, emotional production of Mourning Becomes Electra. Our online field guide is designed to deepen your relationship with the show. Here you can read about the play as it relates to the Civil War, the Oresteia, and the author, Eugene O’Neill, as well as get the latest updates and interviews from Remy Bumppo’s rehearsal room. We also encourage you to post your thoughts on the ideas presented here and on the production itself.

## Biography of Eugene O'Neill

by Jim Manganello, Artistic Assistant at Remy Bumpo



Eugene O'Neill (1888-1953), though born into a theatrical family, was not destined for the profession himself. His father, actor James O'Neill, was a household name late-nineteenth century America, due to his multi-decade run as the title character in a stage adaptation of Alexandre Dumas' *The Count of Monte Cristo*. This popular melodrama stood for everything O'Neill-the-dramatist would despise.

Though introverted as a boy, Eugene was a rebel and a prankster, first at boarding school in Strawberry Hill, Connecticut, then at Princeton, where he enrolled in 1906. At both schools, O'Neill decorated the walls of his room with pin-ups and theatrical souvenirs like actresses' stockings and bras. He often skipped classes to pursue his own curriculum of modern literature—he claims to have read Nietzsche's *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* every year from the age of eighteen. Sexually active from his young teens, when his older brother Jamie brought him to a whorehouse, O'Neill seemed more interested in bars and bordellos than art.

Embarrassed by the dead melodrama of his father, O'Neill's own theatrical sensibilities awakened in 1907. That year he saw *Hedda Gabler* in New York starring Alla Nazimova, who would later originate the role of Christine in *Mourning Becomes Electra*. Attending the production ten times, O'Neill wrote that the play "gave me my first conception of a modern drama where truth might live." His own career as a "modern dramatist" grew less from his theatrical childhood than from life experience. In a country known for autobiographical playwrights, Eugene O'Neill is perhaps the most intensely personal of all American playwrights. Kicked out of Princeton, he married his first wife in 1909, then two weeks later escaped on a gold-mining mission to Honduras. O'Neill was fascinated with the sea. From his Honduras voyage and others on which he served as a "semipassenger" and later a full crewman, O'Neill derived material for his early sea plays, set on the fictional *S.S. Glencairn*—*Bound East for Cardiff*, *In the Zone*, *The Long Voyage Home*, and *The Moon of the Caribbees* (1916-1918)—as well as for *The*

*Emperor Jones* (1920), *Anna Christie* (1921), and *The Hairy Ape* (1922). O'Neill was enchanted by the rough seamen whom he met on board—and they were impressed with the respect “genteel” O'Neill extended to them. Between his sea voyages, the young O'Neill spent long bouts in the bars of New York; his favorite was called the Hell Hole. Though his drinking periods were predictably unproductive in themselves, they acquainted O'Neill with men that he would later transform into compelling dramatic characters, the culmination of which may be seen in his 1946 *The Iceman Cometh*.

In 1916, O'Neill fell in with a group of vacationing writers, including revolutionary journalist Jack Reed and playwright Susan Glaspell, who were producing their second season of plays in a fishing shack on a wharf in Provincetown. This group of amateurs, the now famed “Provincetown Players,” performed O'Neill's *Bound East for Cardiff*, his debut as a playwright. That year, the troupe moved to Greenwich Village, then the hotbed of new theater in America, and continued to produce O'Neill's work. Now called “The Playwrights' Theatre,” the group committed themselves to producing challenging, non-mainstream work. But it wasn't long before the mainstream noticed O'Neill, and by 1919, his *Beyond the Horizon* and *Chris Christopherson* (an early version of *Anna Christie*) had been optioned by Broadway producers.

Despite his rise in popularity, O'Neill continued to experiment with the theatrical medium in the 1920s. In *The Great God Brown* (1926), he incorporated the ancient convention of mask to speak to the modern dilemmas of self-fashioning and self-revelation. Enchanted by the novel as a literary form, O'Neill wrote *Strange Interlude* (1927), an unexpectedly popular six-hour epic, in which he explored a new form of soliloquy by which characters spoke private thoughts as well as dialogue. Then he returned to mask work in *Lazarus Laughed* (1928), this time as a way of engaging in depersonalized, group psychology.

His late, more realistic period began with *Mourning Becomes Electra* (1931), the earlier drafts of which employed many of his old experiments. In this period, O'Neill often drew upon a different area of life: life as a boy and young man at the family home in New London, Connecticut. This shift toward realism also won O'Neill the Nobel Prize for literature, albeit after some debate. Though O'Neill was the strongest contender for the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1935, the Permanent Secretary of the Swedish

Academy, Per Hallström objected to O'Neill's experimentation and uneven quality. No prize was awarded in 1935. It was *Mourning Becomes Electra* that won Hallström over, and O'Neill took the Nobel in 1936, marking the American theater as an international one.

From *Electra* until his death, O'Neill wrote what would become his best known works: *Ah, Wilderness!*, *A Touch of the Poet* and *More Stately Mansions* (the only surviving parts of a major, abandoned nine-play cycle), *The Iceman Cometh*, *Hughie*, and *A Moon for the Misbegotten*. He also wrote the fiercely autobiographical *Long Day's Journey into Night*, which he barred from production until twenty-five years after his death—in fact, O'Neill's widow approved of a production in 1956, less than three years after he died. *A Moon for the Misbegotten* in 1947 was the last of O'Neill's shows to be performed in his lifetime. After it's first production failed to reach Broadway, O'Neill retired from the theater, finding it difficult to write with a serious tremor in his hand. Several friends noted that he seemed to be waiting for his death. He died in 1953 at the age of 65.

## House of Atreus: the full story

by Jim Manganello, Artistic Assistant at Remy Bumppo

Aeschylus' *Oresteia*, now cherished as the only surviving dramatic trilogy from Ancient Greece, was originally a tetralogy. The first three are well known: *Agamemnon*, *Choephoroi* (*The Libation Bearers*), and *The Eumenides*. The lost fourth, *Proteus*, was a satyr-play, in which gods and heroes mingled in comic form, redeeming the tragedy of the preceding three plays, the story of the House of Atreus.

The founder of the line, Tantalus of Lydia, offends the gods by feeding them on the flesh of his son, Pelops. His infamous punishment is an existence in Hades in which food and drink are always in sight, but just out of reach. Pelops' son Thyestes seduces the wife of his twin brother, Atreus. As vengeance, Atreus feeds Thyestes the flesh of his own children. Thyestes, in turn, puts a curse on Atreus—a curse that will be the formal initiation of the tragedy.

Atreus' two sons, Agamemnon and Menelaus, marry sisters Clytemnestra and Helen and become joint rulers of the realm of Argos. When Helen is seduced by Paris of Troy, a Greek force is sent to win her back, initiating the drawn-out Trojan War. Agamemnon, commander-in-chief of the Greeks, must sacrifice the thing most precious to him to ensure Greek victory; therefore, he kills his eldest daughter, Iphigenia, fulfilling Thyestes' curse.

Aeschylus' *Oresteia* begins at the end of the Trojan war. After nine years of fighting, Troy falls to the Greeks and Agamemnon returns home with Cassandra (Paris' sister) as his mistress. Enraged by the death of Iphigenia and the presence of Cassandra, Clytemnestra and her lover Aegisthus murder Agamemnon and become rulers of Argos.

Shortly after Aegisthus takes the throne, Orestes, the long absent son of Clytemnestra and Agamemnon, returns to the realm. Obeying the dictates of the god Apollo and the promptings of his sister Electra, Orestes kills Clytemnestra and her lover. But Clytemnestra's Furies drive Orestes mad with guilt. They pursue the son to Apollo's shrine in Delphi. Though Apollo can purge Orestes of blood-guilt, he cannot appease the vengeful Furies. For that, Orestes must appeal to the goddess Athena, who appoints a jury to hear Orestes' case—establishing the Areopagus or court of law that Aeschylus characterizes as the fount of modern justice.

The upshot of that ruling is the acquittal of Orestes and his restoration as the ruler of Argos, but more importantly, it marks a crucial moment in the history of Greek civilization. Athena persuades the Furies to transform into Eumenides or "Kindly Ones"—forgoing the law of vendetta in favor of peace and justice. A new order is born.

## Modern Tragedy

by Jim Manganello, Artistic Assistant at Remy Bumppo

*But the time of brute force*

*Is past.*

*The day of reasoned persuasion,*

*With its long vision,*

*With its mercy, its forgiveness,*

*Has arrived.*

- from *The Eumenides*, the third part of Aeschylus' *Oresteia*, translated by Ted Hughes

When we moderns think about tragedy—if we think about tragedy at all—we're likely to imagine cycles of bloodshed and insurmountable despair. We're likely, in other words, to think about the way human history seems to work in reality. But as the verses above suggest, the original tragedians, those Ancient Greeks, used tragedy toward more celebratory ends.

Aeschylus' *Oresteia* trilogy—the source for Eugene O'Neill's *Mourning Becomes Electra*—was in fact a tetralogy, its fourth play lost to contemporary readers and audiences. Already in *The Eumenides*, the final surviving play of the cycle, reason and democracy have triumphed over violence. But *Proteus*, that lost fourth play, pushed the merriment to new heights. In it, gods and mortal heroes are cast as comic figures, mingling together at a bacchanalian feast. The modern misappraisal of tragedy follows from our forgetting that these plays were actually a celebration. They were written after two major Greek military triumphs over the Persians, in 490 and 480 BCE. The Greeks considered these victories a triumph of modernity over backwardness, of liberty over base subjection. Aeschylus' earlier play, *The Persians*, explicitly commemorates these military victories. His *Oresteia* is a more ritualized history of the rise of reason and justice among the victorious Greeks. It is a monument to human achievement, in which the evil forces within Greek society are purged, and a new society finds harmony. Since those early stories, our tragedies tended toward the macabre, a tendency already apparent in the work of Aeschylus' closest contemporaries, Sophocles and Euripides,

who flirted with pure destruction more willingly than their predecessor. Attraction to that bleakness has driven the course of storytelling ever since. We dismiss overly saccharine endings as irritatingly improbable. We long for something bitter with our sweets.

So what did Eugene O'Neill, America's bleakest playwright, see in this redemptive tragic trilogy? One could, of course, interpret O'Neill's stab at the House of Atreus as a skeptic's revision of Aeschylus' good-boy optimism. The eminent Greek scholar, Robert Fagles, certainly saw it as such, calling O'Neill's play "the most defeatist, deterministic version of the *Oresteia* that we have," in which O'Neill transformed the "tale of the tribe" into "a story of the tribe's disintegration."

But while O'Neill undeniably held a dim view of family life, and maybe life in general, perhaps in *Mourning Becomes Electra*, he is more faithful to the redemptive spirit of the *Oresteia*. On a psychological level, the play's very brutality is an affirmation of full-blooded humanity. Already in 1923, O'Neill articulated his tragic affirmation of man:

I see life as a gorgeously-ironical, beautifully-indifferent, splendidly suffering bit of chaos, the tragedy of which gives Man a tremendous significance, while without his losing fight with fate he would be a tepid, silly animal. I say "losing fight" only symbolically, for the brave individual always wins. Fate can never conquer his—or her—spirit.

Beyond the personal, O'Neill investigates the state of the nation. He, like Aeschylus, writes of a "long-ago" decisive moment for the nation: the immediate aftermath of, in Aeschylus, the Trojan War, and in O'Neill, the American Civil War. It is in such moments, after so much blood has been spilled, that a nation must decide *to what end?*—a sentiment famously articulated by Abraham Lincoln in his Gettysburg Address: "we here highly resolve that these dead shall not have died in vain..."

Though it is true that, in his other plays, O'Neill's depiction of post-bellum life in America is bleak. Perhaps O'Neill's depiction of the wild Mannons suggests that at the moment when we could have forged ahead as a better nation, one that violently hacked off the brutal appendage of slavery—at *that very moment*, we renewed our old bloodthirst and plunged back into despair. But perhaps, as in Aeschylus, the Mannons'

domestic war is meant to be the final convulsion of the violent bedrock on which this nation was built. Whichever way audiences experience the play, *Mourning Becomes Electra* compels us to consider where we come from and where we are going, and to look squarely at the ground on which we stand today.

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## Contemporary ORESTEIAS

by Jim Manganello, Artistic Assistant at Remy Bumppo

Philosopher Roland Barthes noted that, short on evidence as to how the Greeks originally performed their plays, any modern production cannot help but be an adaptation—there are no more or less “faithful” renderings; we must rely upon or renounce our own conventions and present something new. Perhaps this is why these stories are so attractive to visionary writers, directors, and designers. Our own age has seen no fewer tellings than any other. Here is a sampling of other adaptations of Aeschylus’ *Oresteia* from the past several decades.

### **Clytemnestra** (dance, 1958) by Martha Graham

In perhaps the first of a long line of feminist revisionings of the character Clytemnestra, Martha Graham--the choreographer whose impact on the world of contemporary theater is most felt--transformed the story into pure movement. She wrote: “It was inevitable that I choreographed the Greeks. Mother and Father read them to me as nursery rhymes. I grew up thinking they were my family history. And they are. They’re alive in all of us. Modern man is timid, but the Greeks were realists. We hide from the truth. The Greeks stared life in the face. They knew it was wild and bitter and beautiful. I was never interested in creating pictures. I wanted to use dance to explore

the hidden landscape of the soul, so I turned to the Greeks.” Graham also ushered in a new appreciation for the power of the chorus as a true group collectively delivering the story, the community opinion, and its omens. Bucking the “naturalistic” trend within theater to divvy up the choric odes among definable, individualized characters, Graham’s dancing chorus acted as a unit and reawakened audiences to the power of communal storytelling.

### **Clytemnestra** (1983) by Tadashi Suzuki

Tadashi Suzuki, a Japanese director famous for drawing upon both classical and contemporary performance practices, cut up nearly all known versions of the Orestes myth then pieced them back into a drama in the Noh tradition. He broke the ground for the extraordinarily fruitful cross-pollination between Western and Asian theatrical traditions, both in telling “European” stories with the tools of “Eastern” storytelling and in touring those productions throughout Europe and America, where the stories were familiar but the telling of them new. Suzuki’s initiative has been taken up by other Asian directors. In particular, Luo Jinlin seized upon the similarities between Greek tragedy and the ancient Chinese music-theater form of *hebei bangzi*—a thrust stage, use of exaggerated speech and stylized movement, singing, and music—to create several productions that transformed the stories of Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides into the classical Chinese form. Because traditional Chinese theater tosses attention more toward the skill of the actor than the plot, these productions revealed new ways of physicalizing and embodying characters apart from the iconographic versions of Antigone, Clytemnestra, Orestes, Electra, and others.

### **Les Atrides** (1991) by Ariane Mnouchkine

Mnouchkine’s *Theatre du Soleil* in Paris achieved fame for its spectacular and immersive productions that draw upon all aspects of the live experience—music, dance, art, speech. Her 10-hour take on the *Oresteia* was similarly involving. First performed in a munitions factory outside Paris, Mnouchkine then brought the show to the Park Slope Armory in Brooklyn—both historically militant locations, in which the audience was

essentially held captive for the entire cycle (picnics on stage and all). She built upon the experiments of Eastern/Western mixing by using, as in several other *Solie!* productions, elements of Kabuki movement and music, again calling attention, like Graham, to the communal element in these plays. Also like Graham, Mnouchkine realized the feminist possibilities in the character of Clytemnestra. In fact, she preceded Aeschylus' trilogy, which starts with Agamemnon's return home from war, with the story of Iphigenia, the daughter whom he killed as a sacrifice before venturing to Troy, offering a viable foundation for Clytemnestra's murderous rage.

### **Good Breeding** (2005) by Robert O'Hara

O'Hara stretched even farther back into the Atreus line, beginning his play with Tantalus, the first tragic ancestor, who fed his child to the gods and thus received their curse. O'Hara's erotic take on this infamous family retools the *Oresteia* into a very contemporary American idiom. When Remy Bumppo's Artistic Director Timothy Douglas staged the play at American Conservatory Theatre in San Francisco, he underlined its sensuous tones by setting it in Manhattan's wild Studio 54.

## **O'Neill's Women**

by Jim Manganello, Artistic Assistant at Remy Bumppo

In many ways, the most memorable relationship in *Mourning Becomes Electra* is between mother and daughter. In Christine and Lavinia Mannon, O'Neill created two multi-dimensional and controversial heroines. And though O'Neill is famous for his depiction of masculinity, the Mannons are not the only fascinating women in his opus. Here are excerpts from two other O'Neill plays with a powerful female character at the center, as well as video footage of the scenes from the film versions of the plays—starring Greta Garbo in *Anna Christie* and Sophia Loren in *Desire Under the Elms*.

### **ANNA CHRISTIE** (1920)

**Anna:** You was going on's if one of you had got to own me. But nobody owns me, see?—cepting myself. I'll do what I please and no man, I don't give a hoot who he is, can tell me what to do! I ain't asking either of you for a living. I can make it

myself—one way or other. I'm my own boss. So put that in your pipe and smoke it!  
You and your orders!

**Burke:** I wasn't meaning it that way at all and well you know it. You've no call to be raising this rumpus with me. (*pointing to Chris*) 'Tis him you've a right—

**Anna:** I'm coming to him. But you—you did mean it that way, too. You scoundrel—just like all the rest. But damn it, shut up! Let me talk for a change!

**Burke:** 'Tis square, rough talk, that—for a dacent girl the like of you!

**Anna:** (*with a hard laugh*) Decent? Who told you I was? Don't go to sleep, Old Man! Listen here, I'm talking to you now!

**Chris:** Ay don't vant for hear it. You vas going out of head, Ay tank, Anna.

**Anna:** Well, living with you is enough to drive anyone off their nut. Your bunk about the farm being so fine! Didn't I write you year after year how rotten it was and what a dirty slave them ousins made of me? What'd you care? Nothing! Not even enough to come out and see me! That don't go down with me! You yust didn't want to be bothered with me! You're like all the rest of 'em!

**Chris:** Anna! It ain't so—

**Anna:** But one thing I never wrote you. It was one of them cousins that you think is such nice people—the youngest son—Paul—that started me wrong. It wasn't none of my fault. I hated him worse'n hell and he knew it. But he was big and strong—(*pointing to Burke*)—like you!

**Burke:** God blarst it!

**Chris:** Anna!

**Anna:** That was why I run away from the farm. That was what made me get a job as nurse girl in St. Paul. And you think that was a nice job for a girl, too don't you? With all them nice inland fellers yust looking for a chance to marry me, I s'pose. Marry me? What a chance! They wasn't looking for marrying. I'm owning up to everything fair and square. I was caged in, I tell you—yust like in yail—taking care of other people's kids—listening to 'em bawling and crying day and night—when I wanted to be out—and I was lonesome—lonesome as hell! So I give up finally. What was the use? You don't say nothing—either of you—but I know what you're thinking. You're like all the rest! And who's to blame for it, me or you? If you'd even acted like a man—if you'd even been a regular father and had me with you—maybe things would be different!

**Chris:** Don't talk dat vay, Anna! Ay go crazy! Ay von't listen!

**Anna:** You will too listen! You—keeping me safe inland—I wasn't no nurse girl the last two years—I lied when I wrote you—I was in a house, that's what!—yes, that kind of a house—the kind sailors like you and Mat goes to in port—and your nice inland men, too—and all men, God damn 'em! I hate 'em! Hate 'em!

## DESIRE UNDER THE ELMS (1924)

*Eben and Abbie stare at each other through the wall. Eben sighs heavily and Abbie echoes it. Finally Abbie gets up and listens, her ear to the wall. He acts as if he saw every move she was making. She seems driven into a decision—goes out the door in rear determinedly. His eyes follow her. Then as the door of his room is opened softly, he turns away. Abbie stands for a second staring at him, her eyes burning with desire. Then with a little cry she runs over and throws her arms about his neck, she pulls his head back and covers his mouth with kisses. At first he submits dumbly; then he puts his arms about her neck and returns her kisses, but finally, suddenly aware of his hatred, he hurls her away from him, springing to his feet. They stand speechless and breathless, panting like two animals.*

**Abbie:** Ye shouldn't, Eben—ye shouldn't—I'd make ye happy!

**Eben:** I don't want t' be happy—from yew!

**Abbie:** Ye do, Eben! Ye do! Why d'ye lie?

**Eben:** I don't take t' ye, I tell ye! I hate the sight o' ye!

**Abbie:** Well, I kissed ye anyways—an' ye kissed back—yer lips was burnin'—ye can't lie 'bout that! If ye don't care, why did ye kiss me back—why was yer lips burnin'?

**Eben:** It was like pizen on 'em. When I kissed ye back, mebbe I thought 'twas someone else.

**Abbie:** Min?

**Eben:** Mebbe.

**Abbie:** Did ye go t' see her? Did ye r'ally go? I thought ye mightn't. Is that why ye throwed me off jest now?

**Eben:** What if it be?

**Abbie:** Then ye're a dog, Eben Cabot!

**Eben:** Ye can't talk that way t' me!

**Abbie:** Can't I? Did ye think I was in love with ye—a weak thin' like yew! Not much! I on'y wanted ye fur a purpose o' my own—an' I'll hev fur it yet 'cause I'm stronger'n yew be!

**Eben:** I knowed well it was on'y part o' yer plan t' swaller everythin'!

**Abbie:** Mebbe!

**Eben:** Git out o' my room!

**Abbie:** This air my room an ye're on'y hired help!

**Eben:** Get out afore I murder ye!

**Abbie:** I hain't a mite afeerd. Ye want me, don't ye? Yes, ye do! An' yer Paw's son'll never kill what he wants! Look at yer eyes! They's lust fur me in 'em, burnin' 'em up! Look at yer lips now! They're tremblin' an' longin' t' kiss me, an' yer teeth t' bite! I'm a-goin' t' make all o' this home my home! They's one room hain't mine yet, but it's a-goin' t' be tonight I'm a-goin' down now an' light up! Won't ye come courtin' me in the best parlor, Mister Cabot?

**Eben:** Don't ye dare! It hain't been opened since Maw died an' was laid out thar! Don't ye...!

**Abbie:** I'll expect ye afor long, Eben.

## Soldiers' Trauma in the Civil War

by Jim Manganello, Artistic Assistant at Remy Bumppo

The off-stage battle in *Mourning Becomes Electra* is the American Civil War, without contest the grizzliest conflict ever fought on US soil. The devastating toll of that war is most apparent in the character of Orin Mannon, who returns from combat to find a different kind of war on the home front. “Another corpse!” says Orin despairingly, “You and I have seen fields and hillsides sown with them—and they mean nothing!—nothing but a dirty joke life plays on life!”

Though the term was not around during the Civil War, and not even when O'Neill wrote the play in 1931, Orin Mannon is clearly suffering from some kind of post-traumatic stress. In the inter-war period in which the play was written, audiences would have probably recognized this as “shell-shock.” During the Civil War, it was most often deamed “nostalgia” or “irritable heart.” Soldiers displaying such symptoms were often deamed unmanly or weak, so level-headed descriptions are hard to come by. Not until after the Vietnam War was Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder fully acknowledged as a distinct psychological diagnosis and not as a judgment on individual character. Even then, PTSD was considered a uniquely modern phenomenon, the consequence of

hostility toward soldiers upon their return home, as opposed to the great military parades of the Civil War era.

But the psychological effects of war have been around as long as war itself. The Civil War was radically disorientating. “War reversed the seasons,” writes historian David Goldfield, “Soldiers looked forward to winter [when active combat mostly ceased] as a time of regeneration. Spring brought death.”

### **Horrors of battle**

The sheer scale of the horror soldiers witnessed was unprecedented. At the Battle of Shiloh (April 6 and 7, 1862), the bloodiest single battle the US had then known, 3,500 were killed and 16,000 wounded. Soldiers describe a hell-on-earth: literal pools of blood, trees mangled by bullets, garbage and mangled bodies everywhere, and brain matter blowing in the breeze. Such battles were outside understanding and language. Wrote a Pennsylvania soldier after the Battle of Antietam (September 17, 1862), at which there was twice the death of every previous nineteenth-century war combined (25,000 casualties): “No tongue can tell, no mind conceive, no pen portray the horrible sights I witnessed this morning.” This horror was unrelenting, as the war only grew bloodier. At Gettysburg in July of 1863, equally as violent as Antietam, it was difficult to walk across the ground, so many bodies were strewn about. (For an article on Civil War photography, [click here](#).) Then in the spring of 1864, Generals Grant and Sherman ramped up the conflict even further toward Total War, the goal being, according to Grant, “to hammer continuously against the armed forces of the enemy and his resources until by mere attrition...there should be nothing left to him but submission.” The result: in six weeks of fighting, Grant alone lost 65,000 men. Soldiers described the battlefield in Biblical terms: a “portrait of hell” or a “crash of worlds.” Indeed, battles could be literally deafening and, as smokeless gunpowder had not yet been invented, temporarily blinding as well. Soldiers grew disoriented in the clouds of sulfurous gas.

A wounded man begged piteously for us to take him to the rear; he was wounded in the neck, or head, and the blood flowed freely; everytime he tried to speak the blood would fill his mouth and he would blow it out in all directions; he was all blood, and at the time I thought he was the most dreadful sight I ever saw. We would not help him, for it was of no use, for he could not live long by the way he was bleeding.

Sergeant Austin C. Stearns, Company K

I went over the field of battle as soon as possible after the surrender. At some points it was terrible. My eyes never beheld such a sight before. I hope they may never again. In some places the dead lay very thick, not more than 3-5-10 feet apart; some were shot in the head, others in the breast and lungs, some through the neck, and I saw 3 or 4 torn all to pieces by cannon balls; their innards lying by their side,.... It is indeed a sickening sight,...I had often wished that I could be in one battle and go over a battle field. My curiosity has been gratified. I never wish to see another.

Calvin Ainsworth

In addition to the horrors of battle itself, there was another different kind of “biological warfare”: disease. Taking the Civil War as a whole, for every man who died in combat, two died of disease—in total about 164,000 Confederate and 250,000 Union soldiers.

## Fear

It was popularly thought at the time that while a green soldier might experience some natural apprehension of the unknown before his first battle, once he had been “blooded,” a true soldier would swallow that fear and transform into an effective killing machine. There are some accounts of such bloodthirst:

Strange as it may seem to you, but the more men I saw killed the more reckless I became; when George Gates...was shot I was so enraged I could have tore the heart out of the rebel could I have reached him.

Franklin H. Bailey, 12<sup>th</sup> Michigan Infantry

Perhaps the more common story, though, is that of enthusiasm among naïve soldiers turning to dread once they experienced battle. “A horrible fear took possession of all of us that the war would be over before we got to the front,” wrote one soldier. Once in battle, however, soldiers displayed signs of confusion or trauma. The most common fear was the irrational belief of being followed at all times, often by a killer.

One second you want to dash forward; the next, you want a rock or a tree to dash behind; men think by seconds and part of a second; minutes are too long to dwell on;... One second you are filled with anxiety; the next with fear; one second you want to, and the next you don't. At times your heart is jumping a thousand times a minute; at other times it don't seem to move at all; your knees begin to tremble; your hair to stand up so stiff that you are unable to tell if you have hair or hazel brush on your head...the suspense is awful...you have no conception of time under such conditions. You are chained; riveted to the spot;...we waited on and on; every minute appeared to be a full eternity.

William Henry Younts, Ohio soldier, 1864

He has always claimed that the rebels had set out to kill him, and would take his gun and blanket and stay in the woods for days and nights at a time, and would leave the house at night and sleep in the fence corners.... He told me one day that two or

three of his neighbors were rebels from the south (there were some new people came in then) and that they were going to kill him but that he put his axe under his bed at night to defend himself.

Affidavit taken by Pension Bureau, 1893-94

### **The new normal**

“I don’t believe I am the same being I was two weeks ago,” wrote one soldier to his mother after his first battle.

When soldiers returned home, they often experienced a sentiment that those who were not on the battlefield don’t understand. “How little they do know.” “Nobody at home can form the least idea of the hardships that a soldier has to go through.” “People at home owe a debt to the soldiers that they can never pay. Let them do what ever they may they can never cancel the obligation.”

At one time, soldiers had grown accustomed to death and were shocked by its randomness. This sometimes resulted in criminal behavior. Two thirds of new intakes at state prisons in the North were veterans.

Indiana has for the last three years nearly seemed as distant from and isolated to me as England. More than the Ocean with all its dangers has surged and rolled between me and my Earthly home since I left it in “61”. Since then I have thought of home in the future as if I were in a dream. With a heart throbbing with a fearful hope I looked forward to the time when I might again be at home. But when I thought of that which lay before me. The hours of hellish conflict yet to come. Comrades falling all around me. The deadly Minnie. The fearful shell. The screaming solid shot. The dreadful charge into the very jaws of death. Disease in a hundred forms. When I thought of all this, the faces of my friends seemed to fade to my view, and home seemed hidden by the smoke of battle.

James Stephens, 20<sup>th</sup> Indiana Infantry

These first-person accounts paint a grim and fearful picture of the bloodiest war in American history. It's of course impossible to create any psychiatric diagnosis of a patient long dead--but the subjective human experience blazes through history, forcing us to confront the ghosts of our past and present.

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## A Harvest of Death

by Elizabeth Rice, Education Intern at the Goodman Theatre



Imagine, if you will, the mental toll of the constant image of death. Bodies picked over, laying in the sun to rot, anonymous and forgotten. Perhaps, then, we can understand and clearly visualize Ezra Mannon's meaning when he says "I've seen dead men scattered about, no more important than rubbish to be got rid of... I've seen too many rotting in the sun to make grass greener! Ashes to ashes, dirt to dirt!" The amount of death Ezra Mannon witnesses in the war drives him to rekindle aspects of his life that had died, mainly his relationship with his wife. Orin Mannon, too, has been deeply scarred by the amount of death he experienced during the war. On seeing his father's dead body, he remarks, "Who are you? Another corpse! You and I have seen field and hillsides sown with them and they meant nothing! Nothing but a dirty joke life plays on life!" Death seems to saturate and follow the Mannon family. The advent of photography in the 19<sup>th</sup> century allows us to experience and better understand the grave state of the

Mannon men.

By the outbreak of the Civil War, photographers had begun to use their skills to document the harsh and ever-changing world around them. During this turbulent time, Alexander Gardner pioneered photojournalism and war photography. Photographic technology, still cumbersome and slow to develop, only allowed Gardner and his



colleagues to take photographs of the aftermath of battles, documenting the destruction and carnage that remained. While newspapers illustrators tended to send back to their publications images glorifying moments of battle, photos like *A Harvest of Death* helped viewers realize the harsh and gruesome reality of the Civil War. In this photo, the viewer witnesses a field strewn with bodies. While

only a small portion of the photograph is in focus, we are able to tell that the bodies have begun to decompose, becoming bloated. Most evident is the face of the soldier in the center of the foreground. His face, especially his lips, puckers out, bloated from the initial decomposition and the past two days of rain. Small trinkets and letters are strewn about the fields. Gardner's caption helps the viewer identify the shoelessness of the corpses. Their shoes have been salvaged for the living soldiers that desperately needed them. Leather was an expensive commodity and not every soldier in both the North and South were issued boots.



Soldiers of the Civil War daily confronted images like that of *A Harvest of Death*. Thus, it is not difficult to understand the constant psychological trauma faced by Ezra



and Orin Mannon. They return home to relieve themselves of such mental shackles, but in turn are only drawn closer to the diversions of Death.

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## ***Race and the North after the Civil War***

by Jim Manganello, Artistic Assistant at Remy Bumppo

In *Mourning Becomes Electra*, the first person we see and hear is Seth Beckwith, the Mannons' Irish gardener and handyman, who O'Neill describes as "an old man of seventy-five with white hair and beard, tall, raw-boned and stoop-shouldered, his joints stiffened by rheumatism, but still sound and hale." In the Remy Bumppo production, Seth will be played by Veronda G. Carey, a black Chicago actress—who is neither bearded nor old.

Timothy Douglas, Remy Bumppo's Artistic Director and director of our production, came up with the idea reading O'Neill's original script. In a line cut from the Edelstein adaptation we're using at Remy Bumppo, Seth complains, "That durned nigger cook is allus askin' me to fetch wood fur her! You'd think I was her slave! That's what we get fur freein' 'em!" Douglas thought, "I want to hear from her." And so, with Edelstein's enthusiastic approval, Remy Bumppo audiences will experience a provocative bit of non-traditional casting.

The dominant narrative of the Civil War today tends to applaud the North as fighting to fulfill the nation's original promise of liberty and equality. Certainly, some individuals were motivated by such ethics: some of the abolitionists, black leaders like Frederick Douglass, and Union soldiers who were plunged deep into the plantation society, such as the colonel stationed in Louisiana who wrote, "Since I am here, I have learned and seen...what the horrors of slavery was.... Never hereafter will I either speak or vote in favor of slavery." Even Abraham Lincoln was more motivated by pure hatred of the slave-system than he is often credited for.

But while some northerners were motivated by egalitarian ideals, the majority held a slippery opinion of blacks, which can be difficult for modern Americans to comprehend. Said one Union soldier, "I have a good degree of sympathy for the slave, but I like the Negro the father off the better." The general anti-slavery sentiment of the North was motivated more by a hunger for Northern, industrial dominance than by any genuinely egalitarian sentiment. White Northerners wrote minstrel songs in which the message was almost always more about Union pride than emancipation. "Wid musket on my shoulder and wid banjo in my hand," sings one of these black-faced soldiers,

“For Union, and de Constitution as it was, I stand.” Northerners understood slavery as assisting the Confederate war effort, maintaining an essentially functional domestic sphere, so that white men would be at liberty to leave home indefinitely to fight, giving the South a major advantage. Even the political party founded on white supremacist, anti-immigration principles, the Know Nothing party, opposed slavery as an institution, though clearly not for any anti-racist convictions. The Cincinnati Enquirer’s response to the passing of the Emancipation Proclamation of 1863 epitomizes the position of the northern majority: “Slavery is dead, the negro is not, there is the misfortune.”

Sometimes this uncomfortable pairing of political opposition to slavery with a deeply felt racism “du jour” caused explosions in the North. No such explosion was more violent than the New York City draft riots of July 1863, when celebrations of Union victories at Gettysburg and Vicksburg descended into all-out warfare against people of color, upon whom conscripts and their families began to heap resentment, as if the war was solely for the benefit of the black portion of the population at the expense of the white. This resentment was palpable in the grizzly mock-anthem:

Fight for the nigger,  
The sweet-scented nigger,  
The wooly-headed nigger,  
And the Abolition crew.

The thousands-strong mob burned down the Colored Orphans Asylum and attacked, murdered, or lynched any blacks on the street who didn’t flee to safety in New Jersey or find refuge in Central Park. Fresh from the battles this mob was supposedly “celebrating,” the Gettysburg troops had to march into Manhattan to stop the violence after three days.

After the war, the picture for blacks in America was no brighter. Lincoln’s replacement, Andrew Johnson, held none of Lincoln’s egalitarian views. And during the first stage of Reconstruction, he allowed the southern states—once again part of the Union and therefore subject to the provisions of the Emancipation Proclamation—to pass so-called “Black Codes,” which eerily approximated slavery by instating forced black labor and allowing violence toward blacks who didn’t cooperate. The Democratic Party gained much traction against the Lincoln Republicans by running on a racist platform resisting integration of transport and suffrage. The first several rounds of elections in Philadelphia following the Civil War serve as a case study in Northern

resistance to the principles of egalitarianism. From 1867 to 1870, Democrats steadily gained control of the state, running on an anti-black platform. Then, on Election Day, 1871, when prominent black citizen Octavius Catto left the Institute for Colored Youth for the poles, he was shot three times by Frank Kelly, the associate of Democratic politician William McMullen. Two other black men were also shot that day.

This was the inauspicious beginning to the new America. It is the North of Mourning Becomes Electra. And it assumes new meanings on Remy Bumppo's stage.

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## The South Seas: dreaming of escape

by Jim Manganello, Artistic Assistant at Remy Bumppo

Nearly every character in Mourning Becomes Electra expresses an intense desire to escape. This alone is not surprising, given the social, religious, and especially sexual confines of the mid-nineteenth-century New England in which the play is set. More striking, though, is that almost every character imagines escaping to the same faraway locale—the South Sea islands—and two of those characters even succeed in a long-term visit before the play is through.

The geographic term "South Sea islands" is a vague term that can describe a broad range of land masses in the Pacific Ocean, from New Zealand in the south through Hawaii in the north. More commonly called Polynesia today, in its nineteenth-century application, the "South Sea islands" could also refer to what we now call Micronesia and Melanesia.

The history of Western contact with these islands is tangled and contentious. Clearer, though—and more useful to understanding O'Neill's intentions in *Mourning Becomes Electra*—is the romantic ideal many Westerners held of these distant isles. From the beginning of Western “discovery” in this region, the Pacific islands were associated with sexual liberation. The French explorer Louis Antoine de Bougainville, after spending some time on Tahiti in 1768, called the island *Nouvel-Cythere*, after the Greek island *Cythera*, onto which Aphrodite was birthed out of the sea. Tahitians know “no other god but love;” wrote Philibert Comerson, a naturalist on Bougainville's expedition, “every day is consecrated to it, the whole island is its temple, all the women are its idols, all the men its worshippers.” Others on the trip recorded sexual rituals in which those engaged in the act itself were joined by many onlookers and often accompanied by a flautist. They also noted their own Western impotence when invited to be the performers and confronted with such spectacle.

South Sea islanders learned a bit of European capitalism. They began to exchange sexual favors for the invaluable Western commodity: iron, which was readily available to sailors in the form of nails. George Robertson, who travelled on Samuel Wallis' 1767 expedition, wrote that young island girls would often “carry off a nail from every man of the party” in exchange for sexual favors—“some of the fellows was so Extravagent that...they spent two Nails.” A few weeks later, the ship's carpenter complained “every cleat in the Ship was drawn, and all the Nails carried off”; its boatswain reported that most men were “obliged to lie on the deck for want of nails to hand their Hammocks.” The association between sex and the Pacific was mostly strongly ushered into the twentieth century via the paintings of Paul Gauguin, the acidic middle-aged French artist who, in 1891, arrived on Tahiti and took as his paramour *Tehaamana*, thirteen or fourteen at the time.

These early explorers, influenced by the “noble savage” archetype popularized by Rousseau, also found in the islands a refreshing example of society before the plague of “reason” and “civilization.” Captain William Bligh's crew, the now famous men aboard the *HMS Bounty*, supposedly sought escape from Western hierarchies to live on Tahiti. Bligh wrote that the mutineers thought it “in their power...to fix themselves in the

midst of plenty in the finest Island in the World where they need not labour...,” though he also cited sex (the “alurements of dissipation”) as a strong incentive.

By the 1850s, more permanent outposts of Westerners had been established on islands such as New Zealand. These were usually missionary or economic, serving as toeholds for the shipping industry, or as refueling posts for long whaling voyages, where the crew could nourish themselves against scurvy. In an effort to pump up the populations of these small Western settlements, the newly formed New Zealand Company developed a booster campaign that between 1837 and 1880 pumped 40 books and 100 pamphlets back to the West. This propaganda literature portrayed the island in the Pacific as the perfect new home for discontent Westerners. “It is the opinion of persons who have sojourned in different parts of the world that the Anglo-Saxon race can work and expose themselves to the climate of New Zealand for more days of the year and for more hours in the day than in any other country.” So read one promotional brochure. Western food products were reported to improve in Pacific soil: turnips grew to 80 centimeters in diameter; there was talk of a 500-pound pig. “The carrots were not like ordinary carrots,” one New Zealand booster wrote, “they out-carroted carrots.”

But the strongest influence on Eugene O’Neill was Herman Melville’s book, *Typee*, which Orin Mannon says he read repeatedly while fighting in the Civil War so that he could imagine a place of life instead of death. Melville’s novel is a close retelling of his own time on the Marquesas Islands, in the valley of the Tai Pi in 1842. The book, published in 1846, was an instant popular sensation, counteracting the American and English dissatisfaction for complacent, “civilized” life, while also sating the hunger for adventure. Eugene O’Neill draws upon several themes from the novel, as illustrated by the passages below.

**Female beauty** in the islands and a less severe standard of propriety drew Melville as much as earlier Western visitors. Notice how Melville tries to portray the *Typee*’s exotic difference from Western women, while also asserting the human connection between islanders and their “civilized counterparts”—implying that we

mainland folks also have the choice to live more freely, even if that means relocating to the islands.

Among the permanent inmates of the house were likewise several lovely damsels, who instead of thrumming pianos and reading novels, like more enlightened young ladies, substituted for these employments the manufacture of a fine species of tappa; but for the greater portion of the time were skipping from house to house, gadding and gossiping with their acquaintances.

From the rest of these, however, I must except the beautiful nymph Fayaway, who was my peculiar favourite. Her free pliant figure was the very perfection of female grace and beauty. Her complexion was a rich and mantling olive, and when watching the glow upon her cheeks I could almost swear that beneath the transparent medium there lurked the blushes of a faint vermilion. The face of this girl was a rounded oval, and each feature as perfectly formed as the heart of imagination of man could desire. Her full lips, when parted with a smile, disclosed teeth of a dazzling whiteness; and when her rosy mouth opened with a burst of merriment, they looked like the milk-white seeds of the "arta," a fruit of the valley, which, when cleft in twain, shows them reposing in rows on either side, embedded in the red and juicy pulp. Her hair of the deepest brown, parted irregularly in the middle, flowed in natural ringlets over her shoulders, and whenever she chanced to stoop, fell over and hid from view her lovely bosom. Gazing into the depths of her strange blue eyes, when she was in a contemplative mood, they seemed most placid yet unfathomable; but when illuminated by some lively emotion, they beamed upon the beholder like stars. The hands of Fayaway were as soft and delicate as those of any countess; for an entire exemption from rude labour marks the girlhood and even prime of a Typee woman's life. Her feet, though wholly exposed, were as diminutive and fairly shaped as those which peep from beneath the skirts of a Lima lady's dress. The skin of this young creature, from continual ablutions and the use of mollifying ointments, was inconceivably smooth and soft.

I may succeed, perhaps, in particularizing some of the individual features of Fayaway's beauty, but that general loveliness of appearance which they all contributed to produce I will not attempt to describe. The easy unstudied graces of a child of nature like this, breathing from infancy an atmosphere of perpetual summer, and nurtured by the simple fruits of the earth; enjoying a perfect freedom from care and anxiety, and removed effectually from all injurious tendencies strike the eye in a manner which cannot be portrayed....

Fayaway—I must avow the fact—for the most part clung to the primitive and summer garb of Eden. But how becoming the costume! It showed her fine figure to the best possible advantage; and nothing could have been better adapted to her peculiar style of beauty.... As the beauties of our own land delight in bedecking themselves with fanciful articles of jewelry, suspending them from their ears, hanging them about their necks, and clasping them around their wrists; so Fayaway and her companions were in the habit of ornamenting themselves with similar appendages.

Flora was their jeweler. Sometimes they wore necklaces of small carnation flowers, strung like rubies upon a fiber of tappa, or displayed in their ears a single white bud, the stem thrust backward through the aperture, and showing in front the delicate petals folded together in a beautiful sphere and looking like a drop of the purest pearl. Chaplets, too resembling in their arrangement the strawberry coronal worn by an English peeress, and composed of intertwined leaves and blossoms,

often crowned their temples; and bracelets and anklets of the same tasteful pattern were frequently to be seen....

**The (perceived) absence of a codified religion** at Tai Pi was refreshing to Melville, no friend of organized religion, and especially critical of missionary excursions into “heathen” lands. In fact, the Pacific islands held a highly codified set of spiritual beliefs. But coming from Protestant New England, island religion must have seemed liberating. Ezra Mannon, in *Mourning Becomes Electra*, expresses a similar dissatisfaction with American Puritanism: “Life was a dying. Being born was starting to die. Death was being born. How in hell people ever got such notions! That white meeting-house. It stuck in my mind—clean-scrubbed and whitewashed—a temple of death!” Predictably, religious figures decried Melville’s book when it was first released. “An apotheosis of barbarism!” cried the *Christian Parlor Magazine* of New York, “A panegyric of cannibal delights! An apostrophe to the spirit of savage felicity!” These reactions were prompted by such passages in *Typee*:

I am free to confess my almost entire inability to gratify any curiosity that may be felt with regard to the theology of the valley. I doubt whether the inhabitants of themselves could do so. They are either too lazy or too sensible to worry themselves about abstract points of religious belief. While I was among them, they never held any synods or councils to settle the principles of their faith by agitating them. An unbounded liberty of conscience seemed to prevail. Those who pleased to do so were allowed to repose implicit faith in an ill-favored god, with a large bottle-nose, and fat shapeless arms crossed upon his breast; whilst others worshipped an image which, having no likeness either in heaven or on earth, could hardly be called an idol....

Melville’s admiration for both sexual freedom and the absence of Western religions on the island were part of a larger social critique he was mounting against the West. That is, that which we call “civilization” is in fact an unhealthy state in which to live, and idea all too familiar to the characters in *Mourning Becomes Electra*.

One peculiarity that fixed my admiration was the perpetual hilarity reigning through the whole extent of the vale. There seemed to be no cares, griefs, troubles, or vexations in all *Typee*. The hours tripped along as gaily as the laughing couples down a country dance.

There was none of those thousand sources of irritation that the ingenuity of civilized man has created to mar his own felicity. There were no foreclosures of mortgages, no protested notes, no bills payable, no debts of honor, in *Typee*; no unreasonable tailors and shoemakers, perversely bent on being paid; no duns of any description; no assault and battery attorneys, to foment discord, backing their clients up to a quarrel, and then knocking their heads together; no poor relations everlastingly occupying the spare bed-chamber, and diminishing the elbow-room at the family table; no destitute widows with their children starving on the cold charities

of the world; no beggars; no debtor's prisons; no proud and hard-hearted nabobs in Typee; or, to sum up all in one word—no Money! That "root of all evil" was not to be found in the valley.

In this secluded abode of happiness there were no cross old women, no cruel step-dames, no withered spinsters, no love-sick maidens, no sour old bachelors, no inattentive husbands, no melancholy young men, no blubbing youngsters, and no squalling brats. All was mirth, fun, and high good humor. Blue devils, hypochondria, and doleful dumps went and hid themselves among the nooks and crannies of the rocks.

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