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The New O'Neill Play

By ALEXANDER WOOLLCOTT

The Provincetown Players began their new season in Macdougall Street last week with the impetus of a new play by the as yet unbridled Eugene O'Neill, an extraordinarily striking and dramatic study of panic fear which is called "The Emperor Jones." It reinforces the impression that for strength and originality he has no rival among the American writers for the stage.

Though this new play of his is so clumsily produced that its presentation consists largely of long, unventilated intermissions interspersed with fragmentary scenes, it weaves a most potent spell, thanks partly to the force and cunning of the author, thanks partly in the admirable playing of Charles S. Gilpin in a title role so predominant that the play is little more than a dramatic monologue. His is an uncommonly powerful and imaginative performance, in several respects unsurpassed this season in New York. Mr. Gilpin is a negro.

The Emperor Jones is a burly darky from the States who has broken jail there and escaped as a stowaway to what the program describes as "a West Indian island not yet self-determined by white marines." There, thanks a good deal to the American business philosophy he had picked up as a half-preoccupied porter listening wide-eyed in the smoking rooms of the Pullman cars back home, he is sufficiently bold, ingenious and unscrupulous to make himself ruler within two years. He has moved unharmed among his sullen subjects by virtue of a legend of his invention that only a silver bullet could harm in – this part of the play, at least, is *not* Mr. O'Neill's invention – but now, when he has squeezed from his domain just about all the wealth it will yield, he suspects it would be well for him to take flight. As the play begins, the measured sound of a beating tom-tom in the hills gives warning that the natives are in conclave there, using all manner of incantations to work up their courage to the point of rebellion.

The hour of Emperor Jones has come, and nightfall finds him already at the edge of the distant forest, through whose trackless waste he knows a way to safety and freedom. He has food hidden there and, anyway, his revolver carries five bullets for his enemies and one of silver for himself in case he is ever really cornered.

It is a bold, self-reliant adventurer who strikes out into the jungle at sunset. It is a confused, broken, naked, half-crazed creature who, at dawn, stumbles blindly back to his starting place, only to find the natives calmly waiting there to shoot him down with bullets they have been piously molding according to his own prescription.

The forest has broken him. Full of strange sounds and shadows, it conjures up visions of his own and his ancestral past. These haunt him, and in each crisis of fear he fires wildly into the darkness and goes crashing on through the underbrush, losing his way, wasting

all of his defense, signaling his path, and waking a thousand sinister echoes to work still more upon his terrible fear.

It begins with the rattle of invisible dice in the darkness, and then, as in a little clearing, he suddenly sees the squatting darky he had slain back home in a gamblers' quarrel. He plunges on, but only to find himself once more strangely caught in the old chain gang, while the guard cracks that same whip whose stinging lash had goaded him to another murder. Then, as his fear quickens, the forest fills with old-fashioned people who stare at him and bid for him. They seem to be standing him on some sort of block. They examine his teeth, test his strength, flex his biceps. The scene yields only to the galley of a slave ship, and his own cries of terror take up the rhythmic lamentation of his people. Finally, it is a race memory of old Congo fears which drives him shrieking back through the forest to the very clearing whence he had started and where now his death so complacently awaits him.

From first to last, through all of the agonizing circle of his flight, he is followed by the dull beat, beat, beat, of the tom-tom, ever nearer, ever faster, till it seems to be playing an ominous accompaniment to his mounting panic. The heightening effect of this device is much as you might imagine.

The Provincetown Players have squanderously invested in cushions for their celebrated seats and a concrete dome to catch and dissolve their lights, so that even on their little stage they can now get such illusions of distance and the wide outdoors as few of their uptown rivals can achieve. But of immeasurably greater importance in their present enterprise, they have acquired an actor, one who has it in him to invoke the pity and the terror and indescribable foreboding which are part of the secret of "The Emperor Jones."

Notes on the 1933 film

Chosen by the Library Of Congress in 1999 for the National Film Registry, **The Emperor Jones** (1933) has almost never been shown in its original form over its 70-year career. Now a restoration funded the Library of Congress has been released on DVD by Image Entertainment.

Independent producer/director Dudley Murphy was a white filmmaker with a strong interest in African-American life and stories. Early in the talkie era, Murphy used his access to RCA's sound recording equipment to make two short movies that became essential records of early jazz performers, *St. Louis Blues* (1929) starring Bessie Smith and *Black And Tan* (1929) starring Duke Ellington. However, Murphy's dream was a film adaptation of Eugene O'Neill's 1920 one-act play *The Emperor Jones*.

The future Nobel Prize-winning dramatist's play concerns the last day and night in the life of Brutus Jones, a Pullman porter from the United States who has become the brutal dictator of a small Caribbean island. Murphy long desired the property for a movie

version but O'Neill's price was too high. However, as with so many at the time, the Depression put O'Neill in need of money. He sold the rights to the play for \$30,000 with the single requirement that the lead be played by Paul Robeson.

Robeson, a law student who ventured into acting in the early 1920's, got one of his first breaks in a revival of O'Neill's play. His towering presence and rich, bass voice made him the most famous African-American star of the 1920's and 1930's, but racism in the United States and his own progressive politics led Robeson to move to the more genial climate of England. Robeson agreed to return to take the lead in the film version of **The Emperor Jones**, with the requirement that no scenes would be shot in the racially segregated South.

The resulting film, which Murphy directed with William C. DeMille, Cecil B.'s brother, was a mixed achievement. By necessity, O'Neill's short play was fleshed out, showing Jones' rise from railroad lackey to island emperor. O'Neill's play, in fact, does not begin until 51 minutes into this 76 minute film. The first third of the movie, detailing Jones' life before arriving on the island, plays like a typical movie made for black audiences of the time: speakeasies, a catfight, a knifing over a crap game. There are only two differences from the more run-of-the-mill movies Oscar Micheaux was then directing, superior camerawork from cinematographer Ernest Haller and Robeson's performance. Robeson dominates the film from his first scene; so good that the actors around him seem weak by comparison. The only actor that can begin to hold his ground with Robeson is Dudley Diggs who plays the sniveling, sweaty Cockney trader Smithers.

Robeson's great performance in this film, one of the best of the 1930's, would remain mostly unseen at the time. Few theaters in the United States would book the film and those that did demanded cuts such as a scene in which the new Emperor makes the white man Smithers light his cigarette. Meanwhile, in an effort to make the film palatable for segregated black audiences, the word "nigger," often used in the film, was physically cut out, leaving the movie a jumbled mess.

The Library Of Congress' restoration team had a time piecing it back together and even now a few scenes are missing and freeze frames appear in places to allow time for the restored, uncensored soundtrack. The picture quality on this DVD is excellent and well encoded on the DVD. However, this 76-minute film and a one-page flyer telling the history of the movie is all that is included. Otherwise, there are no extras. As much as the Library Of Congress should be applauded for restoring the film, this seems horribly meager for a DVD presentation of the sole film version of a work by one of America's greatest playwrights, containing one of America's greatest performances and with one of the few portraits of African-American life made at that time.

Paul Robeson Biography

In Princeton, New Jersey on April 9, 1898, Paul Robeson was born to a former slave, the Rev. William Robeson. His mother, a teacher, died shortly thereafter when he was only five years old. Three years later, the Robeson family moved to Westfield, New Jersey. In 1910, Robeson's father became pastor of St. Thomas A.M.E. Zion Church and the Robeson family moved to Somerville, New Jersey. Paul Robeson attended Somerville High School. There, Robeson excelled in sports, drama, singing, academics, and debating. He graduated from Somerville High School in 1915.

Robeson was awarded a four year academic scholarship to Rutgers University in 1915, the third black student in the history of the institution. Despite the openly racist and violent opposition he faced, Robeson became a twelve letter athlete excelling in baseball, basketball, football, and track. He was named to the All American Football team on two occasions. In addition to his athletic talents, Robeson was named a Phi Beta Kappa scholar, belonged to the Cap & Skull Honor Society, and graduated valedictorian of his class in 1919.

He went on to study law at Columbia in New York and received his degree in 1923. There he met and married Eslanda Cardozo Goode, who was the first black woman to head a pathology laboratory. Robeson worked as a law clerk in New York, but once again faced discrimination and soon left the practice because a white secretary refused to take dictation from him.

At this point in his life, Paul returned to his childhood love of drama and singing. He starred in Eugene O'Neill's *All God's Chillun Got Wings* in 1924, creating the starring role. While the racial subject matter of the play spurred controversy and protest, he went on to star in another play by O'Neill - *Emperor Jones*. Perhaps he is most widely recognized from the musical *Showboat*, where he changed the lines of the song "Old Man River". His eleven films included *Body and Soul*, *Jericho*, and *Proud Valley*.

His concert career reads like a world traveler's passport: New York, Vienna, Prague, Budapest, Germany, Paris, Holland, London, Moscow, and Nairobi. His travels taught him that racism was not as prevalent in Europe as it was back home. In the United States, he couldn't enter theaters through the front door or sing without intimidation and protest, but in London he was welcomed with open arms and standing ovations. Robeson believed in the universality of music and that by performing Negro spirituals and other cultures' folk songs, he could promote intercultural understanding. As a result, he became a citizen of the world, singing for peace and equality in twenty-five languages.

During the 1940's Robeson continued to have success on the stage, in film, and in concert halls, but remained face to face with prejudice and racism. After finding the Soviet Union to be a tolerant and friendly nation, he began to protest the growing Cold War hostilities between the United States and the USSR. He began to question why African-Americans should support a government that did not treat them as equals. At a time when dissent was hardly tolerated, Robeson was looked upon as an enemy by his government. In 1947, he was named by the House Committee on Un-American Activities, and the State Department denied him a passport until 1958. Events such as these, along with a negative public response, led to the demise of his public career.

Paul Robeson died on January 23, 1976, in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania after living in seclusion for ten years. Robeson's legacy has been an inspiration to millions around the world. His courageous stance against oppression and inequality in part led to the civil rights movement of the 1960s. Through his stage and film performances he opened doors to inter-racial performances. With his travels across America and abroad, he opened the world's eyes to oppression. Robeson stood tall and proud against powerful governmental and societal forces. He remains in our memory a successful scholar, athlete, performer, and activist.

In the words of Paul Robeson: *"To be free -to walk the good American earth as equal citizens, to live without fear, to enjoy the fruits of our toil to give our children every opportunity in life - that dream which we have held so long in our hearts is today the destiny that we hold in our hands."* (Robeson 108)

Contour In Time

By TRAVIS BOGARD

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On the night of November 1, 1920, *The Emperor Jones* took O'Neill and the Provincetown Players beyond any horizon they had envisioned. Against Cook's plaster dome, moving in chiaroscuro through Cleon Throckmorton's silhouetted setting, and energized by the performances of Charles Gilpin and Jasper Deeter, the play amply repaid the faith that had been lavished upon it. It was proof that the Players had fostered a truly American playwright; it was proof that O'Neill's dedication to his art was in fact a true vocation; and it demonstrated conclusively that there was an untouched world of theatre yet to be explored in America. What *Beyond the Horizon* had suggested—that an ordinary American could become a subject of pathetic concern and on occasion could rise to the height of a tragic figure—was abundantly demonstrated in the account of the rise and fall of Brutus Jones. Moreover, the technical excitements of the play, with its drums, its sustained monologue, its rapidly shifting settings framed into a single desperate action were almost blinding in their virtuosity and in their assurance of important theatrical things to come. Not only the literate American drama, but the American theatre came of age with this play.

The play was an overnight success. The Provincetown had had no experience with a runaway hit and coped bewilderedly with the long lines waiting to buy tickets the morning after the opening. Operating on a subscription system, the box office sold a thousand subscriptions during the first week of the run, and extra performances were scheduled to accommodate the demand. By late December, the little playhouse was overwhelmed, and under the management of Adolph Klauber, the play moved to an uptown engagement, somewhat hesitantly offered at a series of special matinees like those with which *Beyond the Horizon* had been launched. The matinees were scheduled for December 27, 28, 30 and 31, and again the play triumphed. The special engagement was extended for five weeks, until on January 29, it began a regular run, that climaxed with a two-year road tour.¹

The success was the rock on which the Players foundered, yet their demise was inevitable from the very nature of their idealism. More important in considering the development of O'Neill's work is that *The Emperor Jones*, while it confirmed O'Neill's direction and justified his dedication, set him on a path that at its farthest end was to prove artistically perilous. For with the play, O'Neill accepted the dicta of the American Art Theatre movement and began to write plays that moved far from his realistic style. He became a writer from whom "experiment" was expected, and one who would sometimes put the dictates of style over the development of theme and character.

The Emperor Jones charts a difficult course between expressionism and realism. In its inception, it was little different from the realistic plays of the past. The figure of Brutus Jones was suggested, O'Neill said, by the character of a bartender he had known, but other acquaintances and the figures of Henri Christophe and Haiti's President Sam, who, like Jones, had a silver bullet, contributed elements to the portrait. A prospecting expedition to Honduras in 1909 gave O'Neill a sense of the reality of a jungle, and he claimed that the pulse of blood in his eardrums during a bout with malaria on that trip gave him the idea of the drum beat used throughout the play.² Another important influence was a book of

Two of O'Neill's favorite authors may have contributed something to the formation of *The Emperor Jones*. The recollection of Buck, Jack London's dog-turned-wolf in *The Call of the Wild*, may have suggested the racial atavism of the last moments of Jones's life. In Joseph Conrad's *The Heart of Darkness* the graphic depiction of man's capitulation to the primordial darkness of the jungle may also have helped to create the picture of Jones, clad in the burlesque uniform of exploitation, but reduced in the end to primitive nakedness, to rags that in Conrad's words "would fly off at the first good shake." Yet in its dramatic form and in many aspects of its theme, the primary source of O'Neill's play is, unexpectedly, Ibsen.*

The parallels between *The Emperor Jones* and *Peer Gynt* are many and specific. Both plays are about fugitives, running in desperation through the shards of their lives toward a dimly seen salvation whose discovery depends on their learning their essential identities. Much compressed and less oriented toward allegory, O'Neill's play is no more intense than Ibsen's, particularly in those scenes where Peer is alone and in flight—at first from the Trolls, then in the Arabian desert, and finally from the Button-Moulder and his sentence of damnation. The actions of both plays focus on terror and self-discovery, and the crucial moment in both are acted in brief scenes by the protagonists alone onstage, speaking in monologue.

Not only in their dramatic rhythm, emotional pattern and general shape of the action, but in specific episodes, similarities occur. The most notable is Jones's meeting with the Little Formless Fears at the beginning of his flight. As O'Neill describes them,

They are black, shapeless, only their glittering little eyes can be seen. If they have any describable form at all it is that of a grub-worm about the size of a creeping child. They move noiselessly, but with deliberate, painful effort, striving to raise themselves on end, failing and sinking prone again. . . . From (them) comes a tiny gale of low mocking laughter like a rustling of leaves. (189)

When they are dispersed by his revolver shot, Jones reassures himself that "Dey was only little animals—little wild pigs, I reckon."

The Fears are a compound of many of the mysteries Peer meets on his forest run: the formless Boyg, the leaves that talk in the voices of children and the trolls themselves, who, when truly seen, are pigs.

The first title of *The Emperor Jones* was *The Silver Bullet*, an indication of the importance of the bullet in the play's design. Jones's bullet is his emperorhood epitomized in a single destructive symbol; it is his talisman, his rabbit's foot, his fate. When it is gone, he must go to his death. In *Peer Gynt*, the bullet is paralleled by the silver button, Peer's legacy from his father, his squandered inheritance, his wasted soul. Peer, like the silver button, must be melted down again into the mass.⁴

Both button and bullet symbolize the essence of the self of the protagonists, and in both, that self is called an "Emperor." Peer is the Emperor of the Gyntian Self, dreaming of

ruling Peeropolis in the kingdom of Gyntiana, but he is crowned in a Cairo madhouse and his government, founded on “wishes, appetites and desires,” controls a kingdom of lies, dreams and cheating illusions. The Emperor of Self is an Emperor of self-deception, whose life-lie forms the trumpety substance of his existence. At the end of his life, he realizes that he is empty, an onion stripped of exterior covering to reveal nothing at the center. Down on all fours in the forest, he compares himself to an animal and writes his own mock-epitaph, “Here lies Peer Gynt, a decent chap, who was Emperor of all the beasts.”⁵ At the play’s end, Peer will discover where his Empire lay, but although Ibsen’s ending in tone and meaning is very different from O’Neill’s, both playwrights reduce their Emperor-heroes to the condition of groveling animals.

The conformity of the two works in shape and theme is close, although it is difficult to estimate whether O’Neill was aware of the parallels. Ibsen’s stage images seem to have formed part of the stored material on which he drew just as he used his memory of life on the waterfront and at sea. In the end, whatever its indebtedness, *The Emperor Jones* is authentically O’Neill’s in form and statement, an outgrowth of many of the experiments he had undertaken in the years before. The long monologue, developed to a self-conscious point in *Before Breakfast*, is now used superbly to its fullest extent. The concentration of light in surrounding darkness to suggest the spiritual isolation of his characters becomes now a significant stage image. The Negro dialect, with which he had experimented crudely in *The Dreamy Kid*, is made an authentic language. Finally, the attempt with the ghosts in *Where the Cross Is Made* to catch an audience up into madness is repeated in the form of the visions Jones sees and in the drum beat directed as much toward the audience as toward Jones.

O’Neill’s success with all of his stage devices, his conscious skill at controlling the effects he needs, mark the play, despite its reliance on Ibsen, as an original work. It was the first major drama of the new American theatre, and it has remained vital, although, in retrospect, it is not so easy to say why as it is to assess the historical and permanent values of other works of literature that appeared in 1920, such as Lewis’s *Main Street*, Fitzgerald’s *This Side of Paradise* or T. S. Eliot’s *Poems*. In comparison with these, *The Emperor Jones* lies a little outside its time, showing small interest in the war-ruined world of the early twenties nor in man’s attempt at new social formulations. Such relevance as it has to its period lies in its production history, rather than its qualities as a work of art. The excited praise of the performance of the black actor, Charles Gilpin, whose performance as Brutus Jones brought him immediate stardom, led to a series of serio-comic encounters as the Drama League of New York City awarded him an accolade for being one of those who had contributed significantly to the drama during the year but then refused to invite him to the testimonial dinner. The League’s president was quoted as saying that “Mr. Gilpin would not wish to sit down at table with the other prizewinners,” and he added that this was especially true since his performance, although distinguished, had shown his race to bad advantage. The fact that the play’s author was among the invited prizewinners capped the illogic of the argument. The immediate response was a boycott of the dinner loudly announced by most of the prizewinners. Miss Mary Garden stated flatly, “I would be willing to sit with Mr. Gilpin. I would like to know who in New York would not sit with him.” Not to be outdone, Miss Gilda Varesi, star of *Enter Madame*, announced her

willingness as well. Gilpin remained cool, the nonsense was resolved with the appearance of amicability and the awards dinner was a success.

That dinner was perhaps the climactic moments of the actor's career, for Gilpin ran afoul of O'Neill's temper by altering lines and permitting himself careless performances. O'Neill refused to hire him for the London production and cast instead a young actor, Paul Robeson. Robeson's star rose as Gilpin's fell. Moss Hart's account of Gilpin's agonizing drunken performances in a 1926 revival of the play tells the tragic end of the story.⁶ Whatever talent burned in Gilpin was consumed inwardly by the inevitable frustration that followed upon such success as he had had. He was a somber-spirited, restrained man, who damped his fires with rueful humor and with silence. That he was the first black to achieve a major success in the legitimate theatre in the United States did not become for him a matter for public comment. Contemporary interviews suggest only his personal satisfaction in receiving his just due as an actor, not as a representative of his race. His comment on the Provincetown's 1924 revival with Paul Robeson carries no sense of social crusade: "I created the role of the Emperor. That role belongs to me. That Irishman, he just wrote the play."⁷

O'Neill later praised Gilpin as being one of the few actors who had fully realized his own vision of the role, but Gilpin did not make the play. The central social and artistic point lay in the role itself. Taken as an ethnic study displaying the racial characteristics of the American Negro, the part by present-day perspectives is an unacceptable stereotype of the Negro in terms of a crap-shooting, razor-cutting Pullman porter. Its sympathetic point of view toward Jones, and the extension of his personal history into a broader perspective so that Jones becomes a crude personification of black history, does not significantly alter matters. Like Vachel Lindsay in *The Congo*, O'Neill attempted to depict the forces that come "creeping through the black," and he suggests that the Negro is, like London's Buck, only a step removed from the brute. Although he has evidently read Conrad's *The Heart of Darkness*, O'Neill makes no generalization such as Conrad does that there is a savagery in the hearts of all men. Instead, it is the Negro who is essentially uncivilized, wearing contemporary sophistications as a loosely fitting mask over an incorrigibly savage countenance. In its own time, the point of view was possible, and, when disguised by theatrical excitements, acceptable, but today, the ethnic and social implications of the play can no longer command respectful attention.

Yet what held attention, and to a degree disguised the essential racism, was the fact that Brutus Jones was the first important role written for a Negro actor that was more than a walk-on part, a comic turn, a vaudeville sketch. Such a play as James Forbes's *The Travelling Salesman*, in which O'Neill's brother appeared, is typical. In the second act of the comedy, a black waiter—played by a white actor in minstrel-show blackface—appears for a pair of scenes intended to provide comic embellishment. A single example suffices:

(A knock at the door)

BLAKE Come in. (Enter JULIUS . . .) I don't want the porter, I want the bell-boy.

JULIUS I'se the bell-boy.

BLAKE Then send up a waiter.

JULIUS I'se dat, too.

BLAKE I guess you're the whole works?

JULIUS I'se the staff of the Elite.

BLAKE Drinks for a large party!

JULIUS Can't serve no drinks, boss.

(KIMBALL, WATTS and COBB look at JULIUS)

BLAKE What kind of a stall are you giving me?

JULIUS 'Tain't no stall, it's a solemn fac': Clerk downstairs won't allow it. . . The bar done shut down last night. COBB Julius, haven't you a private stock?

JULIUS No, sir, I never drinks durin' office hours.

BLAKE (*Taking a half dollar*) Julius, what could you do for that?

JULIUS (*Grinning*) Most anything, sir.

WATTS Think— (*Holding up half dollar*) . . .

KIMBALL (*Holding up half a dollar*) Think hard! . . .

COBB (*Holding up half dollar*) Think quickly (*Shaking coins, etc.*) . . .

JULIUS Well, gentlemen, you're all mighty persuasive. (BLAKE gives JULIUS money; COBB does same)
I might get you something.

ALL Ah!

JULIUS I might get you some tea. . . (WATTS jumping forward . . . BLAKE holds him. JULIUS
frightened runs up-stage)

JULIUS (*Coming down*) I think you might all be partial to this brand of tea. Guess you never drunk none a
my Scotch breakfast tea. (*They all laugh*)

KIMBALL Now, you're shouting!

BLAKE Vamp! . . .

WATTS And vamp quick.

COBB Bring me a double portion. (JULIUS *exits* . . .)⁸

By contrast with such vile stuff as this, one of many such scenes that held the stage beyond the time of *The Emperor Jones*, O'Neill provides for the black actor a true action: a movement both psychological and physical toward a goal whose achievement is fulfilling and complete. Like all valid dramatic action, it forms the core of the play's meaning and its unity. Gilpin's success came in part from the fact that he was the first black to play a role instead of a routine. His despair arose fundamentally because no other play offered him a similar opportunity.

What the action of Brutus Jones means, set apart from its stereotypical embellishments, is not entirely obvious. As with the outer covering of many of O'Neill's major works—the overly simple Freudianism of *Strange Interlude*, for example, or the Nietzschean exultation of *Lazarus Laughed*—the explicit thematic content is not the real source of the play's energy nor is it a determinant of the play's final meaning. Like *Beyond the Horizon*, *The Emperor Jones* is a play about man's relationship with a possessive God, and in pursuit of this theme, O'Neill turns the play away from its more obvious symbols, toward a highly personal statement.

The heart of the matter, as O'Neill felt it, lay in the book of photographs of African Negro sculpture by Charles Sheeler. Sheeler's photographs are handsome, and do full justice to the shadows and mysteries which the masks and wooden effigies configure. The heart of darkness resides in these images. Even today, when African folk art is much more widely to be seen than in 1920, the photographs stir the imagination, make a darkness visible. Here Lem has sat for his portrait and the mask of the witch doctor holds terror.

Looking at them for the first time, one might well feel that the African Negro is a simple and relatively unsophisticated being, only a few generations removed from the jungle. It would not be difficult to call his sophistications "primitive" and to assume that the heirs of such artists had some powerful and distinctive affiliation with the Gods who look out from the pages of Sheeler's book. In the pulse of the contemporary black, one might maintain, jungle drums beat and recall the service his ancestors paid to these Gods. Yet, the argument might run, the Negro no longer serves these Gods. In white civilization, he has become a new entity, an individual, not one of a horde, howling in communal self-abandonment. He has acquired a white man's name, an occupation, and has assumed the responsibilities of law, judgment, punishment. Evolving from the primitive, he has become something other than his anonymous native essence and has superimposed a new self on his truth.

In doing this, he has denied the primordial God, just as Robert Mayo, in a quite different context, denies the sea. The action of *The Emperor Jones* lies as does that of Thompson's *The Hound of Heaven* in flight, but it is flight toward something, an action responsive to the movement of the primitive God to reach forth and claim its own. Jones's acts of will, his pride, his conscious individuality as Emperor are the false masks of a white savage. At the end, the black must cast himself upon the God and return home.

The climactic moments in scene seven suggest that Jones's homecoming is a form of

salvation. As the scene begins, and as he meets the Witch Doctor, he moves slowly and in puzzled fashion. "As if in obedience to some obscure impulse, he sinks into a kneeling, devotional posture before the altar." He withdraws from his devotions, but then, stirred by the incantations of the Witch Doctor, he turns again to the altar, completely hypnotized: "His voice joins in the incantation, in the cries, he beats time with his hands and sways his body to and fro from the waist. The whole spirit and meaning of the dance has entered into him, has become his spirit. Finally the theme of the pantomime halts on a howl of despair, and is taken up again in a note of savage hope. There is a salvation. The forces of evil demand sacrifice." (201) At once, Jones realizes he must become the sacrifice. He crawls toward the Crocodile God, close to an acceptance of his end. In the last moment, however, he draws back, refuses to be possessed by the God and fires the silver bullet. The God disappears, and Jones, the last vestige of his emperorhood expended, lies whimpering in the deserted circle, "as the throb of the tom-tom fills the silence about him with somber pulsation, a baffled but revengeful power." (202)

In firing the shot, Jones has sought to be Emperor to the end, but, as O'Neill's description of the dance makes clear, by insisting on his sense of conscious self, he has denied finally the God whose creature he rightfully is, has refused to enter where he belongs. In one view, perhaps, Jones's refusal to surrender is heroic for the force is called "evil." In another it is folly, for whatever salvation, whatever true identity he seeks will not come until he loses his emperorhood, the false and fugitive self. Now, however, although he has fled toward his home, he has cut himself from the source of his being. The dark God turns punitive and brutal, and Jones must die without benison or the hope of return.

Divorced of its theatricality and its superficial social concerns, *The Emperor Jones* reads as a theological melodrama rather than as a play about the racial heritage of the American Negro. The attempt to belong to the God and the failure of the attempt is the same action that O'Neill had traced in *Beyond the Horizon* and that he was evolving at the same moment in the draft versions of "Anna Christie." Only in its exotic decor, in its use of the black actor, and in its seemingly novel theatrical style did the play do more than O'Neill had accomplished earlier.

The play's style, of course, seemed highly experimental and can still be looked upon as the first major American drama in the expressionist mode.** Clearly, when Jones's visionary encounters are projected beyond the range of his own memory, O'Neill moves past the limits of the realistic stage, opening surfaces to reveal the forces underlying his action, detailing the racial origins of his protagonist's fear. As he does so, the visions become less specific, more emblematic, and the spectator, at once roused and hypnotized by the drumbeats, is asked to enter into the irrational experience, to feel the panic, to lose his own sense of orientation. To the degree that he is able to divorce his action and his spectators from their own spatial and temporal reality, O'Neill turns his play successfully toward expressionism.

The difficulty, however, is that, after the action has ended, much in the manner of a Gothic novelist whose whole purpose is to scare his readers with seemingly supernatural horrors, O'Neill provides an explanation for the visions that Jones has seen and brings the entire

play safely to harbor in "reality." The explanation lies in the voodoo magic of the native chief, Lem. Lem's magic has sent the devils and ghosts hounding after Jones. Lem's tribe has cast the spell with the drums, and they have spent the night melting coins to make another silver bullet. Lem weaves the web that captures Jones, and states flatly: "We cotch him." Expressionism or realism? It cannot go both ways. Either the visions come from Jones as part of his racial heritage, or they come from Lem and the magic of the vengeful natives. Once the fact of magic is accepted, the play becomes explicable in realistic terms throughout and its theological meanings are lessened if not vitiated.

As the play moves in theatre, the ambiguity of its mode is not really important. O'Neill's drums worked as he hoped they would to involve the audience. The devices seemed modern and suggested that dramatic point of view could be shifted as Strindberg had done in *The Dream Play* or *The Spook Sonata*, but in the end they led to what was really an old-fashioned theatre. James O'Neill would never have understood a performance that did not seek to make the audience weep, cringe, cry out or cheer. O'Neill in this was his father's inheritor, asking his audiences to commit themselves totally, but with the aim of accepting his action as entirely real. The stylistic ambiguity of *The Emperor Jones* is the first important sign of a problem of mode that had arisen earlier, of a crisis of dramaturgy occasioned by the use of the techniques of expressionism to effect the ends of the realistic theatre.

* The relationship is mentioned without detailed elaboration in an interesting short study by Egil Törnqvist, "Ibsen and O'Neill, A Study in Influence." *Scandinavian Studies* (August, 1965, Vol. 37, No. 3), 221.

** It antedates Elmer Rice's *The Adding Machine* by three years and e. e. cummings's *him* by eight.

March 13, 1998

REVIEW:

PUTTING THE DOWNTOWN ELEMENT BACK INTO O'NEILL

By BEN BRANTLEY

"An uncommonly powerful and imaginative performance, in several respects unsurpassed this season," wrote Alexander Woollcott in the fall of 1920 in *The New York Times*. The object of praise was a then little-known actor named Charles S. Gilpin, who was appearing in a strange, bruising new play that had uptown cosmopolites swarming to a small theater in Greenwich Village.

After a series of marginal supporting roles, Gilpin finally had a star part: the title character of the black railroad porter turned West Indies monarch in Eugene O'Neill's "Emperor Jones." Woollcott rounded off his tribute to the actor with a coda that you might have thought was unnecessary: "Mr. Gilpin is a Negro."

Seventy-eight years later, "The Emperor Jones" has been revived by the Wooster Group at the Performance Garage in SoHo, some blocks south of where the work was first seen at the Playwrights' Theater. The drama still seems strange and bruising, and it has again provided the occasion for an uncommonly powerful and imaginative performance in the title role. That part is played by Kate Valk. Ms. Valk is a Caucasian.

A tidy reversal, no? It was a source of pride for the Provincetown Players, the show's first producers, that they had cast a black man as a black man, after seriously considering the safer choice of a white actor in black face. Brutus Jones, later portrayed by the great Paul Robeson in a Broadway revival and the 1933 film, remained for years one of the few parts of any complexity available to black actors. So what are we to make of the current image of the emperor according to Ms. Valk, who wears shoe-polish-like makeup that evokes Al Jolson singing "Mammy"?

Don't call in the police of political correctness just yet. In casting, as in many things, timing is crucial. America has long passed the point where a straightforward production of "The Emperor Jones," with a black man delivering O'Neill's dialectical speeches as written, could be other than embarrassing. Yet the drama remains fascinating, and it would be a shame to consign it to the shelves of unplayable plays.

It would also be a shame, however, to present "The Emperor Jones" as a camp relic, worthy of only a post-modern smirk. The particular triumph of Elizabeth LeCompte's interpretation, which also features Willem Dafoe (a member of the Wooster Group before he became a movie star), is its ability to relocate the play in a contemporary context while holding on to the shadowy, hypnotic qualities that first unsettled audiences of the 1920's. You should know that while doing so,

this production uses such unlikely (but for this company, classic) devices as a set of television monitors, a wheelchair and Kabuki-flavored soft-shoe routines.

Since its inception two decades ago, the Wooster Group has made a specialty of dislocating theatrical classics, from "Our Town" to "The Three Sisters," exploding traditional texts with tools ranging from simulcast video cameras and state-of-the-art synthesizers to fly swatters. Along the way, the troupe has consistently drawn the sort of knowing, exotic-looking audiences who seem destined to drift on to cool clubs with unlisted phone numbers after the show.

While it would be gratifying to report that the Wooster Group is merely chic and self-important, it is a company of exceptional discipline and intelligence. Even more uncommonly, it has created a distinctive artistic vocabulary. It may not always hit its targets, but it has refined and strengthened its craft over the years, working both in New York and on international tour. And under Ms. LeCompte's direction, the company has shown an especially persuasive affinity for O'Neill.

This conjunction actually makes sense. O'Neill is certainly the most ardent experimentalist of America's major playwrights. Moreover, his bleak sense of the consequences of a mechanized society is well matched, in a way, by a company that uses technology to scramble and fragment its productions.

O'Neill created characters who bury their most primal needs beneath layers of "science and materialism," leading to deeply divided selves. For the Wooster Group, dealing with another half-century's worth of scientific and industrial innovations, any solid sense of self appears to have dissolved into atoms.

This theme was evident last season in the company's visually arresting but slightly off-kilter production of "The Hairy Ape," with a compelling Mr. Dafoe in the title role. Like that work, "Jones" traces a descent down a historical ladder within its central character.

Brutus Jones, a former Pullman porter and convict from the United States, has set himself up as emperor on an island in the West Indies. Confronted with the imminence of revolution, he flees into the jungle, where his regal persona is steadily dismantled by his own terror. By the end, having taken an inward, backward journey through his life and on into an atavistic past, Jones is reduced to aboriginal horror.

The Wooster Group stays close to O'Neill's text, though not to his stage directions, which specify the apparitions of a slave auction and some characters identified (I swear) as Little Formless Fears. There are only two central performers here, Ms. Valk and Mr. Dafoe as Jones's sinister cockney henchman, Smithers. Two stage assistants, Dave Shelley and Ari Fliakos, are also visible presences, however.

The production consistently calls attention to its artificiality and its methods of disorientation. The microphones through which Ms. Valk and Mr. Dafoe speak become at moments jaunty props, like canes in a vaudeville skit, and at others seem like biological appendages. The dialogue is often addressed to cameras that register bizarrely distorted images of the performers, including one that turns the blackened Ms. Valk an ashen white.

There is no doubt that the actors, in costumes that suggest ceremonial Japanese drama, are only actors. But this only adds to the overall feeling of alienation. O'Neill saw personality as a construct, something he emphasized by using masks in other plays. Here, Jones's self-created identity as emperor is given yet another layer, that of the grotesque perception of blacks by whites in the early part of this century.

Her eyes rolling feverishly and her voice a brazen evocation of the dumb but crafty black figures in minstrel shows and melodramas, Ms. Valk initially registers as an obscene cartoon. Yet as the performance continues, it acquires a searing depth, a compounded feeling of entrapment. It's a performance that sucks you in just when you're feeling safely distanced from it.

Mr. Dafoe's taunting, epicene Smithers, whose very body seems shaped into a sneer, offers superb support. And both actors, speaking in distorted amplified voices against a collage of precisely coded sound effects and stray melodies, find the music in O'Neill's dialectic speech. You're reminded that this playwright's reputation for having a tin ear was largely unearned; he wrote for the stage, not the page. Accordingly, the overall effect of this production is more like that of a concerto than a traditional theater piece.

Ms. LeCompte and her team have been working on "Jones" for at least five years. Even if you find the result pretentious or ponderous, you can't deny the meticulousness with which it has been executed.

Nor can you deny the sheer joy of craft that infuses every element. Watch the dances that the performers break into at unexpected moments: fusions of undulating hips, bouncy sidesteps and geisha-style gestures. The dances have an intellectual function, of course, rearranging our responses to the show once again. But they are also an exhilarating and touchingly old-fashioned tribute to the pure pleasures of performing. This company may practice its own theater of alienation, but it knows how to seduce while doing so.

rites and wrongs

By Michael Feingold

The Wooster Group's production of *The Emperor Jones* exploded into my theatergoing week, shattering me. Too much mediocrity, no matter how likable, leaves you unprepared for greatness; mechanical aping of the gestures of outrage, however proficient, never prepares you for a real outrage. Elizabeth LeCompte's staging of *The Emperor Jones* is both great and outrageous. If you're ready for it, you'll have a great time. If not--well, to paraphrase the Spanish proverb, who has not seen Kate Valk in this production has not seen a marvel.

Valk is the centerpiece of the staging, her presence an ultimate distancing gesture toward a work with no female roles. Those wishing to take offense at the thought of a pink-skinned woman, her face painted deep charcoal, playing a part famously associated with Paul Robeson, will probably seize the chance for indignation. But I hope they'll see the result before they condemn the premise. Not only is Valk's work brilliantly sustained and varied--so that you feel for her as intensely as you might for Robeson--but her casting is only one element in the elaborate, cunning system by which LeCompte makes her approach seem at once calculated to a hairsbreadth and wildly spontaneous.

Wooster Group fans will recognize this divided feeling, but it takes getting used to. The average theatergoer walks in expecting an "Expressionist" play by O'Neill and sees the bare white rectangle of the stage, backed by the Group's inevitable video monitor. Not only is Valk in blackface, she and Willem Dafoe, who plays the cockney trader Smithers, are costumed as samurai. They talk through mikes, Valk wielding hers like a judge's gavel while Dafoe, lurking in the upstage shadows, supplies his own soundtrack of sinister clucks and gurgles. In the first scene, while "Emperor" Jones is ensconced in his palace, Valk whizzes about in a cushioned office chair on casters. Periodically, Dafoe joins her onstage for an inexplicable bout of what looks like archaic TV versions of disco dancing, carried out with the solemnity of a high mass.

Astonishingly, this parade of dislocations and seeming irrelevancies not only animates O'Neill's play but enriches it. As a text, *The Emperor Jones* (1920) is a bare anecdote, clad uncomfortably in the author's typical archly slangy word-spinning. A black American escaping racism and some outstanding arrest warrants, Brutus Jones has talked his way onto the throne of a Caribbean island, planning to bail out as soon as he either loots all its resources or hears the first rumbles of revolt. The rumbles catch him by surprise, while the drumming of the natives (whom he dismisses as "ignorant bush niggers") affects him despite his pretensions to rationality, inflicting visions of his painful past on him till he loses his way and runs in a circle, becoming an easy target for the rebels. He has fled with only six bullets; he fires one, to wipe out a vision, in each scene. At the end a native chief tells Smithers of his death.

- Do you see evidence of the influence of expressionism in other theatre or film you see today? How about dance?
- Why do you think this play is so rarely performed anymore?
- What do you think about an Irish American writing about the psychological depths of the African American experience?
- Can the language of this play work effectively with a contemporary audience? Should it be made more palatable?
- How do you interpret the various symbols in this piece?
- Paul Robeson was the major Black dramatic actor of his era. Whom would you cast in a production of this play today, and why?
- If you've seen the film, do you think it represents the play or does it distort it?