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Alexei Borodin Brings Eugene O'Neill Back to Moscow

By John Freedman

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Eugene O'Neill. The name has a ring like Chekhov. It sounds like a rock on which you could found something. Like a national tradition of drama.

Modern American drama began with O'Neill in the early decades of the 20th century and his influence spread fast and wide. His plays were already making waves in Moscow by the mid-1920s, even before such important plays as "Lazarus Laughs" and the trilogy "Mourning Becomes Electra," "A Moon for the Misbegotten" and "Long Day's Journey Into Night" had been written.

O'Neill's earliest champion in Russia was Alexander Tairov. He staged hugely influential productions of "Desire Under the Elms" (1926), "The Hairy Ape" (1926) and "All God's Chillun Got Wings" (1929) at the Kamerny Theater — the venue we now know as the Pushkin.

Recently O'Neill has slipped into that dubious category of great playwrights who are so great

that you don't have to stage them to know they are great.

I'm exaggerating a tad. The Et Cetera Theater mounted "Beyond the Horizon" in the mid-1990s. Pavel Safonov staged "Long Day's Journey Into Night" a few years back at the Mossoviet Theater. But until Alexei Borodin unveiled "Mourning Becomes Electra" at the National Youth Theater on Friday, one could say that O'Neill's plays virtually have been ignored here in recent decades.

I will not review this production, titled "Electra's Fate," because I had a very small hand in a project running parallel to it. Among other things, I interviewed the director for an oversized souvenir booklet supported with a grant from the U.S. Embassy's American Seasons cultural program. I can only hope that my more-than-modest involvement in no way detracts from the importance of Borodin's production.

"I had never seen O'Neill on stage," the director told me this summer in his spectacular office overlooking the square in front of the Bolshoi Theater. "The first of his plays that I read was 'A Moon for the Misbegotten,' and it was a shock for me. Then there was 'Desire Under the Elms,' of which I saw photographs from Tairov's production. I once analyzed scenes from 'Anna Christie' with my students. I can't say I had any particular knowledge of his drama, but I had no doubt that this was a world unto itself. One that requires you to immerse yourself in it fully."

I asked Borodin whether Chekhov's acknowledged influence on O'Neill meant there was something Russian at the root of the American writer's work.

"I don't know whether there are any Russian roots," Borodin replied, "but I definitely perceive him as a post-Chekhov author who takes things further. I have my own personal chain — Chekhov-O'Neill-Albee. I often find myself saying during rehearsals, 'You've got to play this as if it were [Edward] Albee.' Albee is one of my favorite writers. He has a similar method of turning things inside out. Only he does it triply. Chekhov turned things inside out. O'Neill gave them a second twist and Albee a third. I wouldn't call it influence so much as expansion on what Chekhov did. It's not a matter of the influence of one person on another; it is a matter of similarities in the perception of environment and time."

One of the most distinctive features of "Electra's Fate" is the set design by Borodin's longtime collaborator Stanislav Benediktov. It consists of stylized columns, walls and windows that spin and transform easily, creating the impression of geometry cut loose on stage.

Describing his work, the designer stated, "My main task was to create a black-and-white world, a space of tragedy. To arrive at a generalization and create a kind of labyrinthine home from which there is no exit. This home is a living entity that changes in time. By playing with space, I came up with the form, which in some ways is reminiscent of Constructivist stylistics of the 1920s when the trilogy was written."

Borodin placed a great deal of weight on his production's physical appearance.

"At a certain point, I began to think this production should be like a black-and-white film," he told me. "Remember Eisenstein's 'Ivan the Terrible,' in which a few colored scenes create a stunning effect. Here we have a green dress — as if inserted arbitrarily — that has

an emotional impact. Impulsive. This kind of minimalism was planned from the beginning."

"O'Neill wrote about the strength that is necessary to hold your own road," Borodin said of the play's themes. "About how human freedom can be crushed by the pressure of forces that oppose a person on that road."