

Soul Talk

Possessing Mary Tyrone

BY JOANNA ROTTÉ



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Mary Tyrone in Eugene O'Neill's *Long Day's Journey into Night* is one of three roles I longed to play until witnessing Vanessa Redgrave embody the part in the current revival at the Plymouth Theatre on Broadway. I had of course seen Katharine Hepburn's film rendition of Mary opposite Ralph Richardson (produced in 1962); and there have been other Mary's to view

on video as in the Laurence Olivier and the Jack Lemmon versions of the play; plus there is a good production by the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation. None of these Mary's ever dampened my desire to interpret the role. But now it can be said that Vanessa Redgrave has taken possession of Mary Tyrone, in the way that Marlon Brando took possession of Stanley Kowalski, and one is tempted to leave the role to her, even if she did not originate it. That honor went to Florence Eldridge in 1957 as the first Mary, a performance unknown to me and unavailable to posterity.

I recently heard R&B singer Smokey Robinson quip that his concert audiences think they're coming to see him but in fact he goes on stage to see them. It is similar to the situation of the audience at *Long Day's Journey* who likely think they're coming to see Vanessa Redgrave but in truth Vanessa Redgrave is bringing Mary Tyrone to them.

Vanessa Redgrave's performance enables us to understand, at last, that Mary Tyrone occupies the center of the play. It is her play and it is her morphine addiction that makes the journey long from breakfast to midnight. The play opens on the morning after Mary has suffered a relapse, although the members of her family (husband James Tyrone and sons Jamie and Edmund) are not yet aware of her fall from abstinence, except that elder son Jamie, the realist and cynic, is suspicious. Once Mary's relapse becomes apparent, their reactions to her as "hop-head" shape the drama, including their reactions to each other's reactions to her. Mary as betraying and loving mother and wife ignites the emotional core of the play, which is pain: the pain of disappointment, disillusion, abandonment and despair.

O'Neill inscribed the play as "written in tears and blood" and somewhere I read that according to his wife Carlotta, when writing the play O'Neill would come out from his study bleeding through his pores. As critic John

Gassner said: "Much of his work seemed wrung from him rather than contrived or calculated," and it is this same wringing that ideally we want to feel from the actors. At the high-drama moments, we do feel this in the acting of Vanessa Redgrave and the effect is excruciating to experience.

The script informs us through husband Tyrone that Mary had been a beautiful and sensual young woman. At 54 she remains appealing even with stark white hair, a pallid complexion, and arthritic hands. The opening line of the play is Tyrone's: "You're a fine armful now, Mary," and here the Broadway production honestly portrays the physical attraction between Tyrone and Mary. (In other productions James and Mary relate more like pals than lovers.) With pleasure at the top of the show, Brian Dennehy as Tyrone holds, pets, kisses and otherwise encircles Vanessa Redgrave and she receives him not without ardor. Since Dennehy's gestures are sexually styled we are better able, later on, to appreciate the extent of Tyrone's suffering. He is losing not just his wife to morphine and not just the woman he loves but also his sexual partner. When Mary shoots up, she goes to the spare room and there she stays the night, forsaking her bedmate.

Harold Clurman, who directed *Long Day's Journey* in Tokyo in 1965 with an all American cast, liked to tell the story of a drama critic complaining that O'Neill had been obsessed with sex, to which Harold replied that he could think of perhaps three things in life worth being obsessed about and sex was surely one of them. The director of the current production, Robert Falls, has not shied away from exciting the sexual bond between Tyrone and Mary.

But sexuality is only one side of O'Neill. What one wants to see enacted in an O'Neill play is the split within the character: the dilemma. Mary Tyrone is an exciting woman and diffident girl divided within her self. She wanted to become a concert pianist or a nun; instead she married a matinee idol. Vanessa Redgrave delivers the division. When she is agitated beyond her capacity for calm and then hears Edmund's footsteps on the stairs, she picks up a book, retires to a chair and assumes a picture of serenity. She hides and she exposes. At the end of the first act, alone on stage, she drums her arthritic hands

on the tabletop: it is her neurosis leaking out and it is as if she were playing the piano. She attacks and she withdraws. She rails at her husband for his miserliness:

"Oh I'm so sick and tired of pretending this is a home! You won't help me! You won't put yourself out the least bit! You don't know how to act in a home! . . . You should have remained a bachelor and lived in second-rate hotels and entertained your friends in barrooms."

And she hits him but her fists flail rather than land. She smacks Jamie's face for impertinence and collapses under the gesture. She blames her husband, she blames her sons, and she retracts the blame. Tightening her body, she wants them gone; extending her body, she wants them with her. Fundamentally Mary Tyrone is divided between a desire to leave the world (enter the convent, enter morphine) and a desire to have an impact upon the world (make music, make a home). Vanessa/Mary teeters in between, split.

It's a treat for the spectator that Mary's inner conflict plays upon Vanessa Redgrave's face. Her sculptural form was meant for the stage. Her visage is so open, the planes of her countenance so angled, that Mary's behavior and expressions travel to the rear of the mezzanine. The audience appreciates Ms. Redgrave's artistry. When she emerges at the curtain call the applause swells and soars. The sorrow of Mary Tyrone in the hands of Vanessa Redgrave brings joy to the audience. Her performance makes me so happy that I'm willing to see her take possession of the other roles I long to play. ♦2003

Written expressly for "The Soul of the American Actor."

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