

Long Day's Journey



Into Night

By Jennie Punter

Martha Henry as the morphine-addicted mother 'Mary' in Stratford's brilliant production of Eugene O'Neill's classic American family tragedy, brought to the big screen by Rhombus Media and directed by David Wellington.

All photos: Cylla Von Tiedemann

The stage and the screen have an uneasy alliance,

sort of like kissing cousins, one of whom frequently—sometimes reverently, sometimes imaginatively, but often callously—borrows from the other. Filming theatre has always been a part of movie-making, with filmmakers taking from the stage everything from vaudeville romps to highbrow drama, returning again and again to classics or capitalizing on contemporary hits. Yet, despite the obvious attractions of making a film of a stage play which has proven itself (artistically, commercially or both), the task of rendering a relatively faithful interpretation presents the adapter with challenges that are tricky or even impossible to overcome. Former *New Yorker* film critic Pauline Kael once wrote that the movie sometimes “breaks the back of the play by ‘opening it up,’ and then makes a half-hearted gesture towards transforming it.” We see this all the time. For instance, many screen adaptations of Shakespeare toss in extra swordfights or sex, have characters run through meadows, gallop on horses towards castles—gratuitous scenes that have no dialogue to support them. The tactic can work, but often feels like a deliberate attempt to make the play more like a “movie,” evoking that get-on-with-it sentiment from the audience. Another tactic is to create new spaces for the dialogue to take place, often done simply to break the supposed monotony of a play’s limited setting.

For several reasons, director David Wellington did not consider such adaptation temptations in the new Canadian film of the Pulitzer Prize-winning drama *Long Day’s Journey Into Night* by American playwright Eugene O’Neill (1888-1953). There were practical factors. The three-hour film, produced by Niv Fichman and Daniel Iron of performing arts film specialists Rhombus Media (*Thirty-two Short Films About Glenn Gould*) and distributed by Cineplex Odeon Films, was shot in only 30 days; the budget, which also included a major contribution from Telefilm Canada and pre-sales to CBC-TV and Bravo!, was just over \$2-million. But the main reasons for confining this “play of old sorrow,” as O’Neill described it, to the living room of the Tyrone family’s summer home were artistic—a little to do with sticking to the “script” and even more to do with the acclaimed Stratford Festival production that inspired the project in the first place.

Directed by Diana Leblanc, the brilliantly cast production of *Long Day’s Journey Into Night*, which opened in the spring of 1994, ran for two seasons at Stratford’s Tom Patterson Theatre. Houses were consistently sold out; all the reviews were raves. One *New York Times* critic wrote that the Stratford production made him see the play for the first time as a story about love. And that loving feeling, not lost at all in Wellington’s film, has everything to do with the remarkable chemistry of the cast: William Hutt as the alcoholic father James Tyrone, an aging Broadway actor; Martha Henry as the morphine-addicted mother Mary, just returned from a sanatorium and seemingly healthy; Peter Donaldson as the broke alcoholic older son Jamie, a reluctant actor; Tom McCamus as the younger son Edmund, who is diagnosed with consumption part of the way through the play, just one of many revelations in the long day; and Martha Burns, who plays the family’s maid, Cathleen. In beautifully poetic language, O’Neill unflinchingly portrays the anguish and regrets of his own family, a play “written in tears and blood” in 1940 but not performed until 1956, three years after his death.

Long Day’s Journey Into Night has been filmed before. Besides two television productions—a British one from 1973 with Laurence Olivier, and one for American Playhouse in 1987 with Jack Lemmon and Kevin Spacey—there is, of course, the famous 1962 version, directed by Sidney Lumet and starring Ralph Richardson, Jason Robards Jr., Dean Stockwell and Katharine Hepburn, whose performance as Mary was nominated for an Academy award. Lumet’s black-and-white film opens up the play, setting some of the action on the porch, the grounds and the garage of the Tyrone abode; Wellington’s film, shot in colour in the Super 35mm format, keeps the viewer inside the very realistic, detailed recreation of the O’Neill family summer home in New London, Connecticut.

“The first meeting I ever had with all the cast, they asked me if I wanted to open this up and I said ‘no,’ and they were glad to hear it,” recalls Wellington, whose first feature was 1993’s *I Love A Man in Uniform*, which he also wrote. “Conventional wisdom is that you open up plays. But the idea is that [the Tyrones are] stuck there, and we’re stuck with them. There are points in the film where the camera backs off into a sort of objective spot, a kind of keyhole, and then goes back in and joins them. But I think it’s important that you’re trapped with them. To take it outside violates the spirit of the play.” One of Wellington’s touchstones was *Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*, the 1966 film of the Edward Albee play. “It’s not only a great film treatment of a play, but it was also an affirmation to me that this kind of thing has been done successfully.

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"I was really committed early on to make [*Long Day's Journey Into Night*] as credible a portrayal of four people in a house in 1912 Connecticut," continues the 33-year-old director. "One of the appeals of this piece for me is that it has no irony at all. It's naked human emotion laid out for you to see. To display the artifice would be an apology for the feeling of it. I didn't want to put it into some hip contemporary context, like 'Isn't this a quaint piece of theatre?' People call that a post-modern approach, but I never wanted to do that. And the cast, and everyone involved, wanted to capture the experience of seeing the play in the film. But that means it shouldn't literally be the same thing. If they wanted to do that they could have taken video cameras in and shot it on the stage."

Few films have featured such a well-rehearsed cast as *Long Day's Journey*. After completing the production's second run last fall, they took a break, then entered a short rehearsal period to adjust their movements to the new set. "We spent a week with the film set taped out on the floor and used what we had done on stage as a starting point," explains Martha Henry, a Stratford veteran and film actor (she won the Best Actress Genie in 1987 for *Dancing in the Dark*). "Once we started shooting, I suppose there was a greater sense of claustrophobia than what we had felt on the stage. But one of the wonderful things about the film set was that outside you

could see the water and trees moving. It felt and smelled and looked like a number of cottages I had been in. You really had a sense of that odd kind of summertime isolation."

Perhaps one of the big challenges for a director in filming a stage cast is to find ways to tone down the performances without losing the energy and momentum. "It's true there might be something onstage where an actor is communicating something that can be tucked away because the camera is doing it," Wellington says. "There's a whole visual language working under it, so the challenge is moving it into a visual place from the text-based place."

"We're going to have a memory of doing the play for 500 people," says Tom McCamus, who won the Best Actor Genie for his leading role in *I Love a Man in Uniform*. "Sometimes it's a relief not to have to send it out anymore, instead you direct the energy to each other in this little room. But no matter how tough it was at times (which for me was the last act where I'm on the whole time), we all trusted David 100 per cent." The film not only captures the love and intimacy and conflicts between the characters, but also another special touch from the stage production—humour—particularly in William Hutt's performance.

"Their whole idea, from the time they began rehearsals with Diana Leblanc, was the love these people have for each other," Wellington says. "The lighter moments in the piece modulate it so when it is tragic, you feel it more. I don't remember ever laughing during the Lumet film. It's true it's a very different style of acting in that film. It's also very dark. This one has some funny stuff in it. And I think most of that came from the actors, because it is not in the text."

Henry explains that the realistic sense of intimacy felt in the performances is due in part to the early rapport of the cast members. "I've played Bill's wife and Tom's mother before, and worked with the other actors," she says. "So we already had a knowledge of each other as actors, akin to a kind of family. The first year, we got together in quite a concentrated way for six days, then I went away to direct *The Miracle Worker* in London. So when they rehearsed, it was as if Mary was away at the sanatorium. Although we didn't set out consciously to do that, it made a great impact. I felt very estranged when I came back to the rehearsals. I seemed to be the outsider."

Wellington, a fan of the play for many years, saw the Stratford production once during the first season, then 15 times during the second in preparation for the film. "There were lots of nice little details in the play that you didn't need to point to, you see them in the first pass," he says. "Each time I saw the show I discovered tiny things that I liked, and I made notes to try and get them in the film. I mean, casting is



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Opposite page: William Hutt and Martha Henry
This page: clockwise, Martha Henry, Peter Donaldson,
Tom McCamus and William Hutt.

about 80 per cent of my job of directing something and this play had a beautiful cast so that was done. The characters were already drawn, so it just came down to specific moments. My responsibility was to make sure it stayed on the right path, that the story was told and the camera was in the right place all the way through."

One of the visual ideas Wellington came up with was to crop the actors' bodies within the frame in certain shots, a technique that works very well in the intimate opening dialogue between James and Mary. "I wanted to direct this thing very quietly, without any noisy camera work," Wellington explains. "One of the first ideas I had for this movie was that at the end of Act II, when the boys are going out, Mary does this little soliloquy, and the camera just walks off. The composition kind of falls apart. She walks out of the frame and then walks back in." The scenes of *Long Day's Journey Into Night* were shot in order, with the exception of the opening. "I wanted to go back and do the first day again," Wellington continues. "It was actually a big decision, but we did it. All the shots were wrong compositions; you can hear them, but it looked like the tail end of a shot. Everybody had walked out, but the camera was still rolling."

One of the "little details" from the stage production that has an arresting impact on the big screen is the image of Mary's gnarled, painfully arthritic hands. "I remember the hands worked really well on stage," Wellington recalls. "The first time I saw it, I thought it was a prosthetic or something." "They just did that themselves," Henry explains. "My mother has some arthritis and, in varying degrees, I have a little myself. It comes from feelings I have in my own body. Eventually, as we rehearsed, I realized I needed my right hand in order to do things, so it turned into a fist, and the left just did what it does when it starts to cramp."

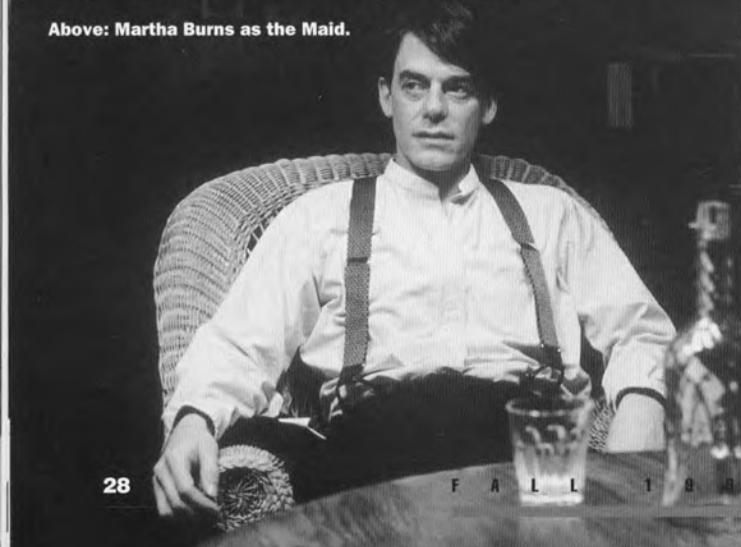
Cramped or not, all the hands in Stratford's Avon Theatre applauded wildly at the premiere of the film in late June. And many of those hands belonged to people who had worked tirelessly behind the scenes. *Long Day's Journey Into Night* marks the first time a Stratford production has been made into a theatrical film, and one of its main champions was Janice Price, former director of marketing and special projects for the Stratford Festival. "My whole focus was the exploitation of the festival's work in other media," she says. "After the first season, we knew we had something extraordinary on our hands, so our first instinct was to take the production on tour. But not only is that expensive, it's almost impossible, considering that Stratford is a repertory company. Then we started exploring ways of turning it into a film."



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Above: Martha Burns as the Maid.



Wellington joined the project in the spring of last year, and was largely responsible for bringing Rhombus Media into the fold soon afterwards. "It was really rewarding for me when we had our deal with Rhombus," Price says. "With all the ups and downs of getting it done, I was always adamant that we weren't going to quit on this thing, and Bill Hutt really motivated me by his commitment to having this work preserved. Through all the artistic discussions that went on, my role was really the business deal, and protecting Stratford's interests." The real turning point was when Rhombus brought Cineplex Odeon to the table, which was a key to the funding. "People aren't used to going to films for the writing and the acting, but I believe there is an audience for this film," co-producer Danny Iron of Rhombus says. "We're going to try for some major international festivals, which would really help this film. One problem with international sales is that the actors aren't that well known internationally. But that was the same with the Glenn Gould movie, which got instant world exposure by being in festivals."

Wellington agrees the film is a tough sell on one level. "It's not, by many standards, a really commercial piece of filmmaking. It's three hours, dialogue without much action and there's one set. What this movie will rely on, and what it needs, is good word of mouth." The exceptional performances from the cast will definitely get people talking about *Long Day's Journey Into Night*. But there is another stellar attraction, as Wellington points out, "The play itself is a star." ■