

Michael Billington hails an enthralling O'Neill revival at the Young Vic

# The conman cometh

WE THINK of Eugene O'Neill as an American dramatist. But there was also a lot of the black Irish humourist in him. And watching David Thacker's magnificent revival of *A Touch Of The Poet* at the Young Vic, it is impossible not to recall Juno And The Paycock, there is the same braggart-hero living in a world of fantasy, the same sustaining wife who gets on with the work and even the same rat-like chum secretly despising the puffed-up protagonist. O'Neill was clearly high on O'Casey.

At the same time this play — now getting its first performance in London — was part of O'Neill's projected epic cycle of American life covering 200 years from the Revolutionary Wars to the Depression. The theme was to be the failure of the American Dream. America's main idea, O'Neill wrote, "is that everlasting game of trying to possess your own soul by the possession of something outside it."

Written between 1939 and 1942 and first produced in 1957, *A Touch Of The Poet* is one of the two plays from the cycle to have survived; and its main theme is now, in a land of possession and greed, people retreat

into pipe-dreams or, more in Thoreau than in anger, a life of rustic simplicity.

O'Neill's hero, Cornelius Melody, is an emigre Irishman who runs a dilapidated tavern outside Boston (the year is 1828) and who lives off his memories of being a major in Wellington's army fighting Napoleon. He prides himself on being a Byronic gentleman: in fact, his father was a shebeen-keeper who got rich through money-lending. But the aptly-named Con Melody (he is a blarneying liar) despises his peasant-wife, Nora, and his daughter Sara, who is in love with a young Yankee gent whom she is nursing back to health after his return to nature.

It may not be one of O'Neill's masterpieces. But it has a rich comic-melodramatic texture and it adumbrates the themes he was to return to in *The Iceman Cometh* and *Long Day's Journey*. On the one hand, O'Neill argues, we need our illusions; and, although Con wakes up to reality when he is engaged in a bruising battle with the police that ruins the scarlet uniform he wore at the battle of Talavera, you feel he has lost some vital part of himself. But, confining

the action to a single day, O'Neill also creates a memorable picture of a family locked together in love and hate.

People attack O'Neill for his verbosity; but that is all part of his cumulative theatrical power. It also finds release in moments of real emotion as in Sara's passionate cry, after her father's transformation, of "I must have his crazy pride in me."

That hint of quasi-incestuous intensity is the one element missing in Mr Thacker's production. Otherwise it is an achievement fit to rank with his *Ghosts*, superbly catching both the Irish comedy and the American pain at the heart of O'Neill. It is also sumptuously acted.

Released from bondage, Timothy Dalton brings to Con Melody exactly "the look of wrecked distinction" O'Neill demanded. There is a wonderful comic vanity about the way he crooks his left knee to gaze admiringly at himself in the mirror while quoting Childe Harold. But Mr Dalton also shows us the lacerating self-disgust that lies behind the Byronic posturing and when he cries, "I'm but a ghost haunting a ruin," it is with the ferocity of recognition. As his

Antony recently proved, Mr Dalton is an actor who has steadily matured with the years.

Vanessa Redgrave is simply astonishing as his peasant-wife. In terms of fires, the part is not large. But Ms Redgrave has the sagging, unharassed breasts, the red, raw-boned hands, the chafed heels resting on scuffed old shoes of the woman whose toil sustains her husband's dreams. Above all, she unforgettably suggests a woman who is still passionately in love with this husk of a man. When he plans a dinner celebrating the Talavera anniversary and says of a guest that he will be placed at his righthand, Ms Redgrave pats the table in affirmation as if it were the right hand of God himself.

But possibly the hardest role is that of Sara Melody in that she is both genuinely in love with her young poet and pragmatic enough to see him as a means of escape. Rudi Davies captures this mixture of sincerity and cunning excellently and needs only more vocal attack under the peasant brogue. Amanda Boxer meanwhile endows a genteel Yankee mum with a nice line in ostrich feathers and Jamesian irony.



Vanessa Redgrave... astonishing

Critics were invited to review this production when it transfers to the Haymarket on March 10. But an evening of this calibre cannot be kept a dark secret for so long. It is quite simply enthralling. Viewed in the round, it draws you inexorably into its world and sends you out of the theatre rejoicing in a real play that views human desperation with compassion and a peculiarly Irish ironic gleam.

● *A Touch Of The Poet* at the Young Vic (01 928 6363) until February 20 and then plays at the Theatre Royal, Brighton, before transferring to the Haymarket.

## Billington on Poet

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