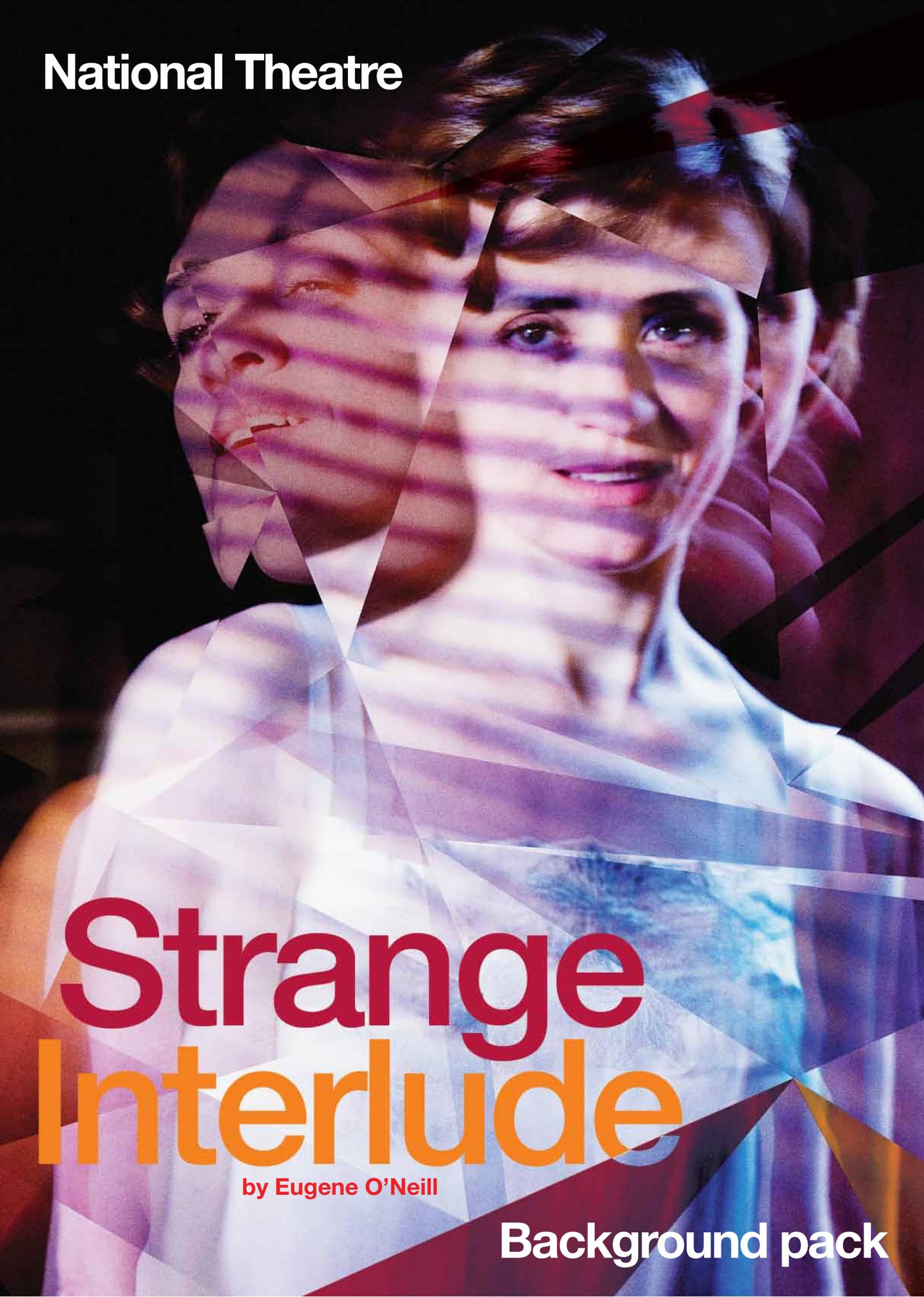


National Theatre



Strange Interlude

by Eugene O'Neill

Background pack

Strange Interlude

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Welcome to the National Theatre's background pack for *Strange Interlude*.

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Jane Ball
Programme Manager, NT Learning
February 2014

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Rehearsal photographs taken at the Jerwood Space.



Click on this arrow, when you see it, for more online resources.

Further production details:
nationaltheatre.org.uk

The National Theatre production of *Strange Interlude*

This production opened in the National's Lyttelton Theatre on **4 June 2013**.

Characters, in order of appearance

Charles Marsden **CHARLES EDWARDS**
Professor Henry Leeds **PATRICK DRURY**
Nina Leeds **ANNE-MARIE DUFF**
Edmund Darrell **DARREN PETTIE**
Sam Evans **JASON WATKINS**
Mrs Amos Evans **GERALDINE ALEXANDER**
Gordon Evans, *aged 11*
ELLIOT DAY or **THEO FEWELL** or **MAX STEPHENS**
Gordon Evans **WILF SCOLDING**
Madeline Arnold **EMILY PLUMTREE**

Director **SIMON GODWIN**
Designer **SOUTRA GILMOUR**
Lighting Designer **GUY HOARE**
Music **MICHAEL BRUCE**
Movement Director **JONATHAN GODDARD**
Sound Designer **CHRISTOPHER SHUTT**
Company Voice Work **JEANNETTE NELSON**
Dialect Coach **JUDITH WINDSOR**
Staff Director **CAITLIN McLEOD**

Understudies

Jennifer Armour (Madeline Arnold),
Jane Perry (Nina Leeds/Mrs Evans),
Tom Peters (Edmund Darrell/Sam Evans),
Chris Towner-Jones (Gordon Evans),
Eben Young (Charles Marsden/Professor Leeds)



Nina Leeds (Anne-Marie Duff)
Production photo: Johan Persson

Scene synopsis

Scene 1

1919. An afternoon in late summer. The Professor's study in the Leeds' home in a small university town in New England.

MARSDEN, novelist, close friend of the family and former student of PROFESSOR LEEDS, has just returned from World War I in Europe. Marsden is very fond of NINA and has known her since she was born. Leeds confides to Marsden that his daughter, who has had a nervous breakdown following the death of her boyfriend, Gordon Shaw, has turned against him because she suspects what is true: that he persuaded Gordon to postpone their marriage until he had safely



returned from the war. Nina announces that she is leaving today: she intends to work as a nurse at a sanatorium for wounded soldiers. She still grieves for Gordon, and for the missed opportunity to become pregnant with his child, and now feels it is her duty to make use of herself and her life, for his sake. Leeds stridently opposes her wishes. In retaliation, Nina confronts him about the truth of his actions. Her father confesses that he was jealous of Gordon because he wanted to keep Nina's love for himself. He finally agrees to let Nina go.

Scene 2

The same. Fall of the following year. Night.

Professor Leeds has died. Marsden awaits the return of Nina, who has been gone for over a year. Nina arrives, bringing DR NED DARRELL and SAM EVANS – both old friends of Gordon – with her. While Nina and DARRELL are upstairs with the body of her father, EVANS introduces himself to Marsden and confesses that he is in love with Nina and has asked her to marry him. When he proposed though, Nina didn't say anything in reply, she just smiled. Evans appeals to Marsden for help but Marsden is dismissive of this young, energetic but naive pup. Dr Darrell comes in to speak with Marsden privately. He describes, in detail, Nina's psychological state. Since Gordon's death, Nina has been left suspended and frustrated, constantly searching for ways to sacrifice herself and find comfort. She is convinced she can't feel anything anymore – including grief at her father's death. Darrell reveals that Nina has been attempting to “give happiness to various fellow war-victims by pretending to love them... kissing, necking, petting – spooning in general – with any patient in the institution who's got a case on her”. Nina is getting out of hand. Marsden, Darrell concludes, is the only person who can lead Nina towards salvation: he must convince her to marry Sam Evans and have children. Nina enters in a numb state. She speaks exquisitely, eloquently and shockingly about science, belief, life, lies and God. She also reveals that Darrell once kissed her at the institute. Darrell leaves Marsden and Nina alone together and Nina breaks down. Climbing onto his lap she asks Marsden to help her, to punish her for all the terrible things she has done at the sanatorium. Marsden is almost overcome with his strong feelings towards Nina and, in order to save her, and himself, urges her to marry Evans. Nina consents.

Scene 3

Dining room of the Evans' homestead in northern New York state – late spring of the next year. Morning.

Nina and Evans are married and on their deferred honeymoon, visiting Evans' mother who has been writing to invite them every week since she heard about the wedding. Marsden has driven them in his car. Nina is pregnant but has not yet told anyone. MRS EVANS and Sam Evans enter from surveying the apple orchards and Mrs Evans persuades her son to go into town with Marsden, leaving her alone with Nina. She asks Nina bluntly if she loves her son, and then if she intends to have a baby. Nina answers both questions with positive conviction. Mrs Evans suddenly informs her new daughter-in-law that she cannot have children – that she must abort her baby. She goes on to explain that the Evans family are cursed with a history of inherited insanity. Sam Evans was born by accident; Mr and Mrs Evans had intended to abstain from having children, not allowing the bloodline to continue. When Evans

Above: Professor Leeds (Patrick Drury)
Production photo: Johan Persson

Scene synopsis

was 8 years old his father gave in to mental illness, driven crazy by the fear that his son would inherit his disease. Since then Mrs Evans has kept her son away from the house – kept him safe and ignorant about his family. Nina is distraught. She reveals that she does not love Evans, she was only with him to have children, and threatens to leave him. Mrs Evans is thrown into a panic: leaving Evans would mean he would definitely go insane, but Nina not being able to bear him a child would also cause him great unhappiness. She convinces Nina to stay with her husband, to try and have a ‘healthy’ baby some other way, and pretend it was Evans’. Nina agrees to give her life for his happiness.

Scene 4

Professor Leeds’ study. Fall of the same year. Evening.

Nina has had an abortion and now takes all precautions not to get pregnant by her husband. Evans is anxious and upset at his wife’s supposed “woman’s sickness” and the fact that they don’t yet have a child. His work in the advertising business is falling short. Sam has invited Ned Darrell to the house to look at Nina. When she hears this, Nina suddenly decides to approach Ned about being the father of her baby. Marsden arrives with notes for the biography of Gordon Shaw he is helping Nina to write. His mother is very ill and Darrell provides him with the name of a specialist. Alone with Darrell, Nina appeals to his medical morals and his desire for her, and convinces him to embark on an affair – for Sam’s happiness.

Scene 5

Sitting room of the small house Evans has rented in a seashore suburb near New York. The following April. Morning.

Nina and Evans have moved house. Dr Darrell has been visiting every week to see Nina, who is now pregnant with their child. Nina, speaking her thoughts, tells how she has fallen in love with Darrell and is convinced he feels the same way towards her. This thing between them, initially so cold and scientific, has become dangerously passionate and real. Evans is still struggling with work and is unaware of Nina’s pregnancy. Darrell arrives, distressed and ashamed at this affair that has been continuing at his best friend’s expense. Nina tells Darrell she loves him and, caught up in the moment of passion, he similarly confesses. Marsden arrives, distraught at his mother’s recent death. On entering the house, he immediately suspects that something is going on between Darrell and Nina. Alone together, Nina tells Darrell she is determined to leave Evans and marry him instead, she intends to tell her husband the truth about her baby – today. Darrell’s guilt overtakes him and he rebukes her, insisting that they must end their affair. When Nina is out of the room, Darrell makes up his mind to leave and reveals to Evans that Nina is pregnant, but

tells him it is Evans’ child. Evans is overcome with joy and the certainty that Nina really does love him. Nina enters, finding Darrell gone and Evans on his knees, thanking God for ‘their baby’. In a storm of emotion Nina almost tells Evans the truth but resolves, at the last moment, to pretend he is the father – to once again sacrifice her happiness for his.

Scene 6

The same. A little over a year later. Evening.

Nina’s son, Gordon, has just been born. Marsden has returned from another tour of Europe (where he bumped into Darrell in Munich), to find the couple happy and well. Since the child’s birth, Evans has been doing extremely well in the “advertising game”, making money



and moving up in the business. He is the epitome of the new, American man – confident, successful and newly wealthy. Unexpectedly, Darrell arrives. He reveals to Nina that he is still in love with her, and is now prepared to tell Evans the truth and claim his son. But this time

Above: Nina Leeds (Anne-Marie Duff)
and Ned Darrell (Darren Pettie)
Production photo: Johan Persson

Scene synopsis

it is Nina who refuses him: she has found security and love in this companionship with Evans, and in her child. Nina is determined to keep all four of these men in her life: her lover, Darrell; her husband, Evans; her 'father', Marsden; and her son, Gordon.

Scene 7

Sitting room of the Evans' apartment on Park Avenue. Nearly eleven years later. Early afternoon.

It is GORDON's 11th birthday. Evans and Nina are now extremely wealthy, as are Darrell and Marsden who invested in Evans' business as silent partners. Gordon has developed a hatred for Darrell who he feels is "always hanging around mother." Gordon has smashed every present the doctor has ever bought him. Darrell has been taking trips to the West Indies, working at a research station with a young, bright assistant, Preston. When he returns to see Nina, he is bitter and resentful about Evans and his son. Following an argument between them, Nina convinces Darrell to leave and stay away for a long stretch. On saying goodbye, Gordon catches Nina kissing Darrell which makes him outraged and grief-stricken. He confronts Darrell, threatening to tell Evans what he saw, and smashes the toy yacht Darrell bought him for his birthday. When Darrell leaves, Gordon asks Evans about his name-sake, the legendary Gordon Shaw. Evans promises Gordon that if he becomes a great sportsman like Gordon Shaw, he will give him anything he asks for. When Nina enters, Gordon is cold towards her and she realises he must have seen her kiss Darrell. She falsely tells them both that she sent the doctor away out of annoyance and kissed him goodbye to get rid of him. Gordon believes her for a moment but then senses the truth and runs out of the room.

Scene 8

Section of afterdeck of the Evans' cruiser anchored near the finish line at Poughkeepsie. Ten years later. Afternoon.

Gordon is rowing in his last varsity race at college. His fiancée Madeline is aboard the yacht, cheering him on alongside the intensely proud Evans. Nina is resentful and spiteful towards her husband and Madeline who she believes have both stolen her son from her. Darrell has returned from a long stint in the West Indies, convinced he is finally free of Nina. Marsden's sister has just died and he is in a morose and tipsy state. The race begins. Determined to break up Gordon's engagement, Nina tries to enlist Darrell's help, but he refuses. She confesses to Marsden the whole history of her affair with Darrell and the insanity in the Evans' family. Nina comes close to telling Madeline the same but Darrell prevents her. Gordon wins the race and Evans, in a fit of elation and celebration, has a stroke. Everyone rushes to his aid and, once again, Nina and Darrell pledge to devote their lives to caring for him.

Scene 9

A terrace on the Evans' estate on Long Island. Several months later. Late afternoon.

It is the day of Evans' funeral. Gordon and Madeline sit looking out over the harbour. Gordon reveals to his fiancée that he always suspected his mother was in love with Darrell. He is still unaware that Darrell is his true father. Madeline leaves to wait by their small plane, out on the water, while Gordon speaks to Nina and Darrell about his father's will. Evans has left half a million dollars to Darrell's biological station for research work. On hearing this, the doctor refuses to take the money and Gordon, in a fit of anger, lashes out and hits him. To intervene, Nina cries that Gordon is "hitting [his] father" but Gordon misconstrues her meaning and apologises to Darrell, agreeing that "Dad would feel as if I'd hit him, just as bad as if I'd hit him". He gives Nina and Darrell his blessing if they intend to get married. As he leaves, Darrell makes an attempt to finally tell his son the truth but Nina intervenes and sends Gordon on his way. The two agree that they could never be together and instead, Darrell tells Nina she ought to marry Marsden – if for nothing else, then for his life-long devotion and love for her. Nina agrees. She has finally given up on the idea of 'happiness' and is prepared to settle for 'peace' instead. Gordon's plane flies over them on the pier and Darrell shouts into the sky that Gordon is his son. Nina and Marsden are left together in the darkening dusk, contemplating life, and these "strange dark interludes in the electrical display of God the Father."



Left to right: Charles Marsden (Charles Edwards), Nina Leeds (Anne-Marie Duff), Madeline Arnold (Emily Plumtree), Ned Darrell (Darren Pettie) and Sam Evans (Jason Watkins). Production photo: Johan Persson

Rehearsal diary

Staff director Caitlin McLeod documented the six-week rehearsal period; these notes and extracts from her diary reveal how the production emerged

Week One – “*The bright abyss that is Strange Interlude*” (Simon Godwin)

The entire company (including Stage Managers and composer Michael Bruce) read through the script for the first time, sat round in a circle. No one person reads a single part. There is lots of enjoyment at the stage directions, especially the sudden appearance and subsequent sudden disappearance of weight, hair, tans, jowls etc from one scene to the next.

Exercises and icebreakers

Simon Godwin (director) believes strongly in the power of the warm-up. Games and exercises are the best way to start rehearsals as they break down inhibitions and warm-up the body and mind ready for the work ahead. Some of the games/warm-ups we use include:

- *Spend one minute talking with a partner* about certain key play-related topics, eg honeymoons, advertising, summertime.
- *Stretches*
- *Clap volleyball*
- *‘Mickey Mouse’ game* – this involves the company standing in a circle and passing a movement randomly and quickly as possible from person to person. One participant each time sends the ‘nose’ to some one else. This involves just pinching your nose. The two participants on either side of the person with the ‘nose’ have to cup either their left or right ear to complete the image of a mouse with two ears. The idea is to build up a seamless rhythm and sequence until it’s almost unconscious.
- *“What kind of animal are you today?”* Simon asks everyone in the circle to describe themselves as an animal to reflect how they are feeling. There is a lovely variety of animals and eloquent explanations for sloths, meercats, hippos etc.



- *Leading people around with their eyes closed*, which helps to build trust in your fellow actors, instinct, and understanding of touch
- *A version of ‘Zombie Tag’*

Historical context

Judith Windsor, our dialect coach, tells us O’Neill would very seldom watch his own work. It is a good note for us to consider: that he may have found it too autobiographical. Judith also says the New England accent wouldn’t use ‘r’s (in words like theatre or water, for example). But, in order to ground these characters for an English audience, we will use a gentle ‘r’ sound (and good ‘t’s).

O’Neill completed *Strange Interlude* in 1926, but the play’s narrative runs into the 1940s. He was speculating about what those future years would be like. He had no knowledge that there would be a great financial crash or economic depression in the 1930s, no idea about the rise of fascism, or the Second World War. What was the world he envisioned? How should that be portrayed on stage in our design?

Research tasks are set to help everyone understand more about the play and the era in which it is set. We should: watch the film *The Age of Innocence*; look for examples of ageing (how faces and families change over time); find out about Germany at that time and about Americans visiting the West Indies; understand what \$100,000 (from the 1920s) would be in today’s monetary terms.

Facts and questions

We start work on the text seated around the table, re-reading the play (still not designating parts) and collating lists of facts and questions about characters and events to help build the world and timeline before each scene begins. ‘Present’ denotes events that have taken place in the last 24 hours. The categories are divided into:

- Present facts*
- Present questions*
- and
- Historical facts*
- Historical questions*

One must resist the urge to answer these questions straight away: that is the next stage. This initially takes some getting used to. Examples include “In scene two, where has Sam Evans just arrived from?” “Where is Marsden living at the moment?”



Left to right: Director Simon Godwin with Anne-Marie Duff (Nina Leeds); Geraldine Alexander (Mrs Amos Evans) and Charles Edwards (Charles Marsden) in rehearsal
Photo: Johan Persson

Rehearsal diary (continued)

“What car does Marsden drive and why does he refuse to allow anyone else to drive it?”
“When do Nina and Ned find out that she is pregnant?”
“Where is the sanatorium?”
“Where is Sam’s boarding school?”
“Where is the Evans’ farm?”

The actors create character biographies using these facts and questions. There is incredible precision and attention to detail from everyone, ie. Professor Leeds’ life spans the Civil War years. He dies of a weak/broken heart. Sam, Ned and Gordon all went to Princeton University.

O’Neill

Jean Chothia (professor from Cambridge University who specialises in O’Neill) visits rehearsals. We draft a list of questions and topics that we want to discuss:

1. Does O’Neill’s life yield any clues about which ‘university town’ the play is set in?
2. What role did religion and/or science play in O’Neill’s life?
3. How was Darwin’s Theory of Evolution perceived at that time?
4. Attitudes to and treatments of mental illness in the 1920s
5. Advertising at the time, and O’Neill’s opinion of the ‘new, self-made, materialist man’
6. America during WW1 – was there conscription? Why didn’t Marsden serve in the army?
7. Attitudes and access to abortion and contraceptives
8. Is ‘Beachampton’ a made-up place?

And, these are some of my notes from Jean Chothia’s wonderful lecture:

1. O’Neill was depressive and an alcoholic
2. His mother was addicted to morphine
3. He contracted TB and almost died (which caused him to make huge changes in his life)
4. He abandoned his wife
5. His mother, father and brother all died before *Strange Interlude* was written
6. He hated melodrama (the world of acting his father came from)
7. He was heavily influenced by playwrights Ibsen and Strindberg...
8. ... and by poets William Carlos Williams and Ezra Pound
9. O’Neill created a vast amount of experimental (and terrible!) work
10. He gave his earlier plays a different vernacular so he could be more inventive; then finally decided to write in his own dialect
11. *Strange Interlude* was a huge hit at the time. It sold 100,000 copies, and ran for weeks
12. O’Neill was searching for the art form between a play and a novel.

Techniques

O’Neill has written a number of ‘asides’ in *Strange Interlude*, or moments where characters speak their thoughts aloud. These asides offer real insight into the truth behind each character’s motivations but they are also very tricky to perform as they can be long and take place while action is still going on.

We end the day with some exercises looking at the asides and developing a language within the company for what shape and style those might take. Should they be delivered to: 1. to audience; 2. to self; 3. to the space in between?

Jason Watkins (who plays Sam Evans) acts out a scenario (taking a shower) and speaks aloud his thoughts about taking a holiday. We discuss how this changes by engaging directly with the audience or speaking reflectively.

Anne-Marie Duff improvises a scenario of preparing for a town meeting and speaking her inner monologue. She tries it in different ways with the physical activity continuing underneath. These improvisations lead us to discover three versions of the aside:

- the mirror (speaking as if to an audience of ‘self’)
- the wall (no interaction with the audience, reflectively)
- the connection (‘dialogue’ with the audience)

The mirror seems to affect everyone the most. It feels vulnerable and intimate, powerful. Connection is the most engaging, and allows for the most comedy.



Staff Director Caitlin McLeod
in rehearsal
Photo: Johan Persson

Rehearsal diary (continued)

We do a big group improvisation which we call ‘The very important evening’ (a couple preparing a dinner party with guests arriving soon). Everyone is allowed to throw their thoughts out to the audience and the result is very comic and chaotic. It is difficult to continue in the scene whilst also speaking sub-thoughts – but also very rewarding when achieved. The improvisation makes us question if we need a physical movement or signal each time the characters speak their thoughts. This is yet to be decided upon but we do agree that asides must have pace and playfulness. “As swift as meditation” (*Hamlet*).

Timelines and structure

This week we spend the first three days working on constructing a huge, incredibly detailed timeline of all the events that happen in the play, then all the significant events that happen in the lead-up to the first scene.

For example:

Marsden born

Professor Leeds moves to ‘Middletown’ and teaches at ‘Wesleyan University’

Gordon Shaw’s death

Nina visits the sanatorium

These events are written out, with specific days and dates, on A4 paper and then fixed along the edge of the room. It covers two walls. Pictures are added underneath to give context to things, like Germany in the 1920s, the sanatorium, and the Evans’ homestead.

Each scene is also given a rough title

Scene 1: *Hello and goodbye*

Scene 2: *An opportunity* – this may be changed to something stronger and more active.

Scene 3: *Blood*

Scene 4: *Agreement* (contract? pact?)

Scene 5: *The price of happiness*

Scene 6: *Fathers*

Scene 7: *Happy birthday*

Scene 8: *The competition*

Scene 9: *Point of departure*

Week Two

From week one’s readthrough, there is a general feeling that through cuts we had lost some of the beautiful, poetic and deeper text in the second half of the play. Simon adds some text back in and during a second reading we feel that it really brings detail, depth and complexity to the characters and the scenes in the second half.

Actioning

On Thursday of week two we read through scenes, actioning each line. Actioning is a technique of breaking up the script and finding active verbs for each thought

(eg to beg, to charm). This verb sets up what your character’s intentions are at that moment and what lies behind the line. We are also up on our feet to let the actors explore the space and relationships.

For scene one we look at what the text tells us:

- Marsden hasn’t seen Leeds in 3.5 months
- It starts off in a crisis – Leeds needs Marsden’s help with Nina
- Nina has been playing tennis beforehand
- Why does she stay in the room? Does a part of her need her father’s blessing to leave? Does she stay to prove she can look after herself?
- There are two men, ‘fathers’, laughing over her head. They belittle her ‘hysteria’ and ‘nervous breakdown’
- Where is the front door?
- Objects are very helpful to trigger the ‘aside’ journeys
- Professor Leeds feels guilty
- Nina wasn’t planning on revealing that she knew about her father convincing Gordon that they shouldn’t get married, the truth is forced out in the scene.

We increase the tempo of delivery of the asides to ensure we don’t let the tension drop and keep momentum of the story alive – this proves to be very successful and a joy to watch.

Improvisations

Everyone, including Stage Management, takes part in elaborate improvisations over three days. We think about the most significant events that take place before scene one begins and explore what those moments might have been, how certain characters might have reacted, and what they would have said. We devise the following improvisation scenarios:

1. Nina, after hearing about Gordon’s death, goes on a BBQ trip with her friends. It starts raining and the car breaks down. In the improvisation we find a barn. Nina is a bit unhinged, dances in the rain and avoids questions about Gordon.
2. Nina at the sanatorium. We explore what those first days of working there might have been like, how her relationship with Darrell and the soldiers developed. We all create characters of soldiers who might have been at the hospital. Brandelli, my character, is recovering from severe shell shock; there is also Johnson who makes a pass at Nurse Mabel; Steigmire, who is blind; Able Tom, O’Malley, Thomas and many more.
3. Gordon proposes to Nina in her garden. Gordon tells Professor Leeds, hears his reprimand, his strong advice, and postpones the wedding.
4. Sam’s first day at Princeton, rooming with Ned. Mrs Evans fusses over him.

We also have a movement session with Jon Goddard, which helps to improve the quality of improvisation. People feel spontaneous and more able, physically, to push themselves, act younger etc.

Rehearsal diary (continued)

Techniques and conventions

We revisit asides and make some discoveries:

- they are alive, active (not reflective)
- they are a connection with the audience, engaging
- they are as quick as real thoughts. This increases the fun and the playfulness
- characters are searching, striving forwards, away from pain
- there can be pleasure at being able to share your deepest, darkest thoughts.

We think about people in the 1920s: their movement; that world; where people are in the room; how they occupy the space; and how they greet each other. Research topics are set to help us uncover more about the world we are creating. They include:

- find pictures of Puerto Rico (where Darrell has his research base)
- Hobart Amory Hare Baker – an athlete and First World War pilot who died after his plane crashed. Is he the original Gordon Shaw?
- the music playing at the prom where Nina met Sam

Week Three

Freud and frustration (1905)

O'Neill and the character Ned Darrell both engage with psychoanalytical preoccupations of the time: there is the idea of Nina having a 'fixation' on someone (Gordon Shaw) and it's unresolved as they didn't consummate their relationship. Nina is left in a kind of suspension, a limbo. The unresolved desire between her and Gordon leads to uncertainty about sexuality and how it's used, as well as the feeling of needing to sacrifice oneself.

Another psychoanalytical strand of the play revolves around loss. If you have a trauma at a young age that can't be located, it becomes your default reaction to a situation – eg if you were abandoned, your mind immediately goes to that feeling of abandonment in times of stress. Or fear of it. Nina loses both parents and her lover so looks for comfort and safety in others – or in children: "happy security of health and peace of mind" (*Strange Interlude*).

Scene analysis

We investigate ideas for the scene change at the end of scene one: objects that move through time? Eg a book Professor Leeds reads is then picked up by Marsden in the next scene, or perhaps a sharpened pencil. Scene changes should be very quick and direct – the sound of Mary crying (at the Professor's death), a murmur and then Marsden enters. We wonder if it should be so quick he almost crosses the Professor as he leaves?

Scene three at the Evans' homestead is the only time we see Mrs Evans, so we need to get to grips with what it is she is warning Nina about. The more lightness there is in the scene and the more she attempts to cover the situation, the more we understand the desperation lying beneath it.



Mrs Evans' tactics and thread of argument:

1. Do you (Nina) want to have a baby?
2. (Nina reveals she *is* pregnant) You can't have it
3. Someone told me I couldn't have my child and I prayed it would be born dead
4. Sam's family history of insanity and the accident that led to his conception
5. It would be worse than killing the child if she brought it into the world – for the baby and for Sam
6. It would also be a 'living hell' for Nina
7. Sam doesn't and can't know about the family history of mental illness
8. Nina has the chance to save the person she loves...
9. (Nina says she doesn't love Sam) She mustn't leave him or he will go insane

Watching the scene play out we can see what a devastating and terrifying trap Mrs Evans binds Nina into. She only agreed to marry Sam because she wanted children. She can't have children with him, but she also can't leave him or he might go crazy. Nina needs to find a way of giving him a healthy baby that's not his, or he might go crazy from the sadness of never being able to conceive a child. She has to sacrifice herself for his happiness – but what about her happiness?

Scene four is where Darrell is seduced by Nina. We start by looking at Sam's character, his physicality and his aspirations. For example, Sam is at Professor Leeds'

Rehearsal diary (continued)



desk. He is typing, fiddling with a pipe, finding matches etc and has a nervous energy. The desk has become neurotic. We ask whether he really smokes the pipe? Or does he just like the idea of the pipe? He believes having a family will solve everything: "If we only had a kid, then they'd see what I could do". To him children equal success, happiness and the future.

Darrell is a doctor and a man of science – diagnosis gives him pleasure and it's safe, he knows the ground. Each time he feels he's correctly identified the problem and the solution it's something he can be proud of. In Nina's seduction of him, we investigate what happens if she doesn't touch him until the very end of the scene: it looks more powerful when she finally does. Nina's tactics in this scene have to be light, and she needs to approach him in a roundabout way or he might balk. She is desperate: to her it's a life-or-death situation, but she can't reveal that.

Scene five is set near the beach (sea and tide are symbols of freedom). Nina and Sam have not slept together since she got pregnant and this is causing frustration for both. Sam believes Darrell has been doing psychoanalytical work on Nina every Wednesday. Where do Darrell and Nina conduct their affair – in the spare room? Darrell is as raw and out of control as he's ever been in his life. He is humiliated and arrives with the certainty that he has to leave, but sees her and melts. He resolves to leave America.

In the original text Sam enters, preparing to offer Nina a divorce. We have removed this, but debate if it should go back in. Or do we at least demonstrate the knowledge of his intention as their relationship has become so poor? It means Sam is more emotionally canny than he is first perceived to be. An additional element in this scene is that Marsden's mother has recently died – what does this mean for the character?

We establish that Nina and Sam *are* happy in scene six. But all the characters are playing with fire. Nina invites Darrell to expose everything to Sam but he can't. In rehearsal we consider the implications if he had. Little character details are added to the asides, which are good fun. For example, Marsden gets chocolates and passes them around while he delivers his aside.

Asides

We do more work on the asides and discuss the following:

- should there be different conventions for different asides?
- there should never be a hint as to who might 'go off' and turn to tell the audience something intimate
- the need to maintain momentum of the scene and the private thought of the person speaking
- the person in thought needs help and energy to bring them back into the scene and rejoin reality. It is very satisfying when it happens in the blink of an eye
- actors need to commit to the physicality of the asides

Our goal when it comes to delivering the asides is that O'Neill really rewards risk-taking in performance.

Week Four

Scene changes

We brainstorm how to do the scene changes. How do we make them a) economical and b) beautiful? What O'Neill captures so beautifully is the "cast of one's life" (as Simon would say). In other words, those figures who come in and out of focus, and those who remain with us until the end of our lives. The scene changes can help with this story-telling.

Rehearsal diary (continued)

Soutra Gilmour's incredible 3D moving model of the set and its changes is very helpful. We find these changes exciting on a small scale, despite there being no music, lights or action, and are heartened to imagine them in the theatre with huge pieces of set moving, and worlds changing. Looking at the scene changes using the model helps us to decide to use characters to drift in and out of the worlds, to show time passing, then let a character draw the eye and continue the story.

Scene developments

Looking at scene one again, we rationalise that the confession of the pact between Professor Leeds and Gordon Shaw is the crux of the scene, and indeed, of the play. Marsden should also be caught up in this drama to keep it integral to plot – all events stem from that act. Gordon didn't sleep with Nina so she didn't become pregnant with his child and as a result, she was left suspended and guilty, constantly searching for a way to 'sacrifice' herself and seeking comfort. She marries Sam, learns about the Evans' insanity, feels forced to abort her child, but can't leave her husband. She must embark on an affair to get a healthy child, and live a lie for the rest of her life, which ruins her marriage. This act by the Professor creates the "whole absurd mess" of the play. Nina's father "destroyed her happiness" and the rest of the play is fuelled by the search for that happiness.

We look further at Mrs Evans' intentions in scene three. She truly believes Nina should not have Sam's baby as this is the best thing for everyone's happiness. Nina refers to Mrs Evans as 'mother' – she really believes this is her new family. Mrs Evans' confession is in the moment and improvised, that's why it is so unclear, rushed and confusing. We really play with space in the room – pushing it to its farthest extremes should increase the tension and drama. The audience are Nina.

Scene four has a flavour of farce (Marsden: "it's all a sordid mess") and, as such, is a welcome change after scene three. A great position to start the scene is established by sitting Sam behind the Professor's desk with typewriter. The result is very satisfying. Sam is clearly procrastinating. Nina could bring him a cup of coffee or something on a plate but we should be left with the impression that neither of them is good at domestic life. They are young people playing at a marriage – the desk and study are untidy, and there is crockery everywhere.

Sam's status has to have increased for us to root for this marriage. There is more equality between him and Nina. Sam's energy, in turn, also needs to change. He is more rooted and connected but still passionate. Jason Watkins shares his research on Sam's work in advertising. At the time, he might

have been writing ads for Chrysler cars. After scene five when his career booms, Jason imagines Sam came up with the idea for a very successful ad – Coca Cola, perhaps, or Rice Krispies (Snap, crackle and pop). Darrell by contrast, has become more extreme. We decide he is the opposite of Sam. He is a young man who thinks he is Freud and he is very tidy. His asides have an existential quality to them "have I ever been happy?", "what is happiness?". Darren Pettie (who plays Ned Darrell) plays them active, so they don't become reflective and lose the tension of the scene.

Scene four shows the many colours of Nina as she manipulates the men to get what she needs. With Marsden she plays into his fantasy of a little girl who needs to be taken care of or punished; for Darrell she is a woman in need of saving. Because of this, it is a very sexy scene involving game-playing and seduction.



Rehearsal prop typewriter
Photo: Johan Persson

Rehearsal diary (continued)

Darrell is a different person by the end and holds her very differently: it's not the grasping comfort of Sam, it's more of an exploring delight. In Darren's own words: "I can't wait to open this present."

Scene eight (on the boat) is the only scene which takes place outdoors. There are a variety of factors at work in this section: alcohol, sun, heat, waves, tide, crowds, race, haze on the river. The characters are in a kind of suspended limbo so all the elements spark off tiny fires between people – attacks, passions, confessions, even a stroke. For this scene to work properly we need to decide the distance to the finishing line of the boat race, which will help to pace the action on deck.

In the scene change between eight and nine, Nina's son, Gordon (Evans) will be introduced as a character. We've really been waiting the whole play to see him – or rather, the original Gordon Shaw. Is the Gordon of scene nine everything we expect him to be? Marsden notes that the closeness of Madeline (Gordon's fiancée) and Gordon, straight after Evans' funeral, is positively bestial. This should once more hint at the connection between death and desire, something Nina introduced after Gordon Shaw's death.

Sam leaves money to Darrell's work in his Will, which makes us question whether Sam knew about Darrell and Nina. Did he ever wonder if Gordon really was his son? By leaving money to Preston's (Darrell's assistant) scientific work is Sam claiming him as his own, too?

Asides

The "mint crème convention" is developed. The audience see the thoughts being spoken but it's as if the person speaking is just silent to the other characters (ie, silently handing out mint crèmes as Marsden does in scene six). For the asides to work there needs to be greater contrast between them and the public face. The subtext can't be played in their normal lines or the asides become redundant. The asides can only work if we embrace the radical difference: "This is a play where characters say one thing and think another" (Simon Godwin).

Week Five

Intentions

We continue to work on finding the intention in each scene. This should help us find any additional movement and trace the emotional journey throughout the play.

Scene one

Marsden needs to keep active in scene one. He should maintain the momentum and the 'thoughts' (asides) just come to him rather than stopping and channeling them. In a way, Marsden sets himself up as our narrator. A hat is particularly useful in this scene to convey the idea of mask on/mask off during the asides. Marsden is wafting his hat when he speaks to the Professor (mask on) and stops on his thoughts (mask off). There is a question over whether Professor Leeds should speak to the audience at the end of scene one. We haven't yet established if this is a 'thought' or a moment of reflection.

For Nina's outburst to have impact, the cast all need to be speaking in the same coded way (ie 'What *did* I give him?') – no one has spoken about sex in this way to them before – so the audience understand the impact of what she is saying.

Scene five

Anne-Marie feels she has found the key to Nina in scene five. Here we see a truly courageous character, virtually the only one in the play, who is willing to grab her happiness. This is where the Nina of the rest of the play is born. But it is also a crisis point. Nina is prepared to leave Sam, to risk his sanity, but grab her happiness. It is also the first time Nina and Darrell acknowledge there is love in their relationship. Until now it's been physical, mental, intellectual, scientific, lust – but never love. I question whether we need a little more of an aside for Sam at the beginning of this scene. We have cut a lot of material and understanding the pressure he is under and his mental state may convey how high the stakes are for him.



Charles Edwards (Charles Marsden) and Anne-Marie Duff (Nina Leeds) in rehearsal
Photo: Johan Persson

Rehearsal diary (continued)

Scene six

Scene six takes place after the interval so in theory people will be charged up and returning with expectations. We decide we can really push the mask on/mask off quality of the asides here. Some of the details of this scene are fleshed out: Marsden could have a notepad for jotting down his 'new plot'; Little Gordon is eight months old, etc. Nina and Darrell's relationship should also have changed: she has all the power now. In the previous scene they both declare their love, but he leaves without notice, so it makes sense that the anger and hurt she directs at him now is real.

We explore what makes Darrell decide not to reveal the truth about young Gordon to Sam. Does he feel a sense of guilt as Sam has finally taken control over his own life and become a success? Darrell may feel he can't destroy that. All the action (and inaction) must come from a place of genuine love – that has to be at the heart of the play: the search for, and failings of, love.

Scene seven

Michael [Bruce, composer] sends samples of melancholic and jazz music to indicate the feeling of going into the Park Avenue apartment in New York for scene seven. We wonder if it would work to have a strange, warped version of Charlie's "Row, row, row, right down the river" taking us into scene eight. Would the effect prove tipsy, woozy, watery or haunting?

Scene eight

We block scene eight for the first time, and start by looking at characters' objectives. Marsden initially wants to escape, then once the alcohol kicks in, his objective changes to trying to win Nina. Nina wants to have power, to be loved, to control, to be the woman she was 20 years ago.

The scene is broken into manageable sections but, ultimately, the boat race defines it. Nina has the length of the race to save her son, before he becomes Madeline's or Sam's. There are practicalities to consider: Who has drinks? Marsden and Nina play SNAP! Do they ever 'snap' during the scene? To keep the pace of the scene flowing, everyone must be ready to react to Sam's announcements and updates of the race. When Nina and Darrell are alone together they must resist slipping into nostalgia in favour of present wants and needs. And, of course, Nina's attempt to convince Darrell that Madeline isn't good enough for Gordon is an echo of what her father did to Gordon Shaw.

We discuss what may have led to Sam's stroke. By finally reincarnating Gordon Shaw for Nina, does Sam feel his life's work is complete? He's done what he was meant to do and given her the ultimate happiness. Does he feel he has finally proved himself and Nina's rejection of that brings on his stroke?



The lines and asides in the final moments of the scene are important: do we want laughter at the moment? Or do we want a real, genuine, collective moment of human tragedy, empathy? If the latter then we must cut asides which voice the wishes for Sam's death. We get enough of an indication about their individual feelings from the rest of the scene.

One prop is particularly useful in this scene. Nina's card-playing helps to show the state of her emotions and plotting. She does a lot of shuffling and snapping and anxious dealing.

Scene nine

We initially try to play scene nine as though Gordon has just come from the graveyard and Sam's funeral, but this means Gordon looks backwards rather than forwards. Gordon's intention is changed: he has to deliver the

Rehearsal diary (continued)

news of the Will, and wish his mother and Darrell well for their 'wedding'. He is looking to the future rather than the past but this is also the first time he voices his thoughts and feelings about his mother and Darrell. It is likely to be hard for him to say out loud. Madeline, too, needs a clear motivation in this scene. She ultimately wants to take Gordon away from his mother, but here her immediate objective may be to support and soothe him.

Week Six

We work on scene two, finding the hook to access Darrell as a character. He is excited to expound his theories of Freud and at this point in the play, is a young man, with physical energy. He seems fixated with Marsden ("He interests me") and is the only character familiar with Marsden's books so he feeds us some important character information about him. Darren has an added challenge in playing Darrell, as his thoughts/asides are long. Simon advises him to embrace that, and to keep them whole rather than breaking them down.

For the first time, we are able to run the entire play and, apart from the technical challenges (on quick costume changes Simon quips "Getting your knickers in a twist – this is the show that really brings that phrase to life"), we make some interesting discoveries.

In scene one, playing the heat works well and the actors capture delicious distinctions between the public and private faces. There are concerns Nina may lose some of her power when she faces upstage ("What did I give him") but Patrick Drury as Professor Leeds is hugely moving when he directly engages with the audience at the end.

The vibrancy and mercurial playfulness of Nina in scene two is lovely, endearing and fun to watch. Marsden, too, works well where Charles Edwards plays on 'Darrell and Nina upstairs alone' through the whole of his contact with Sam. We find Nina's 'radical re-imagining of God' is very powerful if said clearly and simply. Her father and Marsden make her future for her – and she signs up to it.

Nina's line "No that's a vile thought, I don't mean that" is a lovely moment of self-awareness and offers a third dimension to the thoughts/asides. The run also shows a nice connection between Marsden and Nina when they look at each other during her 'punish me' moment.

There are a few notes on scene six, too. This scene should be an exciting and uplifting welcome back from the interval. At the moment it looks a little static, as though everyone is falling into a line. Should Marsden be

more on the move? Darren produces a lovely moment as Darrell in the hesitant way he touches Nina. How do they all feel about the baby?

The scene on the boat is finally the chance for Darrell to throw off his shackles – he is now completely free. But for Nina, this is losing Gordon all over again. "I won't have it" needs to be played as another huge turning point.

The final scene with the young lovers (Madeline and Gordon) needs to leave the audience feeling endeared towards them. Therefore, Madeline can't be too self-involved and Gordon shouldn't be too vicious. Madeline's aside "How little he knows her" demonstrates how well women understand the actions of other women.

O'Neill does not let us off easily. We are brought full circle as Nina recalls receiving the news of Gordon Shaw's death, and it's gut-wrenching to watch ("I've just had a cable father, Gordon's dead").

The moment between Nina and Darrell, where he finally asks her to marry him and she finally turns him down, is gorgeous and human. They don't find happiness but they find peace – that's all we can ever really wish for.

Strange Interlude, The Great Gatsby and the “années folles” (crazy years)

“I certainly am [awfully] glad to see you again”

The first half of the twentieth century has, in recent times, become a point of fascination for contemporary audiences, especially in film and television. We worked our way through the 1950s with series like *The Hour* and *Mad Men*, we jumped all the way back to the fin de siècle with *Mr Selfridge* and then we landed firmly in the 1920s with the explosion of Fitzgerald’s *The Great Gatsby*, and all the trappings of fashion, music, culture and extravagance that come with that social world. And it seems to come in no small dose: long, loud, poetic, big and bright. In 2013, not only did we have Baz Luhrman’s film, but that very particular Gatsby-esque world tipped over from recorded to live art. There was the epic uncut theatrical event *Gatz* at the Noël Coward Theatre, created by the Elevator Repair Service, a ballet adaptation of *The Great Gatsby* at Sadler’s Wells and also, at the National Theatre, a play from one of the most prolific American playwrights, set in the centre of the ‘roaring 20s’.

The quote used at the top of this chapter is an amalgam of two (almost identical) lines, one from *Gatsby* and the other, *Strange Interlude*. O’Neill finished his play in 1923 but it was not performed until 1928. Fitzgerald completed *Gatsby* in 1925 and we can only wonder if one informed the other. Yet there are similarities in style and poetics: longing, love triangles and unrequited passion. A definite link between the two writers is a real-life principle character who epitomises that unique, romantic, fallen hero: the 1920s character that has become so attractive to audiences today.

Hobart Amory Hare “Hobey” Baker was considered to be one of the most notable amateur athletic stars of his time. He excelled in ice hockey and football while at Princeton University and was dubbed the “the blond Adonis of the gridiron” for his good looks. Baker died in December 1918 after a plane he was test-piloting crashed, hours before he was due to leave France and return to America. Fitzgerald, also at Princeton, idolised Baker and included him as a minor character in the 1920 novel *This Side of Paradise*. In *Strange Interlude*, Nina’s fiancé Gordon Shaw – the idolised “crack athlete”, also brought down just before the armistice – who haunts Nina and the other characters throughout the play, is also based on Baker. In rehearsals, the unearthing of this historical figure was a very important discovery. It enabled the cast to grasp a fixed idea of who this ethereal, powerful and central character from the 1920s really was.

What magic do the early 1900s, especially in American history, hold for audiences today? It is indeed a very tangible time. A moment in history when culture became avant-garde, radical and all about the people; a boom in life and living after the First World War. In *Strange Interlude*, Marsden and Ned Darrell both take excursions to Europe, coming across each other in Germany: a cultural hotbed in the age of Jazz, Cabaret, art, ‘thrill seeking’ and erotica.

In a society of recession, we might look back at the 1920s for the art, but perhaps there is also a nostalgia for carefree consumerism. Fashions began in a whole new way, advertising and marketing took off and people were starting to really buy and waste in excess. Of course we may look back on it with a fondness for the deliciousness of indulgence, but some writers of the time viewed it quite differently. In *The Great Gatsby* the billboard-God looms over the landscape with terrifying certainty and dominance while *Strange Interlude* helps us to understand O’Neill’s regard for this unstoppable rise of Capitalism. Sam Evans, the embodiment of the ‘self-made-man’ makes his name and financial success in advertising. Charles Marsden, the character O’Neill most strongly identified with, comments that “his kind are inheriting the earth ... hogging it, cramming it down their tasteless gullets!” Evans is a “typical terrible child of the age ... universal slogan, keep moving ... moving where?” Moving towards the Great Depression of the 1930s, of course. O’Neill wasn’t to know but perhaps he sensed it. That the great, yellow, Gatsby car was heading towards a crash.

Article written by Caitlin McLeod



Sam Evans (Jason Watkins) and Nina Leeds (Anne-Marie Duff)
Production photo: Johan Persson

O'Neill and Asides

*“Poetry of the unconscious... and silences
out loud”*

(the magic and challenges of speaking
one's thoughts)

*“Cogito ergo sum.
(I think, therefore I am.)”*

René Descartes

Eugene O'Neill's father, James, made his name and success playing the title role in *The Count of Monte Cristo* over 6,000 times. From a young age, Eugene came to regard his father as a sellout who traded his talent for money, and distanced himself from his father's career, developing a deep aversion towards 'melodrama'. Later, as a rebellious young man and playwright, making theatre in New York's radical Greenwich Village, he fully embraced the experimental, not only in form but by seeking out alternative – often non-western – worlds to put on stage. O'Neill was fascinated by other vernaculars, ways of speaking and interacting that would allow him to examine his own reality through an objective perspective. However, there would soon come a time when O'Neill felt he could no longer hide from his own, immediate world. *Strange Interlude* was one of the first plays that dramatically captured O'Neill's desire to take on his reality, his language.



Charles Marsden (Charles Edwards)
Production photo: Johan Persson

Although he had a huge respect for the formal naturalism of Ibsen and Strindberg, O'Neill felt there was ultimately something lacking in how reality was represented. Was it possible to make reality more real?

In plays of the time, characters confessed their truths only when under the influence of drugs, alcohol or medication. Unlike in a novel, where a character's innermost desires are explored in depth and revealed to the reader, plays didn't allow their audiences the intimate, sometimes uncomfortable and often endearing, closeness that comes from hearing and understanding a character's hidden thoughts and feelings.

And thus *Strange Interlude* was born – a mid point between a standard play and a novel: an epic exploration of life. A journey of love, death, birth, passion and betrayal, made all the more messy, exciting, revelatory and real by the fact that each character shared their thoughts and desires, candidly and passionately, with the audience.

*“Man is least himself when he talks in his own
person. Give him a mask, and he will tell you
the truth.”*

Oscar Wilde

Some performances to date have indeed used masks to distinguish between the public and private voices yet O'Neill himself commented that “*Strange Interlude* was an attempt at the new masked psychological drama ... without masks”. In *Strange Interlude*, O'Neill gives his characters a mask of 'silence' to hide and speak behind but they are also unmasked. We, the audience, are the ones who get to see the true face before it's hidden once again under a public facade.

The extent of these thoughts can sometimes be very shocking. Characters proclaim that they wished others were dead, foresee their own deaths, confess their sordid fantasies and desires – and often in very beautiful, heightened, poetic terms. The extremity of these thoughts means that the on-stage reality becomes hugely charged with everything that is not being said. There are even exciting moments in the text when a further dimension is added: characters either comment on their own thoughts or seem to penetrate the boundaries between reality and hyper-reality. Darrell confides in scene seven; “What is she thinking?... we sit together in silence, thinking ... thoughts that never know the other's thoughts ... our love has become the intimate thinking together of thoughts that are strangers.” Nina despairs that “He read my thoughts!” when she imagines her lover in her mind and her son Gordon jumps from her lap, suddenly suspecting she is having an affair.

The question of how to deliver the asides is one of the most challenging and ever-changing elements of the rehearsal process. From the start we established certain terms and sets of rules about how to share one's

O'Neill and Asides (continued)

thoughts during a scene. There was **wall**, which meant a character did not acknowledge the audience; **mirror**, where a character turns out towards the audience but speaks as if to their own image; and **connection** or **dialogue** which is direct engagement with the audience. From the start, it was unanimously agreed that the latter two options were the most effective. They keep the action alive and moving forwards. As observers, Simon [Godwin] and I felt a very strong sense of privilege that we were invited in to these private moments, conspired with and charmed.

Thus we tended towards dialogue for the majority of the scenes in the first Act. However, as we came to work on Act Two, it became apparent that some thoughts needed to be more internal, or reflective, otherwise they would fall into the trap of becoming like Shakespearean 'asides' with nods and winks to the audience, an unintended comment being made on the scene at hand. So the convention began to shift. As well as discovering what the actor who was delivering the asides was doing, the other questions were "What happens while this person is telling their thoughts?" Is time suspended? Do the other characters carry on existing in reality and keep moving the action forward? What does that character see? Do they see someone deep in silent thought for some moments or are the thoughts so quick that they

see nothing at all? As with the mirror and dialogue differences, we also found that certain rules worked for certain scenes and depended often on the length of thoughts.

Lastly there was the question of physicality. Does one turn fully and express themselves out to the onlookers? Or speak the thought on the move? Or simply snap their head towards us and back again? The form and manner of delivery was just as changeable as the intention of the thoughts and became once again determined by the circumstances of the scene and situation.

Despite these mutable elements, one thing was certain; the more energy and precision given to 'taking off the mask' and then 'putting the mask back on', the more successful the thoughts became. It is a delicious difference between the public and private faces and the snap between the two heightens not only the comedy and enjoyment of the thoughts, but also means that the scenes begin to crackle and fizz – you never know who might suddenly pop out with a thought, and what they will reveal.

Article written by Caitlin McLeod



Left to right: Charles Marsden (Charles Edwards), Sam Evans (Jason Watkins), Nina Leeds (Anne-Marie Duff) and Ned Darrell (Darren Pettie)
Production photo: Johan Persson

Interview... Simon Godwin

What was your first impression when you read *Strange Interlude*?

That it was long! And the question of how people could speak aloud their thoughts – this interior monologue, which partly is why the play is so long. It is two plays really: the public play, the dialogue between characters; and the private play, the dialogue between the characters and the audience. And the fact that it was two plays struck me very strongly when I first read it.

At this point in rehearsals what would you say the play is about?

The play is about the search for happiness. And that's a search which unites everybody in the audience with the people on stage. I think it makes it a very American play – in the rehearsals I have discovered that the English are rather nervous about acknowledging they might want to be happy, or certainly that they are happy; these characters really make it their lives' aim to be happy. And they are not abashed about that. Of course, the play also asks how to be happy; and even what happiness is. It partly supports and celebrates these characters, but it also partly critiques their ambition, their drive and their ruthlessnesses. Achieving happiness is sometimes their undoing.

Once you'd decided to embark on the project, did you come into rehearsals with a concept in your mind, or did it come out of the process?

Well I think the concept is so firmly embedded in the writing, it's so firmly enconced – the notion of public and private – that to layer another concept from me on top felt like it would be too much. My aim from the beginning was to celebrate the workings of the text, and avoid getting in the way of that whilst giving it a production that respected its historical detail and personal detail, the exquisite detail that O'Neill himself imagined when he was writing the play and set it in these different periods in time. It felt like my job was to do justice to his noble vision.

You and Soutra Gilmour came up with a clear decision early on about how you wanted the production to feel, is that right?

That's right, it strikes me by his very detailed stage directions that O'Neill was very interested in atmosphere. The atmospheres in which words were spoken. So although the words carry a lot of atmosphere, the setting, the furniture, the way rooms are organised and the entrances and exits are all intrinsic to the meaning of the play. So to really search carefully through all of these clues as to how the atmospheres feel, it struck me that the way to unlock them was by following the magic recipe that he had laid out.



Simon Godwin in rehearsal
Photo: Johan Persson

How is the experience of directing this play different to other shows you've worked on?

Well because O'Neill is not squeamish about emotion and not squeamish about drives, it's not a play that can be hidden from. It's not a play that can be done under your breath. It's a play that's done *on breath*, that requires a style not least because you're actually addressing the audience (which is in itself both public and private), and trying to look after both of those things has been a unique challenge of this rehearsal period.

Tell me about your latest big discovery – or small!

That feeling of characters being emotional, yet actually tougher than I realised. So they're sensitive, but they're also ambitious for what they believe is right. And I can see the danger is to collapse into a kind of emotional trough rather than following the potential for growth that all the characters strive for.

Interview by Caitlin McLeod

Interview... Charles Edwards (Charles Marsden) and Anne-Marie Duff (Nina Leeds)

How are you both feeling at this point, two days before technical rehearsal?

AMD: Obviously we're a bit nervous, because we are just trying to make sense of the panorama of the play and with O'Neill that requires guts, to be able to commit to every moment of it. I guess that's where I am at. When you come to the end of rehearsals you should feel like you're too big for the rehearsal room and you're ready for the theatre, that's the place we're trying to get to.

CE: We feel like we're getting there. We're starting to feel like certain scenes can't go any further or can't settle until we have the actual stage around us, spatially.

What were your first impressions of the play and how have they changed?

CE: My first impression was 'Wow' and now it's even more 'Wow'! In performance it is something else. It's an enormous challenge, both on the page and to perform, but just seeing the work that everybody is doing is absolutely wonderful.

AMD: I suppose I found it quite labyrinthine. I couldn't see my way through when I first read it, which is a little bit frightening, but then when I actually sat down with Simon and we talked about the play properly, it all began to come into focus. And so, I was aware it was an extraordinary symphony but I couldn't really taste it yet. When I heard other people and saw the characters come to life in rehearsals, then I had a sense of the world and it all sort of started to settle more.

CE: Symphony is a really good description. We talked a lot in rehearsal about it being musical and it really is, it's a huge, epic symphony.

I read that O'Neill identified most with Marsden.

Does that bring anything in terms of what that means about O'Neill?

CE: Well there's one telling thing about Marsden, Nina describes him as basically – to paraphrase – too timid to jump into the river. He likes to sit on the banks and watch everyone else throw themselves in. And suffer whatever it is the river does to them. Marsden doesn't dip his toe in. O'Neill wrote a poem about exactly that, about himself. About a group of friends persuading him to come and have a dip in the sea. He actually did go in but the poem was about how much he hated it. And there's something of Marsden in that. I think that sounds very autobiographical.

Anne-Marie, does O'Neill identify with Nina at all?

AMD: With any of the female characters in his plays, one always thinks of his mother because that was a complicated relationship. But in terms of Nina being elements of himself, I guess there's a sense of the not belonging, her seeking external answers, and looking for answers through love. And because of his chronology of quite difficult relationships, I always feel this is evident inside him. Also, her attraction to death is very similar



Charles Edwards (Charles Marsden) and Anne-Marie Duff (Nina Leeds) in rehearsal
Photo: Johan Persson

to O'Neill. One can never know about his sexual life, his journey, his physical journey as a human being. We'll never know. There may have been confused elements and perforated boundaries that mirror Nina's, for all I know.

Have you now found the key to deliver the asides?

CE: They are coming with much more ease now. You find yourself wanting to tell the audience what you're really thinking, which is a thrill to be able to do. It's a wonderful opportunity, to share with an audience on such a direct line, but in a play where you just would not expect this to happen. That's the best thing about it. The first few minutes of the play are going to be educating the audience that this is a play set in the '20s, '30s and '40s, but we're going to be confiding in you all the way through, we are going to be wanting your help, it's great.

AMD: It is really good fun, especially when you watch other people, or when they are witty or vicious thoughts. We are all guilty of these thoughts as a species, so it's great fun to see them played out.

Can you both tell me one thing that you are looking forward to in the process?

CE: I am really looking forward to seeing this massive thing as a whole journey in one evening. The completion of that will be an exhilaration for us and for the audience.

AMD: I am very interested and excited to hear how people enjoy or don't enjoy or are touched or excited by the play. 'Cause I haven't a clue yet. But anyone I know who has seen this play jumps on me and says you're part of that incredible company working on the play. I am really looking forward to how people feel about it.

Interview by Caitlin McLeod

Additional resources

Online content from the National Theatre:

- ➔ Watch interviews with the company of *Strange Interlude*
- ➔ Watch the NT's trailer for the production

Written resources:

- ➔ *Actions: The Actor's Thesaurus* by Marina Caldarone (Nick Herne Books, 2004) ISBN: 978-1854596741
- ➔ *Eugene O'Neill – Beyond Mourning and Tragedy* by Stephen A Black (Yale University Press, 2002) ISBN: 978-0300093995
- ➔ *Eugene O'Neill's America: Desire Under Democracy* by John Patrick Diggins (University of Chicago Press, 2007) ISBN: 978-0226148809