

The First Five Years: 1964-69

By George C. White, O'Neill Founder and President, 1964-2000

In chronicling the early history of what has come to be called “The O’Neill,” it is important to note that Waterford, Connecticut, is my home town. It is the place where, as a child and teenager, I fished, lobstered, sailed, played ball, and received my first eight years of formal education.

My grandfather and my father were prominent American impressionist painters (as is my middle brother); therefore, growing up with arts and art talk was as natural as breathing. Waterford and its large neighbor, New London, are towns with a rich history and huge inferiority complexes. Due to my family’s love of art and theater, I was brought up with a pride not shared by my community that one local “shining light” was Eugene O’Neill. (Our family doctor had cared for the O’Neills, some locals had been his friends, and my mother had even been whistled at by Eugene and his brother Jamie when she was a young Italian dress maker in a New London sweatshop).

In 1961, the town of Waterford bought the 95-acre Hammond farm with the plan to turn it into a park and town beach. Its situation on Long Island Sound constitutes one of the most ideal waterfronts in Connecticut.



(Left to Right) John Guare, George White, and Michael Douglas at the O’Neill’s 20th Anniversary event.

In the summer of 1962, I was sailing with my father and my wife, Betsy, off the property on which I had played as a child, and I asked what use was planned for the buildings, e.g. the large, rambling main house, out buildings, and huge old barn. My father said that though there had been some proposals, the general feeling was the best use for the main buildings was to burn them as an exercise for the local fire departments.

At the time, I was working in New York in television, and I was also on the alumni board of my alma mater, the Yale School of Drama. The thought occurred to me that a better use of the buildings might be to marry Eugene O'Neill's name to what might become a summer adjunct to the Drama School, particularly since O'Neill had willed his papers to Yale. Both the University and the town might benefit, academically and economically respectively.



The Margo & Rufus Rose Barn

Based on this concept, in the spring of 1963, I put Dean Curtis Canfield and Associate Dean Edward C. Cole together with a group of Waterford town officials. Both sides were excited by the property's possibilities, and I felt I had dispensed my duty. Fate, however, intervened when the Yale Corporation vetoed the idea. In essence, this left my hometown, which had enthusiastically embraced my proposal, bereft of a theatrical partner – and me with a personal loss of face.

In order to save the situation, I began to look for alternatives. In the meantime, Dean Canfield used his influence with O'Neill's widow, Carlotta, to permit use of her husband's name; in due course she wrote me the following:

August 3, 1964

Dear Mr. White,

I beg of you to excuse this more than tardy reply to your letter of June 23. I have not been very well, which made a great deal of work pile up, and my time was not really my own.

This is to tell you that I am delighted that you wish to name your Foundation for a theater project in the name of Eugene O'Neill; could he know this, he would be more than pleased.

*Also, I hope that some day I will be able to visit the Foundation.
May you have even greater success than you expect.*

Very sincerely yours,

Carlotta Monterey O'Neill

The summer of 1964 was spent putting together a team of Waterford people who supported the prospect of a theater at "Beach Park," incorporating a not-for-profit corporation, the working title of which was "The Waterford Foundation for the Performing Arts," and negotiating a lease on part of the property for \$1.00 per year for an initial 30 year period. Though there was some resistance, it was minimal for two reasons. Firstly, I was from Waterford, and, secondly, there was no other viable alternative use for the buildings. We fashioned a red and white striped parachute into a tent which served to house photographs of the O'Neill family in New London and brochures proclaiming our intentions. This traveled to county fairs and art shows and was manned by volunteers.



On opening day of the Playwrights Conference in 1965, George addresses the attendees. Seated on his left are Fred Grimsey and Anne Row, Waterford residents, and playwright Marc Smith.

In the meantime, a young dramatist, Marc Smith, whom I knew from television, approached me with a suggestion to convene a gathering of new playwrights, a "playwright's conference," in Waterford to discuss their craft, needs, and concerns.

During the fall and winter of 1964-65, I had been using my tenuous contacts from television to get theater people involved, particularly trying to interest such people as José Quintero (a renowned O'Neill director) and others associated with O'Neill productions. TV Director David Pressman introduced me to David Hays, designer of the original 1956 production of *Long Day's Journey Into Night*.

As I contemplated what theatrical avenues to pursue, the idea of doing a season of O'Neill plays was daunting. We had no theater, had not begun to renovate the property, and as I was still in my 20's, I had few contacts and meager financial resources upon which to call. The best course seemed to be Marc Smith's idea of holding a playwrights conference.

We had to first identify the playwrights, then find the wherewithal to support the venture. In the former case I once again called on my television acquaintances as well as Dean Canfield. Two key people were William Darrid, then an executive at MCA (Music Corporation of America) and Audrey Wood (the most powerful playwright's agent in America, who represented, among others, William Inge, Robert Anderson, and Tennessee Williams). They in turn led me to two new playwrights organizations, The New Dramatists Committee and The Van Dam Street Playwrights Lab, just then funded by Edward Albee and producer Richard Barr with a portion of the profits from *Who's Afraid Of Virginia Woolf?*. From these groups, plus a few recent fellow graduates from the Yale School of Drama, we invited twenty playwrights to come to Waterford for the first week of August in 1965.

The plan was that they would meet with noted designers, directors, producers, actors, and critics and discuss their needs and relationships to these various theatrical disciplines. It was my job to invite and secure the panelists and raise the necessary funding.

Cash was virtually non-existent, so my wife Betsy and I called upon our friends in the Waterford-New London area to give bed and breakfast to the playwrights for a week. I cashed in an insurance policy (\$1,200) which secured transportation to and from New York and paid for a week of lunches, while different neighborhoods in town organized evening meals for the conference participants. On August 4th, the entire complement arrived. Though the "Mansion" was almost unusable (the ceiling had fallen in when we tested the plumbing), there were rooms in which to have temporary offices. Key meetings were held in the Sunken Garden under a gigantic ancient copper beech tree.



The Nelson and Aida White House

Our first formal opening ceremonies were led by Connecticut author and poet, Odell Shepherd, next came the first panel discussion, led by designer David Hays and costumer Patricia Zipprodt. What had been scheduled to be a pleasant and informative discussion of craft almost instantly became a forum for the outpouring of the anger and frustration felt by a group of young artists unable to express themselves effectively, who perceived themselves as "artistically restricted." The two designers caught the initial tidal wave of hostility.

Things seemed to deteriorate from there. The nadir was reached with a critics panel, wherein the now renowned playwright John Guare and the distinguished Boston critic, Eliot Norton, almost came to blows.

Though we didn't know it at the time, the O'Neill Center had become a *de facto* forum from which an entirely new generation of playwrights could vent their frustration at a theatrical establishment that had limited access to a few American dramatists (i.e. Tennessee Williams, William Inge, Robert Anderson and Arthur Miller), and the rest of Broadway was perceived, with some reason, as a British Cultural Colony. The regional theater movement in this country was in its infancy and was not adventurous in producing new plays. The only new voice and symbol of success was Edward Albee, who had just opened *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*

Two leavening events saved the first playwrights conference from total chaos. First, Albee and Richard Barr agreed to come to Waterford and meet with the group. Then, on the last evening, José Quintero directed a collection of professional actors in scenes from O'Neill's *A Moon for the Misbegotten*.

The Albee/Barr meeting was positive, enlightening, and put the issues in perspective. Most importantly they were living examples of newcomers who had cracked the Broadway barrier.

For the open rehearsal of *A Moon for the Misbegotten* in the Barn, it was necessary to surround the building with fire engines, as there was still dry hay beneath the floor (which sagged in the middle). The lighting was provided by a line of 75 watt bulbs strung down the center. The audience sat in folding chairs provided by the local fire house. It was a magical night. The evening was warm, the moon was full, Quintero was at his most articulate and charismatic. It was an eloquent expression of talent, theater, and O'Neill and served to bond the conference together; it changed the negative attitudes into an overall feeling of enthusiasm and optimism.

In the end, it was decided to hold a conference on the conference in order to chart a course for the future or decide if there should even be a program in the coming years.

The general opinion was to continue, but the cry was to move from talk to action. Not only to produce plays, but to do so with Broadway professionals. Once again, it must be emphasized that the American Regional Theater Movement was in its infancy; young playwrights from the off-Broadway or the off-off-Broadway coffee houses were forced to make do with minimal facilities and inexperienced actors, and the call for "Broadway professionals" was actually a plea for experienced professional talent to work with young playwrights on their plays. Quixotically, I agreed to select two plays and try to procure the actors, designer, director, and producer of the playwright's choice.

The fall of 1965 and the winter of 1966 were spent raising \$350,000 to renovate the Mansion, the Barn, and to build an Amphitheater. Additionally, efforts were made with the designer David Hays to secure funding from the federal government to fund a National Theater of the Deaf, an idea suggested by director Arthur Penn and actress Anne Bancroft after their success with *The Miracle Worker*. Hays had long nurtured the idea, and now had a place receptive to harboring it.



The Amphitheater

One of the two plays selected was *The Bird, The Bear, And The Actress* by John Glennon (a drama about the late years of designer Edward Gordon Craig). The playwright's choices were Franchot Tone as lead actor, director Fred Rolfe, designer Kim Swados. I was given an option to choose the producer, and asked David Black.

The second play was *Bedford Forest*, an epic 54 character drama of the Civil War, by Joel Oliansky. Here the choices were Joseph Wiseman in the title role, James Edwards as the antagonist, Lloyd Richards (director), Peter Larkin (designer), and I selected Leonard Soloway as producer.

The miracle of the entire process was that, despite the fact that I personally knew none of the choices, I was able to secure all but the services of Joseph Wiseman.

The original plan was that the playwrights of the previous year's conference would observe the summer production process. Were they to have done so, it probably would have resulted in general frustration. It was therefore decided to hire a small company of actors and two young directors to present readings of plays brought to Waterford by the previous year's playwrights.

In preparing for the summer, Betsy and I were able to secure, between loans and gifts, the funds for the necessary building renovations and support for the productions, as well as a matching gift necessary to insure U.S. government financing for a deaf theater program with David Hays as director. By late June of 1966, we had mostly completed the physical needs. The Barn was transformed into a theater in the round. This renovation was overseen by renowned puppeteer Rufus Rose; it now bears his and his wife's names as the "Rufus and Margo Rose Theater Barn". The Amphitheater, designed by Hays and a Waterford local, C. Fred Grimsey, awaited decent weather for completion. I hosted a series of beer and pizza parties for local college students who volunteered to work with Grimsey and me. We taught them the necessary masonry skills as we went along.

The 1966 National Playwrights Conference opened with *Bedford Forest*. The Amphitheater was completed the afternoon of the opening. Up until "the house" actually opened, we were still hosing down the asphalt to cool it and allow to harden. The production was a great success and many local people filled out the cast of soldiers (included in the group, who also volunteered to build the amphitheater, was 19-year-old aspiring actor Michael Douglas).

In an attempt to complete the mirror of a Broadway experience, I had enlisted the aid of some prominent critics to sit on stage after the performance and critique the play, and also to hold a session with the playwright. In the case of *Bedford Forest*, the post-play session was extremely positive, entertaining for the audience, and possibly instructive for the playwright.

The Bird, The Bear, And The Actress was less successful. Franchot Tone was excellent, but the play was not as well received as a Civil War epic. The after-play critique was respectful, but unenthusiastic.

Two especially prophetic events were the premiere of Gallaudet College's deaf sign language production of *Iphigenia In Aulis*, and the staged readings held in informal spaces such as the kitchen's back yard, created with seating from the local little league baseball field. In the former case, The National Theater of the Deaf was launched and would, for the next ten years, be a program of the O'Neill Center, until it became independent in 1977. The backyard readings were surprisingly successful, and received a great deal of enthusiastic attention. The young actor Al Pacino performed in Israel Horovitz's *The Indian Wants the Bronx*, while John Guare created the character of Artie in his play *The House Of Blue Leaves*.

At the 1966 "Conference on the Conference," it was generally determined that the staged readings were so successful that they should be the route to follow. In addition, a variety of seminars were held making the Playwrights Conference truly a conference. Albee and Barr came back, and other useful discussions were held, led by agent Audrey Wood, producer William Darrid, and David LeVine, executive director of the Dramatists Guild.



Al Pacino (center), *The Indian Wants the Bronx*
by Israel Horovitz (NPC '66)

This pivotal summer shaped the future, and the O'Neill programs such as the Theater of the Deaf began.

In the fall and winter of 1966-67, efforts were made to build a more sound financial base, and promote ourselves. I was able to interest NBC in doing a television special on the Theater of the Deaf, which insured national attention, and I enlisted the interest of the Rockefeller Foundation in the possibility of a multi-year grant to develop the National Playwrights Conference. The major drawback to foundation funding was the newness, and the youth of the major instigators. Due to the cleverness of Rockefeller Arts Director Robert Crawford, he suggested if I could find an established institution willing to oversee the program, he could route a grant through it to the O'Neill Center. J Ranelli, a young drama instructor at Wesleyan, was key in convincing the college to accept a three year, \$100,000 per year grant on our behalf. Built into the funding was also a program for drama teachers and a series of theater seminars at Wesleyan organized and chaired by Audrey Wood.

Fueled by the Rockefeller grant, for the summer of 1967, it was decided to do staged readings of 17 new works, and to hire major designers to design and light the plays. We also invited critics from across the country to preside at the critiques after each reading. Due to the new funding, we entered the summer with enormous expectations, even though the logistics of presenting so many pieces in three weeks were daunting. It was an exciting challenge, and we had a sense that we were breaking new ground in the service of the playwright. There was also a growing national attention occasioned by a series of articles in *The New York Times*.

After the conference, Broadway, off-Broadway, and Lincoln Center snatched up some of the plays, and the O'Neill Center was riding a wave of enthusiasm for new American works, most of which were iconoclastic, as they were set against the background of the United States' growing involvement in Vietnam.

To our initial satisfaction, a headline in *The New York Times* termed Waterford, Connecticut, "Tryout Town, USA." Unknown at the time, contained in this phrase was the concept that almost killed the program in its infancy.



(Left to Right) Richard Barr, George White and Edward Albee at the 1967 Playwrights Conference.

The 1967 Conference seemed enormously successful with the exception of the after-reading on stage critiques. Though the audiences enjoyed them, the playwrights found them useless, and often hostile towards their vision and creativity. Though I felt firmly committed to having critics at the conference, it became obvious that other ways must be found to effect this. It became apparent that there was also a need to train critics to deal with an entirely new dramaturgy. Therefore, I approached the Ford Foundation to fund a Critics Institute for the 1968 season, and I received a grant to do so.

The acclaim for the 1967 conference sowed the seeds of chaos for the next summer. While it was found possible to have actors "off book" (approximating the playwrights' words), 125 light cues, and elaborate sets all in three days, the loser was the playwright, and the text. They were virtually run over in a scrabble to get the work on its feet, and some playwrights began to "cheat" by working on their plays in New York before coming to Connecticut. All these elements began to breed a sense of competition among actors, playwrights, designers, and directors.

The "tryout town" headline had the effect of creating a circus, wherein each weekend limos would *de bouche* hoards of producers and scouts from as far as London's West End, all seeking next season's "hits." The scenic grounds of the O'Neill became a meat market where, under its majestic elms and copper beech trees, the commercial theater vied for properties. What had begun as an attempt at building a temple of creativity had now allowed the money changers to enter.

At the 1968 "Conference on the Conference", the playwrights expressed their frustration and anger at the chaos and the way the conference was evolving. The passions were running so high that I thought it best to let them cool down a bit and convene a representative group of playwrights, actors, and directors in Waterford a month later to recommend ways to solve the problems.

This representative group was unanimous in its call for an artistic director with a firm hand who would put the house in order. Interestingly, the playwrights expressed their ambivalence. Though they wanted a place to explore their craft away from commercialism, they also desired the presence of agents and producers to enhance their careers, thus creating an immediate clash of motives and conference goals.

My choice for artistic director was Lloyd Richards. He had successfully directed *Bedford Forest* under the most stressful circumstances and since then had become an integral part of the conference. He had shown a genius for play analysis, was a highly respected teacher, exhibited a cool head under fire, and seemed to have the experience and wisdom to accomplish the job. He accepted the position, and together we began to institute the program he designed to affect the necessary changes.

Peter Larkin was asked to create a group of modules which, like child's building blocks, could be assembled in different configurations to create scenic elements, i.e. door and window frames, platforms and furniture, etc. This effectively addressed the issue of special scenery for each play. Fred Voelpel and Neil Jampolis did full renderings of sets which were to be posted outside the theater spaces to give playwrights and audiences a picture of how each play might be built were it to be completely produced.

Additionally, it was decided that all actors must perform with script in hand, whether or not they had memorized their lines. This took all pressure off the actors, eliminated any sense of competition, made the actors an integral part of the process, and allowed the playwrights to rewrite up until the curtain if they so desired; rewrites were color coded to show the extent of work done on each play. No longer would each piece have a lighting "design," rather, each play would simply be "lit."



The Edith Oliver Memorial Theater

Directors would be assigned plays upon their arrival to Waterford, in order to stop the attempt to rehearse in advance, and thus use the conference as a showcase for themselves. Indeed, their job became to explore a play, and expose its problems; to allow the playwright opportunity for change and rewrites, rather than the commercial theater function of making the play work by covering up its flaws.

Producers and agents continued to be welcome at Waterford, but rigorous efforts were made to keep negotiations off the grounds. Nothing could be more destructive to the playwrights' bonding process as one playwright saying to another (as Lloyd puts it), "So and so is interested in my play. Who's interested in yours?"

The critics continued to be a part of the conference, first with the creation of the National Critics Institute, which would use the conference plays to exercise the writing and perception skills in camera. Secondly, Lloyd conceived of a function which was to use an especially skilled critic as a sort of ombudsman between the director and the dramatist. I suggested that the name for this person might be stolen from Bertolt Brecht's theater and we call them "Dramaturgs." It has interested and amused Lloyd and me, that over the years this name, which I learned from my theater history professor, Alois Nagler at Yale, has come into the mainstream of contemporary American Regional Theater life.

Finally, in order to emphasize these new ground rules, it was determined that Lloyd or I would nightly give a "curtain speech" welcoming the audience, and inviting them to become part of the process, i.e. their reactions, or lack of some, would help the playwright assess his work's effect. They would also be reminded that this was a true laboratory for experimentation and implementation, and not a showcase or a play market. In 1969, Lloyd Richards' first summer as artistic director, these reforms were incorporated, and, though fine-tuned over the years, have remained in place.



Derek Walcott (straw hat), George White and Julius Novick in 1969

Another aspect of 1969 was the bringing of the first foreign playwright and international company to Waterford. Derek Walcott and his theater workshop of Trinidad were invited to come with *Dream On Monkey Mountain*. Not only were the play and playwright enthusiastically received and constituted a great leavening force, but they established a tradition of incorporating dramatists and groups from abroad, which has since included actors and directors from as diverse countries as Australia, Russia, Iceland, China, Sweden, and many others. This has further resulted in establishing playwrights conferences in many of these nations.

The first five years of the Eugene O'Neill Theater Center were turbulent and often chaotic, as is any evolutionary process, but they set the stage for the years to come. It took the reforms, and the establishment of ground rules by Lloyd Richards, to structure the Playwrights Conference, but this could not have occurred without the exploratory steps taken in the first few years.

O'Neill playwrights have won Nobel Prizes, Oscars, Emmys, Obies, Pulitzers, Tonys, and their names read like a Who's Who in contemporary theater, something undreamt of by the 20 angry young dramatists that gathered under the ancient copper beech tree in August of 1965.

When one visits the "Founders Room" in the Nelson and Aida White House, along the frieze can be seen names, both local and national, of those who gave their time, money, and expertise. These people endorsed a dream, and made it happen.