Foreword

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I had the opportunity of doing a production of *Long Day's Journey Into Night* in London some years ago. There are roles that arrive like gifts. Given and received. Mary Tyrone was that. No part I have played on stage or in film has ever captured me more. Actors can fall in love with characters they play, obsess over them, cling to them . . . sometimes we're haunted by them.

I loved Mary Tyrone. I longed to get to the theater each evening so I could experience her. So I could lose myself in her. The part of Mary Tyrone is a bottomless well. Impossible to exhaust.

We went into rehearsals in late fall and played through the long winter of 2000–2001. London is the perfect setting to experience this masterful play. The gloom and dampness, the fog and the grayness mirror the atmosphere of the play.

Our set was more dreamlike than what O'Neill describes in the stage directions. It had a ghostly feel, more memory than reality. As the light moved east to west across the stage during the course of the long day, the fog seemed to seep through the walls. The foghorn a constant reminder of old sorrows . . . a plaintive, haunting refrain.

"Why is it fog makes everything sound so sad and lost, I wonder?"

Memorizing lines proved difficult at first. I found I would often lose track of where I was in the play. I came to understand it was due to the circular nature of the play, which is structured like a piece of music where the composer creates a melody and then repeats it again and again in altered forms. Theme and variations. The cycles of punishment and forgiveness, recriminations and excuses. A tragic score of love and hate.

It is linear only in the passage of time, morning to night, and the effects of the morphine increasing steadily as the day wears on.

Mary's addiction has been singled out in the family as the greatest transgression. But there are four addicts living in that house. The men are alcoholics. Morphine is less acceptable, less social, more mysterious, and therefore more isolating. It sets Mary apart, separating her even more from the rest of them.

One heroin addict I talked to when I was preparing to do the play described how it felt like being wrapped in a warm blanket. I imagine that's what Mary is looking for.

But like many addicts, she is a master of deceit, a champion liar.

"How could you believe me—when I can't believe myself? I've become such a liar."

Mary is also a master of manipulation. She controls every moment she is on stage, and at the same time she is barely in control of herself. Her innocence and helplessness and, in the next moment, her capacity for cruelty, to wound those she loves the dearest. Her shifting alliances, her need to lay blame, to accuse and then excuse. To punish and then forgive. She is the most complex and fully realized character I have ever played.

Mary is torn between her love and her need for her husband and sons and her desire to lose herself in the morphine: to disappear.

"You're lying to yourself again. You wanted to get rid of them. Their contempt and disgust aren't pleasant company. You're glad they're gone. Then Mother of God, why do I feel so lonely?"

It is these contradictions and the layering of emotions—woven into a patchwork pattern of sorrow, grief, guilt, anger, blame, love, desire, hate—that make Mary a profound and fascinating character. Playing multiple emotions in the same moment is exciting. Her elusiveness and quicksilver shifts are thrilling. The fluidity and velocity are staggering but feel inevitable. In a single page of dialogue with James, O'Neill describes some of these shifts: *"forcing a laugh . . . sharply . . . then pleadingly . . . with dull anger . . . in stubborn defiance . . . then accusingly . . . bitterly . . . pleadingly . . . strickenly . . . slipping away into her strange detachment—quite casually . . . piteously . . . into that stubborn denial again."*

I have always considered this play a great love story. Mary and James share a deep and abiding devotion to each other. The memory of their passion and romance is so close to the surface. Those memories are in their fingertips when they touch.

When she tells Cathleen of their first meeting, you hear the girl—her sensuality, her sexual discovery. She loves this story. How, in her innocence and beauty, she won the most handsome, famous man of the day. How they fell deeply in love and couldn't bear to be separated. The evocation of that moment transports her out of this place she despises. It is a classic sense-memory exercise for an actor.

But it is a story of a great love damaged by loneliness and despair, by disappointment. Those romantic stories exist hand in hand with the most grievous memories.

"James! We've loved each other! We always will! Let's remember only that, and not try to understand what we cannot understand, or help things that cannot be helped."

Mary speaks of that night on her honeymoon—an innocent young bride waiting in an ugly hotel room, hour after hour, terrified that something has happened to James. How his barroom friends brought him home and deposited him drunk outside the hotel room door. She goes on to say that many more of those nights were to come.

James, overwhelmed by shame, asks her, "Mary! Can't you forget—?" And she answers: "No, dear. But I forgive. I always forgive you."

No one in this play is ever allowed to forget.

The end of act 4, midnight of this long and harrowing day, brings Mary back onstage. In our production she seemed to appear out of nowhere—a spectral presence trailing her wedding dress behind her. "The Mad Scene, Enter Ophelia!" Jamie says.

The Chopin waltz and the wedding dress illuminate how far back in time she has retreated. How far out of their reach. More past than present. "The past is the present, isn't it?"

It is the most beautiful scene to play. The image is heartbreaking and the language, so simple, yet so powerful. She speaks of looking for something she lost. The word *lost* is repeated many times, her sad refrain in the closing moments. At the final curtain, we have the tableau of a family trapped by one another and their shared history. Doomed to repeat their chorus of love, pity, hate, blame, guilt. Forgiving but never forgetting.

Mary's curtain speech is one the great moments in the theater for an actress. The simple truth that speaks to the quiet tragedy of her life.

“Then in the spring something happened to me. Yes, I remember. I fell in love with James Tyrone and was so happy for a time.”

The four actors onstage, absolutely still, all lost in Mary’s sad dream. You could hear a pin drop in the audience. It is a sublime moment to play. Unforgettable.