

**The  
American Century Theater  
Presents**

***Desire  
Under  
The  
Elms***

**By Eugene O'Neill**

**Directed by Bill Aitken  
Produced by Rhonda Hill  
January-February 2007**

**Audience Guide**

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# **The Accent Problem**

**By Jack Marshall**

Desire Under the Elms is one of many that O'Neill wrote imposing a dialect and extreme accent on his characters. Many have speculated that the playwright had such a fondness for regional turns of phrase because he was insecure about the quality of his dialogue, though O'Neill's dialogue usually serves his visceral plots well on stage and coming from the mouths of accomplished actors. It is on the page that his dialogue seems unwieldy, and the fact that so much of it is expressed in quirky spellings and obscure slang doesn't help matters. In fact, it is likely that O'Neill's plays would have had many more productions if so many directors and producers didn't give up after laboring to read exchanges like this one, from *The Emperor Jones*.

*SMITHERS—A bloomin' charm, wot? Well, you'll need all the bloody charms you 'as before long, s' 'elp me!*

*JONES—Oh, I'se good for six months yit 'fore dey gits sick o' my game. Den, when I sees trouble comin', I makes my getaway.*

*SMITHERS—Ho! You got it all planned, ain't yer?*

*JONES—I ain't no fool. I knows dis Emperor's time is sho't. Dat why I make hay when de sun shine. Was you thinkin' I'se aimin' to hold down dis job for life? No, suh! What good is gittin' money if you stays back in dis raggedy country? I wants action when I spends. And when I sees dese niggers gittin' up deir nerve to tu'n me out, and I'se got all de money in sight, I resigns on de spot and beats it quick.*

Such dialogue presents a director with three options. The first--- perform the dialogue exactly as O'Neill wrote it---risks losing the audience in a sea of incomprehensible language. But ignoring the accents and dialects abandons the playwright's careful mooring of his characters to ethnicity and place. Would any sane company perform *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* without employing southern accents? Can Maria in *West Side Story* be credible without a Puerto Rican accent? Half-measures, like toning down the dialects without ditching them entirely, can be effective. But they have perils of their own.

Among the most dreaded is "the Insecure Critic Syndrome." It is a long-recognized habit of second-tier critics to review accents rather than actors. Give such a critic an accent to listen to, and he or she will go through the entire show keeping a meticulous count of every time it waivers. Such critics elevate accents to the exalted importance of sets and costumes, when they are in fact more like grace notes. "The purpose of accents," said Alec Guinness in a televised interview shortly before his death, "is to tell us something about a character without becoming a distraction to either the audience or the actor." He went on to say that except for the rare actor who had a natural facility with them such as Meryl Streep or the late Peter Sellers, extreme accents require concentration and energy that would be put to better use in other aspects of the performance. Guinness' solution was to come out strong with a character accent and then to ease off of it as the play progresses. "The audience almost never notices if you do it gradually enough," he said.

Accents cause other problems. The “down east” Maine accent O’Neill intended for *Desire Under the Elms* is unusually rigid, and can limit an actor’s range of vocal expression severely. It is also an accent that today’s audiences associate with comic movie characters, Pepperidge Farm TV commercials and Gorton fish sticks, none of which are helpful in establishing the proper mood for one of O’Neill’s most violent and disturbing tragedies.

One might also conclude that trying to perform an authentic accent is seldom worth its costs. In the 1920s, before modern transportation and television had homogenized America, blunting regional differences and softening extreme accents, Americans were not only accustomed to hearing dialects but also better at translating them. With the exception of stubborn individualists like Henry Kissinger and Arnold Schwarzenegger, most Americans work hard to obliterate their distinctive accents as quickly as possible. We are, sadly, used to conformity in speech, and either use significant differences from the norm as a topic for satire and humor, or to the contrary, regard the use of broad accents as politically incorrect, an evocation of stereotypes. The American Century Theater will long remember the local critic who attacked an actor’s Italian accent as offensive, when it was an absolutely accurate and carefully researched reproduction of the most common speech patterns of recent Italian immigrants at the time the play was written. Another local actor was skewered for a “ridiculous” Norwegian accent that was in fact a very correct version of what a thick Norwegian accent sounds like. Should a director require actors to use the accents critics and audience *think* are appropriate, rather than technically correct accents that they will regard as mistakes or distractions?

Every play requires that the issue be revisited anew, and there may be no good solution to it. When TACT produced William Saroyan’s quirky playlet *My Heart’s in the Highlands*, based on his upbringing in an Armenian community in Fresno, two audience members proclaimed themselves outraged at an accent used by one of the play’s actresses who was cast as Saroyan’s grandmother. “Her accent is Northern Armenian, and everyone knows that Saroyan’s family was from the South,” said one, with real anger. “It’s an insult!” said the other.

All of the character’s lines were spoken in *Armenian*. Sometimes, when accents are involved, you just can’t win.