BOUND EAST FOR CARDIFF

Produced by the Provincetown Players at the Playwrights' Theatre, New York City

3 November 1916

Direction: Eugene O'Neill and E. J. Ballantine

Yank: George Cram Cook
Driscoll: William Stuart
Cocky: Edward J. Ballantine
Davis: Harry Kemp
Scotty: Frank Shay

Oleson: B. J. O. Nordfeldt
A Norwegian: Donald Corley
Smitty: Lew Parrish
Ivan: Francis Buzzell
The Captain: Henry Marion Hall

The Second Mate: Eugene G. O'Neill
Oyez! Hear ye! Make way there! New players are come to town.

Washington Square Players, Neighborhood Playhouse, Portmanteau Theatre and all other thimble, toy, “little” and intimate theatres, make room a trifle for the Provincetown Players—and the Samovar.

Not that they’re heralding their arrival with any such clash and clatter. Instead they’re here already, have been for a week, put on a new bill next Friday night, and will play all winter. No advance notices and billboards for them; instead the world shall make a path to their door, 139 Macdougal street. At least so the players seriously say when foregathered round the corner, at the Samovar.

The world has made path enough already, so that instead of playing two nights a week as planned they’re playing five. The first night they turned away ten limousines—just like that—and on the nights the Stage Society has taken they have to install a carriage caller—in Macdougal street! [. . . . ]

The second piece, Eugene G. O'Neill’s “Bound East for Cardiff,” was delightful. The setting, a wall of bunks in a ship’s fo’c’s’le, fitted the little stage perfectly. Harry Kemp, E. J. Ballantine, William Stuart, “Jig” Cook and seven others were capital sailors. The play was real, subtly tense and avoided a dozen pitfalls that might have made it “the regular thing.” [. . . . ]

As we understand it, an experiment is something which turns cinders into gold dust or explodes with a fearful crash and odor. In this sense the Provincetown Players have established a most efficient experimental theatre. Some of the explosions can be heard even when the plays are read miles away from Macdougal [sic] Street.

There is only a little gold dust, but then there never is much gold dust. The Provincetown plays seem to have been written by a group of remarkably divergent ability. One would go far to escape such a play as “Freedom” or to find such a one as “Trifles.” [. . . . ]

Different in key, but second in interest, comes “Bound East for Cardiff,” by Eugene G. O’Neill. Here is a play which owes more to the creation of mood and atmosphere than to any fundamentally interesting idea or sudden twist of plot. “Bound East for Cardiff” merely shows the death of a sailor in the forecastle of a British tramp on a foggy night. The appeal lies in the successful approximation of true talk in such a speech as the one where the dying sailor fretfully complains: “Why should it be a rotten night like this, with that damn whistle blowin’ and people snorin’ all around? I wish the stars was out, and the moon, too; I c’d lie out on deck and look at them, and it’d make it easier to go—somehow.”

Approximation, rather than faithful reproduction, must be the aim of the
dramatist who deals with the looser talking sort of folk. Obviously, it is impossible to set down the conversation of sailors word for word. And yet it is possible to make their talk sound real, as in the speech we have quoted, or unreal, as in the scene where Driscoll, “a red-haired giant, with the battered features of a prizefighter,” refers to one of his boon companions as a “divil-may-care rake av a man.” This is false, not so much because the phrase is obviously one which would not be heard from the mouth of a sailor, but because the spirit is false.

Such slips are few in the play. Eugene O’Neill has written several short plays about the sea, and is probably familiar with that subject. At any rate, he strikes a rich vein, the old Kipling vein, in the bit where the dying man and his pal mull over the times they used to have. “The moving pictures in Barracas? Some class to them, d’yuh remember?” And they talk of sounds in Paseo Colon, and smells in La Plata, rows in Singapore and sprees in Port Said, to say nothing of the fight on a dock at Cape Town, when knives were drawn.

Appropriately enough, there is a touch of sentiment about the pleasant-spoken barmaid at the Red Stork, in Cardiff. Perhaps it is of her that Yank is thinking just before he dies, when he gulps at the dipper of water and gasps: “I wish this was a pint of beer.” [. . . . ]
IN THE ZONE

Produced by the Washington Square Players at the Comedy Theatre, New York City

31 October 1917

Design: Rollo Peters

Smitty: Frederick Roland

Davis: Robert Strange

Olsen: Abram Gillette

Scotty: Eugene Lincoln

Ivan: Edward Balzerit

Yank: Jay Strong

Driscoll: Arthur Hohl

Cocky: Rienzi de Cordova
Last season, after seeing a particularly fine bill at the Comedy Theater [sic], we exclaimed fervently and enthusiastically: “Thank the Lord for the Washington Square Players!” Last night, after seeing the Players’ new bill, we exclaimed “Amen!” to last year’s ejaculation. And we meant it, too. There is more meat, more cleverness and more originality packed into one bill of the Washington Square Players than there is in an entire season of Broadway potboilers.

The new bill of one-act plays that started the Players’ season at the Comedy Theater [sic] last night is nothing short of brilliant. It is, in many respects, the best bill the Players have ever given New York. And it justifies all of the hopes that the friends of this excellent organization have expressed for its artistic future. Such a bill as this brings fruition of drama long desired, but never before attained in this country. Manna in the wilderness! A drink of cold water at the end of an arid day! [. . . . ]

“In the Zone” is a breathlessly absorbing little drama that is enacted in the bowels of an ammunition ship just entering the submarine danger zone. Eugene O’Neill is the author and he is a real artist. The men are suspicious of a man named Smitty, whom they have dubbed “The Duke.” They think he is a German spy. Finally their fears become unendurable and they seize hold of Smitty’s black box that he has concealed under the mattress, thinking it contains an infernal machine. But all they find is a packet of love letters, revealing the sordid fact that Smitty has lost forever the love of his sweetheart—because he couldn’t master his greater love for drink. The men go silently forth, leaving Smitty with bowed head and sob-shaken body, facing a hopeless future.

There is not a woman in the cast, and, singular to relate, the ubiquitous she was not missed. This pathetic little tragedy, showing the death of a man’s soul, was amazingly well acted. Not a false note was struck by the actors and during the progress of the play the auditorium was as silent as the proverbial tomb. [. . . . ]

Ralph Block.
“The Drama: The Washington Square Players in Four One-Act Plays.”
New York Tribune, 1 November 1917, p. 11.

The Washington Square Players, whose business it is to shunt the drama out of the well beaten road of the commonplace that Broadway does its best to travel, assumed again the performance of their duty at the Comedy Theatre last night. The brotherhood at the Comedy has more or less established its right to claim the attention of playgoers who seek their entertainment in something beyond the old furniture, the wax flowers and haircloth upholstery of the playhouse. The programme of last night, the first of the season, is set in pleasant pieces and does not lack variety, although it is not so distinguished at any point as to rise above a passing entertainment of the fancy to an actual stimulation of the imagination. [. . . . ]
“In the Zone” is an up-to-date sea tale by Eugene O’Neill, set in the forecastle of a small tramp steamer loaded with dynamite. The nervous crew, under the impression that they have discovered a German spy in their midst, gag him and soak his supposed bomb in a pail of water, only to discover that it is loaded with love letters. Intended, doubtless, to be a shocker, the piece somewhat fails of its effect by the previous assurance on the part of the audience that the bomb is not a bomb. The acting is not impressive, but is sufficient. The setting is interesting. [.....]

Charles Darnton.
“The New Plays: ‘In the Zone’ At the Comedy.”
New York Evening World, 1 November 1917, p. 19.

In renewing operations at the Comedy Theatre last night, the Washington Square Players fired their best shot with “In the Zone,” by Eugene O’Neill, who, I’m told, is the son of that fine old actor, James O’Neill.

The significance of “In the Zone” was realized when the curtain rose on the forecastle of a small steamship loaded with ammunition. Looking furtively about, a man crawled out of his bunk, opened a bag and took from it a box which he placed beneath his mattress. Then he pretended to be asleep. Watching him all the time, however, was a shipmate who had started to bring in coffee. The box, of course, suggested a bomb, the man a German spy. “Smithy” [sic], he was called. When he went out on deck his companions held a council of war, with the result that the mysterious box was carefully placed in a pail of water. On his return to the forecastle “Smithy” [sic] was knocked down and tied hand and foot. He threatened to kill the man who opened the box, and was promptly gagged. Then the lid of the box was lifted to reveal only letters. The letters, postmarked Berlin, were from a woman—love letters that marked the man as a drunkard, not a spy. He buried his head in his bunk, while the two members of the crew who had taken the cords off his hands and feet gave him sympathetic pats on the back as they left him to his misery.

Suspense was felt in this realistic bit of drama, not to mention a shock when the ship was hit by something. It might have been a torpedo, but it happened to be nothing worse than a piece of wreckage. Frederick Roland as “Smithy” [sic], Eugene Lincoln, Arthur Hohl and others acted like desperate men in this “sea tale.” The forecastle was staged in a way to make it as convincing as one of Joseph Conrad’s tales of the sea, but the swish of water should have been kept up to the end. [.....]

“Four Plays to Start Season For Players.”
New York Herald, 1 November 1917, p. 7.

To formally open their fourth season the Washington Square Players last night presented four new plays, three of which were original enough to stand out distinctly in this playhouse of exotic conceits.

“In the Zone,” a night drama of the sea, by Eugene O’Neill, registered so realistically that several spectators laughed awkwardly in its tense moments as a result of the nervous strain of the sustained thrill.
The setting was one of the best of the programme, depicting the forecastle of a steamship in the submarine zone. The seamen believed they had captured a German spy who had apparently placed an infernal machine in the mattress under his bunk. “Smitty,” played by Frederick Roland, was caught, gagged and received a primitive court martial at the hands of his messmates, and for a time it looked pretty dark for him.

The removal of the “bomb” was one of the most ingeniously dramatic effects the Washington Square Players have offered, and most persons held their breath until the wicked looking box had been immersed in a bucket of water. The sequel would prevent future audiences from enjoying the full surprise, and so it must not be disclosed here.

Though no one realized it, William [sic] Gillette played Olsen the Swede in this sketch. But the other Mr. Gillette probably did not mind the coincidence—if it is a coincidence. Robert Strange, Edward Balzerit, Eugene Lincoln, Rienzi de Cordova, Arthur Hohl and Jay Strong visualized the rough crew of able seamen with just the right nonchalance at the beginning, building up the climax of the scene in an easy and highly effective manner. [. . . .]

Burns Mantle.
“Washington Square Players Present James O’Neill’s Son as a New Playwright.”
New York Evening Mail, 1 November 1917, p. 11.

The Washington Square Players emerge from their lengthy summer’s siesta—or arise from it, or awake, or whatever players might do in putting a siesta aside—with four new one-act plays. Two of them are excellent and two of them are no better than fair.

Of the two that are worthiest, the one that leads is a sea tale told by Eugene O’Neill, son of James O’Neill, the venerable and venerated actor, a genius, a new playwright who seems certain to be heard from again, and most impressively heard from eventually.

The play with which he is introduced to New York audiences is a thirty-minute drama, confined to the foc’sle of an ammunition ship running the submarine blockade. “In the Zone” it is called and it compresses in its thirty minutes of playing time as gripping a bit of drama, and as reasonable, as any that has been acted hereabouts in some time.

The story is as simple as the setting and as stripped of decorations. As the watch is being changed the sailor come to call the sleepers notices that one, “Smitty,” nick-named “The Duke” because of his fine manners and careful speech, has crawled from his bunk, opened his kit bag and taken a mysterious package from inside it. This he is seen to secrete beneath his blankets and then to crawl back into bed, pretending to be asleep when he is aroused five minutes later.

The man’s nerves are jangled by the knowledge that their ship is within the submarine belt, and suddenly they begin to imagine things. Some one has left a porthole open. It may be a signal to the enemy. The ship strikes a piece of driftwood—or was it a mine that did not explode?

Anything, everything, adds to the tension. And when the man who has seen “Smitty” hide the box makes his report there is no other reasonable conclusion than that he is a German spy. So they tie him up, and gag him when he curses them,
and then gingerly soak the suspected package in a pail of water. Carefully they undo it and find only a package of letters. Even then they scent a plot—seeing that one of the letters is postmarked Berlin. So they read them, and find in them the tragedy of “Smitty’s” life. The letters are from the girl who had given him up when her love had failed to reform him, and he was away on this voyage trying to beat the thing that had cursed his life—his thirst for liquor.

As they read laboriously “the blarneyin’ stuff” the man they have tied to the bunk behind them crouches in piti ful shame, and when they have finished they release him and sneak away one by one without making a bad matter worse with explanations. It is a splendidly written scene and one of the things the men of the Players’ company do so well. And it atones for a lot they may do that is not so interesting. [. . . .]

“Music and Drama: The Washington Square Players.”
New York Evening Post, 1 November 1917, p. 9.

The Washington Square Players opened their regular season in the Comedy Theatre last evening with an offering of four little plays, exiguous in dimensions and quality, which were received with kindliness by a complacent audience. There was nothing worthy of serious attention in the performance, which never rose above the level of respectable amateurism. To pretend that it had any of the particular literary or histrionic significance that might denote uncommon artistic ambition or perception would be an affectation at once ridiculous and dishonest. But the show, judged according to amateur standards, was not a bad one possessing the two conspicuous merits of brevity and variety. [. . . .]

“In the Zone,” a sea tale by Eugene O’Neill, is the most satisfactory thing on the programme. The scene, the forecastle of a small ocean tramp, is ingeniously and realistically constructed, and the incident portrayed is sufficiently plausible, although the details do not always have the true fo’c’sle flavor. The polyglot crew, very uneasy about submarines, have caught a lone little Cockney hiding a tin box in his bedding, jump at the conclusion that he is a German spy with a bomb, and gag and bind him after a hard fight. Then they discover that the “bomb” is a package of love letters, in which his girl finally dismisses him on account of his drunken habits. Here there is drama, with many natural as well as some unnatural touches. Real sailormen would have acted with far greater promptitude and less sentimentality. But this is a clever little “thriller” of the “sell” variety, and is not badly done. [. . . .]

“New Play Bill From Washington Square.”

Perhaps the most vivid and keenly felt of the Provincetown plays was a forecastle scene by Eugene O’Neill; and in the new bill of the Washington Square Players, which was disclosed last night at the Comedy Theatre, the high spot was marked by