

# THE PLAY IN REVIEW

## 'Iceman Cometh,' Mr. O'Neill's New Work, With Four-Hour Running Time, Has Its World Premiere at the Martin Beck

THE ICEMAN COMETH, Eugene O'Neill's marathon play in four acts. Staged by Eddie Dowling; scenery designed and lighted by Robert Edmond Jones; production under the supervision of Theresa Helburn and Lawrence Langner; associate producer, Armina Marshall; presented by the Theatre Guild. At the Martin Beck Theatre.

Harry Hope	Dudley Digges
Ed Mosher	Morton L. Stevens
Pat McGloin	Al McGranery
Willie Oban	E. G. Marshall
Joe Mott	John Marriott
Piet Wetjoen	Frank Tweddell
Cecil Lewis	Nicholas Joy
James Cameron	Russell Collins
Hugo Kalmar	Leo Chalzel
Larry Slade	Carl Benton Reid
Rocky Poggi	Tom Pedi
Dan Parritt	Paul Crabtree
Pearl	Ruth Gilbert
Margie	Jeanne Cagney
Cora	Marcella Markham
Chuck Morello	Joe Marr
Theodore Hickman	James E. Barton
Moran	Michael Wyler
Lieb	Charles Hart



**IN THE PLAY:** "It's just that I know now from experience what a lying pipe dream can do to you—and how damned relieved and contented with yourself you feel when you're rid of it."—James Barton (second from left) to Nicholas Joy, Dudley Digges and Carl Benton Reid in "The Iceman Cometh."

By BROOKS ATKINSON

Mr. O'Neill has written one of his best plays. Dipping back in his memory thirty-four years, reaching down to the tattered demotions of a mouldy bar-room, he has come up with a dark and somber play that compares with the best work of his earliest period. "The Iceman Cometh," he calls it to no one's satisfaction but his own, and it was acted with rare insight and vitality at the Martin Beck last evening. Writing it for a performance that lasts more than four hours is a sin that rests between Mr. O'Neill and his Maker. Long plays have become nothing more than a bad label with our first dramatist.

But if that is the way Mr. O'Neill wants to afflict harmless playgoers, let us accept our fate with nothing more than a polite demurer. For the only thing that matters is that he has plunged again into the black quagmire of man's illusions and composed a rigadon of death as strange and elemental as his first works. Taking his characters again out of the lower depths, as he did in the "S. S. Glencairn" series, he is looking them over with bleak and mature introspection. And like all his best work, this one is preeminentlyactable. The Theatre Guild performance, under Eddie Dowling's direction, is a masterpiece of tones, rhythms and illumination.

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The whisky-ridden derelicts who drag their broken carcasses through Harry Hope's bar came out of O'Neill's youth when he, too, was drinking too much and dreaming of becoming a writer. They are men whose only lives are illusions—"pie dreams," O'Neill calls their memories which they foolishly translate into hopes for a future that will never exist. When the play opens they are happily living together in a spirit of human rancor, broken, tired and drunken but buoyed up by romantic illusions about themselves.

What shatters their stupor is the arrival of an old comrade who has reformed. He has found peace at last, he says. He does not need whisky any more, he says, because he has purged himself of illusions and knows the full truth of him-

self. Instead of making them kind of lumbering precision. The happy, however, his reform movement destroys their decaying contentment. Without illusions, they find themselves standing alone and terrified. They cannot face the hollowness of themselves without the opium of illusions. But they are released in the last act by the awful discovery that their teacher has freed himself from illusions by committing a crime that will sit him in the electric chair. He is free from illusions because he has resigned from life and is already dead in spirit. Whereupon, the derelicts drink up again and happily relapse into the stupor of the bottle.

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That is the abstract story of "The Iceman Cometh." But the concrete drama on the stage is infinitely more flavorsome. Among its battered wretches it includes a raffish lot of social outcasts in amazing variety—an I. W. W. émigré, a broken gambler, a cop who was thrown off the force, a British infantry officer who stole regimental funds, a Boer commando leader who showed the white feather, the well-educated son of an embezzler, some prostitutes and barkeeps. The Lord knows they talk too much, for Mr. O'Neill insists on grinding their bitterness into very small and precise pieces. But it is good talk—racy, angry, comic drumbeats on the lid of doom, and a strong undercurrent of elemental drama silently washes the gloomy charnel-house where they sit waiting.

Surely it is no accident that most of Mr. O'Neill's plays act well. Although he seems on the surface to be a literal writer, interminably fussing over minor details, his best plays move across the stage as methodically and resolutely as a heavy battle attack, and over-run strategic points with a

performance of "The Iceman Cometh" ranks among the theatre's finest works. To house these rags and tags of the human race, Robert Edmond Jones has created a mean and dingy last refuge that nevertheless glows with an articulate meaning, like a Daumier print, as one alert spectator observed.

To anyone who loves acting, Dudley Digges' performance as the tottering and irascible saloon proprietor is worth particular cherishing. Although the old man is half dead, Mr. Digges' command of the actor's art of expressing character and theme is brilliantly alive; it overflows with comic and philosophical expression. As the messenger of peace, James Barton is also superb—common, unctuous, cheerful and fanatical; and Mr. Barton reads one of the longest speeches on record without letting it drift off into sing-song or monotony.

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As the barroom's master of cosmic thinking, Carl Benton Reid is vigorously incisive, and lends substance to the entire performance. Nicholas Joy is giving the best performance of his career as the unfrocked captain. As the garrulous night bartender, Tom Pedi with his querulous vitality streaks an amusing ribbon of color throughout the drama. There are also notable performances by John Marriott, as the discredited gambler; Paul Crabtree, as an I. W. W. traitor, and E. G. Marshall, as a fallen Harvard man.

If there were any justice in the world, all the actors would get a line of applause here. But this bulletin, like Mr. O'Neill's play, is already much too garrulous. Let us cut it short with one final salute to a notable drama by a man who writes with the heart and wonder of a poet.