

JEFFERSON EDUCATIONAL SOCIETY

Quick, Timely Reads
On the Waterfront

Chasing Eugene O'Neill
The Salesman's Life

By David Frew
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Eugene O'Neill from a 1924 Time Magazine cover

My father was a salesman. Even though we lived within walking distance of the West 12th Street factory district and almost all the fathers in my neighborhood worked in one of the companies, which populated that venerable strip of

manufacturing firms, my dad was different. Instead of leaving the house each morning with a lunch bucket and walking up Cascade Street to one of the many businesses that would have provided a steady living as well as an almost guaranteed fixed-benefit pension, he chose to explore the “opportunities” that presented themselves in the vast but unsteady world of sales and marketing. He sold cars, both new and used models, delighting me by bringing a vast array of odd vehicles home most days after work. He would slap a dealer’s plate on the car of his choice and bring it home after work, a benefit that was driven by his persuasive skills. He was perpetually showing his take-home automobiles to friends, neighbors, and relatives and sometimes making a “deal.” I must have gone along on dozens of test rides with my father and his “prospects.” Perhaps having a cute little kid in the backseat during a test ride helped to close more than one deal (I was cute then).

The downside of living with a dad who was a commission-driven salesperson was the unsteady nature of economic life at home. When he was able to sell a car or two, mostly when the weather was warm, we had plenty of everything. But there were weeks and months when things were sparse. I often asked why he did not get a factory job and the answers that I received from family members were more than a bit scary. My father had been drafted into the Army during the early days of World War II and had experienced the horrors of the beaches at Normandy as well as the almost endless “Battle of the Bulge.” He returned from the war physically unscathed, but psychologically damaged. One of the things that he could not tolerate was the inside of a factory with its typical loud noises. These days we would categorize those characteristics as PTSD but during the 1950s no one understood such esoterica.

His career as a salesman included selling cars, appliances, and electronics. He worked for a long time at Warren Radio during the early days of television, driving throughout the region to supply small-town, television and radio shops with vacuum tubes, chassis assemblies, switches, and other electronic parts. And while those jobs featured autonomy as well as an opportunity to be out and about, and with people, each seemed to end with a major technological shift that left my father hanging onto the final stages of a dying industry. Family members grumbled. They continued to wonder why he didn’t just walk up to 12th Street and sign on as a factory worker. Back in those days the demand for “steady” workers was enormous and a loyal employee at almost any of the factories would make a comfortable living and earn a defined benefit pension.

Eventually, the ups and downs of my father’s irregular career took such a toll on our family that he and my mother separated. Growing up I often connected his life as a salesman with the difficulties that my family experienced when I was a boy. I somehow concluded that family issues were related to the fact that my father did not have a steady factory job. When I entered college, I was not sure what I wanted to be “when I grew up” but I was sure that it would not include

sales. Beginning college at Gannon in 1960, I signed up for engineering classes but thanks to a required core curriculum class in English literature I was exposed to Arthur Miller's "Death of a Salesman." Not only did we read and discuss the entire play, but we were required to watch a film version of the play. Watching the struggles of the play's central character, Willy Loman, had a powerful impact on me. It made me vicariously relive the struggles of my father and our family.

Professor John Rouch required that we choose a playwright and do an in-depth term paper in which we examined one of his major works. I recall meeting with Dr. Rouch in his office and telling him how much I was impacted by "Death of a Salesman" and why. When I explained my personal experiences with having a father who was a salesman and the frustrations connected to his lack of a steady income Dr. Rouch made a recommendation that had a powerful impact on my life. He suggested that if I was drawn to Arthur Miller's writing that I might be even more profoundly moved by the work of Eugene O'Neill. After briefly introducing me to O'Neill and his work he loaned me his own worn copy of "The Ice Man Cometh," and asked me to come back to his office to chat after I had begun reading it. At the time I had absolutely no idea who Eugene O'Neill was.

I was stunned by the time and personal attention that John Rouch took with me, a semi-literate engineering student who had little or no exposure to such powerful literature. "Ice Man Cometh," like "Death of a Salesman," is a narrative that revolves about the unrealistic and neurotic ambitions of a salesman. It is another American tragedy, but even more complicated and frightening. Both writers, Arthur Miller (Death) and Eugene O'Neill (Ice Man), had met salesmen and held them in low regard. For O'Neill, who was an Arthur Miller contemporary, the destructive social network driven by the play's main character, Theodore "Hickey" Hickman is even more complicated because, as the plot evolves, the salesman comes to terms with his failures and desperately tries to make the huge network of friends who he has influenced aware of their unrealistic fantasies as well as the problems associated with their drinking.

O'Neill was a tragic character, himself. Born in New York City in 1888, O'Neill struggled to find a viable profession. As a young man he went to sea, where he was both terrorized and delighted by life as a sailor. He contracted tuberculosis in 1912 and was in a sanitarium for two years. During his time in the TB hospital, he decided that he should become a writer so in 1914 he enrolled at Harvard to learn how to write, but he dropped out after a year. From 1915 to 1920 he completed several plays, a few of which were successful on Broadway. He married twice, had children and moved about, spending time in Paris as well as New England and Georgia.

Life shifted dramatically for him in 1929 when he met and married an actress named Carlotta Monterey. In 1937, she convinced him to leave Sea Island, Georgia and move across the country and closer to her original home, near San Francisco.

At the time of their departure from Sea Island there was a scare among residents of the coastal island that crews from the Nazi U-Boats, which were patrolling the coast, might come ashore and kidnap wealthy Americans, and take them back to Germany.



O'Neill on the beach at Sea Island, Georgia

While I have spent much of my adult life as a fan of O'Neill's plays and have seen almost all of them several times, including "Ice Man Cometh," I was not aware that he had done much of his writing on the West Coast. I had always thought of O'Neill as a New Englander who split time between New York City and Connecticut. This changed a few months ago when I was visiting my son who lives in San Ramon, California. One Sunday morning, my son asked if I would like to visit the home of Eugene O'Neill. He knew of my love of O'Neill plays. I was shocked to learn that the playwright who has been so important to me had lived and worked in California, and within a few miles of my son's home.



Denzel Washington as "Hickey" in "Ice Man Cometh"

Recognizing the genius of O'Neill's writing, his third wife Carlotta convinced him to build a house and writer's retreat far from the distractions of the East Coast. She could see that he was struggling with health issues, connected in part to his drinking, and presumed that if they were to get away from New York she could protect him from distractions and help him to focus on his work. O'Neill's parents and older brother had already succumbed from drinking problems by the time they moved west in 1937 and O'Neill, himself, was clearly struggling with alcoholism.



Mount Diablo, which dominates the landscape of the San Ramon Valley, can be seen from the Tao House.



Carlotta Monterey

They chose a lovely ridge within view of Mount Diablo in the San Ramon Valley and used money that O'Neill had been awarded for his 1936 Pulitzer Prize to build

a writer's retreat. The Tau House, as they called their new compound, was out of the way, secluded and beautiful. It featured oriental architecture, elaborate gardens and a large swimming pool. Since O'Neill's death in 1953, the Tau House has become a popular tourist destination operated by the National Park Service. The compound includes a barn that has been converted into a small theater where O'Neill plays are regularly produced, as well as a museum that includes the writer's library, desk, and photographs.



The Tao House in San Ramon



Interior of the Tao House

My visit to the Tau House brought back a flood of memories. I wandered the museum-house, reading about O'Neill plays that I have seen, including "Ice Man," "Long Day's Journey into Night," and more. Both Ice Man and Long Day's Journey, two of my favorites, were written there in San Ramon. That visit also reminded me of the many television and film adaptations of O'Neill's work and the diverse array of stars who have been cast as O'Neill characters, including Jason Robards, Brian Denehy, James Earl Jones, and Denzel Washington. But

most of all it rekindled vivid memories of a young professor who took time to inspire a raw, young student's life-long interest in a literary character and live theater: Dr. John Rouch.



Professor John Rouch

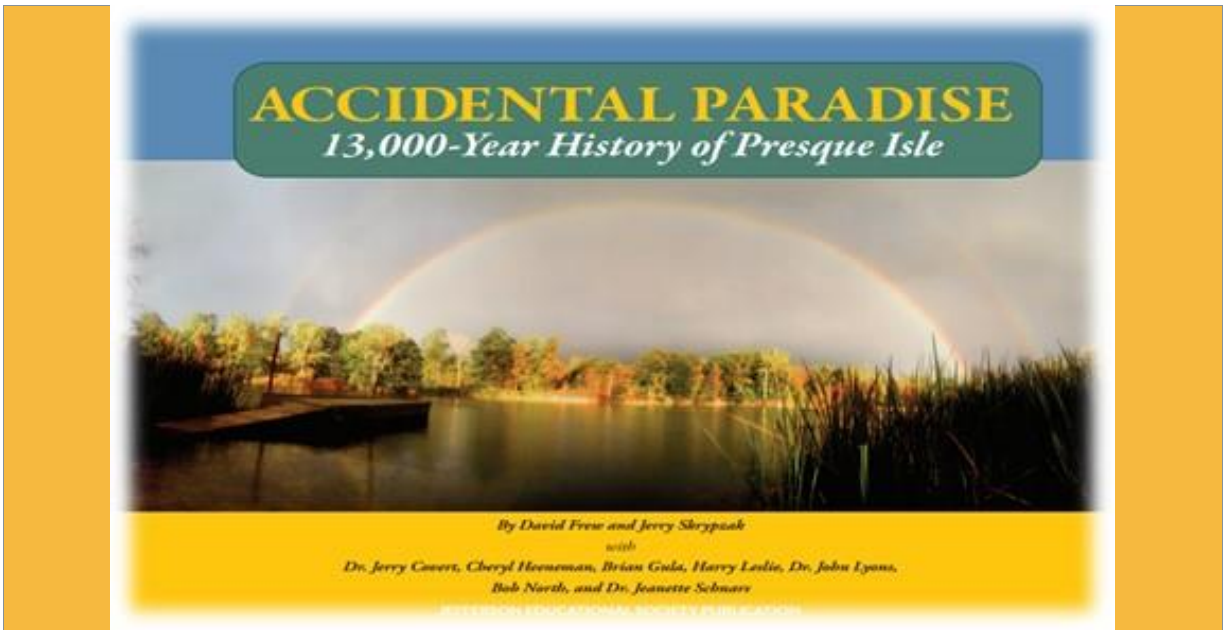
A number of Sea Island residents, including families from Erie, abandoned their oceanside mansions and the busy steamboat landing during the World War II era. Submarine spotting stations continue along the coastline.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Historian and author David Frew, Ph.D., is a Scholar-in-Residence at the JES. An emeritus professor at Gannon University, he held a variety of administrative positions during a 33-year career. He is also emeritus director of the Erie County Historical Society/Hagen History Center and is president of his own management consulting business. Frew has written or co-written 35 books and more than 100 articles, cases, and papers.



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