THE KEEGAN THEATRE
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REGIONAL PREMIERE

N

a play by
Adrienne Pender

one became a legend, one was lost to history

INTRODUCTION

This amazing play by Adrienne Earle Pender asks us to confront explicit themes of racism, white privilege and dominance, and the cost paid by one of the most brilliant American actors of the 20th century, but he was largely forgotten.

In the relationship and the struggles between Eugene O'Neill and Charles Gilpin we are asked to consider some key issues.

THE PLAYERS

Eugene O'Neill - Playwright, 1888-1953

Eugene O'Neill was a prominent American playwright of the 20th Century. He wrote very few comedies, and his work wasdark and often tragic. He won four Pulitzer Prizes for his work and the Nobel Prize for Literature. Arguably his best play, *Long Day's Journey into Night*, was largely autobiographical and exemplified his family life full of dysfunction, death, and addiction. It is said that his last words were: "Born in a hotel room and god d*mnit died in a hotel room."

Charles Sidney Gilpin - Actor, 1878 - 1930

Charles Gilpin had a long career in performing before his connection with Eugene O'Neill and The Emperor Jones. He first started performing on stage as a singer at the age of 12. His work in New York brought him to the attention of Eugene O'Neill who cast him as his title lead in his new play The Emperor Jones. The show was so popular it moved to Broadway gaining both international attention. Due to a dispute with O'Neill over the use of the 'n' word in the play O'Neill replaced Gilpin with Paul Robeson. In 1921 Gilpin was awarded the NAACP Spingarn Medal. He was one of the first black performers to perform in a drama on radio. He was honored at the White House by President Warren G. Harding. Charles Gilpin was inducted into the American Theatre Hall of Fame in 1991.

Florence Gilpin - (married c.1897)

Florence Gilpin was the first wife of Charles Gilpin. N A Play maintains Florence as a consistent wife figure through the entirety of Charles Gilpin's career until the time of his death.

The Emperor Jones by Eugene O'Neill

Opened in New York - 1920

This play along with the Pulitzer Prize awarded the same year, served to make O'Neill's reputation as a successful playwright. But its success was largely due to Gilpin.
In an interview with Adrienne Pender, playwright of N A Play, she is quoted as saying, "…The Emperor Jones was the latest play by O'Neill to push some boundaries, BUT - it became a hit because of Charles.

…Charles's performance was considered epic, revelatory, and he was hailed immediately as the greatest actor of the generation. Reviews of the play from 1920 and 1921 call out the problems with the play itself even back then - but everyone agreed that the reason to see the play was Charles."

(The Black Emperor of Broadway: Charles Gilpin, Eugene O'Neill's Great Forgotten Actor. Jonathan Mandela, New York Theatre, September 15, 2020.)

The Context in History: The 1920's

The 1920's began amid the Spanish Flu epidemic, the Treaty of Versailles ending WW1, and the Great Migration of African Americans moving to northern cities in large numbers. 1920 brings the first radio broadcasts - KDKA in Pittsburgh and WWJ in Detroit. Women are granted the right to vote with passage of the 19th Amendment. The Cotton Club opened in Harlem and Yankee Stadium was built in 1923.

Red Summer - 1919

James Weldon Johnson used the name Red Summer to describe the racial riots and white supremacist terrorism that took place in over a dozen cities in the United States including Washington DC. Instigated in part by white sailors returning from the war, the riots in DC lasted four days and resulted in some 40 deaths and numerous injuries. The worst attacks occurred in Elaine Arkansas during which over 200 black men, women and children were killed after black sharecroppers attempted to organize for better working conditions. (Information from history.com - see resources)

ISSUES TO CONSIDER

The relationship between O'Neill and Gilpin

- Playwright vs Actor
- Who owns the role?
- Was it about fidelity to the script? It was changed for the movie.

The ways in which white patronage brings with it a sense of tension

- The power differential between O'Neill and Gilpin
- Academic credentials valued over lived experience
- Entitlement and power

Aggressions and Microaggressions

- O'Neill's surprise at Gilpin's command of Shakespeare
- Depictions of Africans/Black people in The Emperor Jones
- Casting and stereotyping - scarcity of roles
- Depictions, tokenism, and representation of black bodies in *The Emperor Jones* and *N* A Play

What about the 'N' Word

'N' is a key term in American culture used to advance white supremacy/black inferiority in all facets of life from popular culture to the legal system. Challenging Racism will replace N***** with 'n' or the 'n' word in our written documents and in conversations and workshops. In N A Play the character Charles Gilpin explains why the term is harmful and should not ever be used by white people -
"When white people say it, it's in derision. You use it to demean us, to remove us as a class, and strip our humanity. It's only ever a word of hate for you." - Charles Gilpin speaking to Eugene O'Neill

FROM THE SCRIPT

Notice the microaggressions and the presumptions illustrated in this excerpt.

Act 1, Scene 4

Eugene: Though I must say, I think you would make a great Othello.

Charles: You think so?

Eugene: Absolutely. Your presence - and your voice - it's a marvel.
You would be brilliant.

Charles: there's no challenge in Othello; there's just the novelty of a colored man playing a colored man.

Eugene: It's Shakespeare, for god's sake.

Charles: Yes, I suppose it is.

Charles: [from Act 3, Scene 3 of Othello]
I think that thou art just and think thou art not.
I'll have some proof. Her name, that was as fresh…..

Eugene: You know it.

Charles: I do. Oh. You're surprised. Training for a Negro actor is Shakespeare and 'white' plays.

Eugene: Training?

Charles: We do study, actually. Just like you.

FROM THE SCRIPT (CONT.)

Eugene O'Neill using his power over Charles Gilpin (One example among many.)

Act 1, Scene 4

Eugene: Don't change the dialogue, Charlie.

Charles: Gene–

Eugene: Don't. Change. My. Dialogue.

Eugene O'Neill and Charles Gilpin discuss the 'N' word

Act 1, Scene 2

Charles: Colored people. We don't like that word. I'm sorry - but it's a word that white people call us.

Eugene: I'm fairly certain I've heard a Negro call another Negro *n* before.

Charles: We have - we do - But it's not the same thing.

Eugene: Why isn't it the same?

Charles: Because for us, it's - it's a connection to an experience that we all share. We say that word to another Negro, and it's (sic) an understanding that we are connected.

Eugene: Where as, for White people, it's–

Charles: Racist.

Eugene: Always?

Charles: When white people say it, it's said in derision. You use it to demean us, to remove us as a class, and strip our humanity. It's only ever a word of hate for you.

FROM THE SCRIPT (CONT.)

Notice the similarities between Gilpin and O'Neill's father

Act 2, Scene 3

Eugene: You can't recapture past glory.

Charles: I don't want to recapture anything. (Pause). I want - I NEED - to play Brutus again.

Eugene: You sound like my father.
Charles: How?

Eugene: I think that the part of The Count wasn't just work to him….
It was like a friend that he had to crawl into and feel - from the inside.

Eugene and Florence speak at the graveside

Act 2, Epilogue

Florence: Charles is dead. Who is it going to hurt now?

Florence: Do you know who He was? He was a leading member of the Anita Bush Players, one of the first Negro theater companies in America. He STARRED in over a hundred productions with the Lafayette Players in Harlem. He was already a legend in the Negro community but in one night - opening night of your play - he became the most important Negro man in the country. In the whole country. He couldn't walk down the street without people stopping him to shake his hand or say "Thank You." Sculptors wanted him to model for them; he was called "the Moses of the Negro" by leading Negro newspapers.

Eugene: I didn't know all that.

Florence: Of course not; you never bothered to know about him. (Pause) How much money did Charles make for you?

Eugene: I - don't know.

Florence: Charles was paid $50 a week for your play. That's a lot of money for a Negro - but I'm guessing you and the Provincetown Players made a lot more than that.

TO THINK ABOUT

• Would removing the 'N' word make the play *The Emperor Jones* any less racist?

• Can you explain away the racist caricatures and tokenism seen in *The Emperor Jones* by simply attributing them to historical context?

• What about the dynamic between actor and playwright - who owns the role?

• Consider the imbalance of power between Gilpin and O'Neill: white supremacy, the academic learnings valued over lived human experiences, pay inequity, access to work in theatre, others…

• What is Florence Gilpin's role in this story? How does it parallel with the roles of black women in 2021?

RESOURCES

Emperor Jones 1933 American pre-Code film adaptation of Eugene O'Neill's 1920 play of the same title:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=feQ3-DuzS-Y

The Black Emperor of Broadway:

https://www.theblackemperor.com/

Interview with Adrienne Pender:

https://newyorktheater.me/2020/09/15/the-black-emperor-of-broadway-charles-gilpin-eugene-oneills-great-forgotten-actor/

Information about Red Summer

https://www.history.com/news/red-summer-1919-riots-chicago-dc-great-migration

For more information: ChallengingRacism.org