ANNA CHRISTIE

BY EUGENE O'NEILL

ANNA CHRISTIE
BY EUGENE O'NEILL

CAST
in order of speaking

Johnny The Priest	**PAUL BRIGHTWELL**
First Longshoreman	**MICHAEL WALTERS**
Second Longshoreman	**MATT WILMAN**
Postman	**ROBERT LONSDALE**
Larry	**HENRY PETTIGREW**
Chris Christopherson	**DAVID HAYMAN**
Marthy Owen	**JENNY GALLOWAY**
Anna Christopherson	**RUTH WILSON**
Mat Burke	**JUDE LAW**

Other roles played by members of the company

Act One – A saloon near South Street Seaport, New York City.

Act Two – Aboard a coal barge, at anchor in the outer harbour of Provincetown, Massachusetts. Ten days later.

Act Three – Inside the barge, at dock in Boston. About a week later.

Interval

Act Four – Inside the barge. Two days later.

The performance lasts approximately
2 hours and 30 minutes including an interval

First performed at the Donmar Warehouse
on 4 August 2011

PRODUCTION

Director	**ROB ASHFORD**
Designer	**PAUL WILLS**
Lighting Designer	**HOWARD HARRISON**
Composer & Sound Designer	**ADAM CORK**
Casting Director	**ANNE McNULTY**
Production Manager	**PAUL HANDLEY & TARIQ RIFAAT**
Company Stage Manager	**MICHAEL DENNIS**
Deputy Stage Manager	**RHIANNON HARPER**
Assistant Stage Manager	**LAURA DRAPER**
Assistant Director	**SIMON EVANS**
Dialect Coach	**PENNY DYER**
Fight Director	**TERRY KING**
Costume Supervisor	**MARY CHARLTON**
Rehearsal Photography	**MARC BRENNER**
Production Photography	**JOHAN PERSSON**

Significant Annual Support from
Supported by
ARTS COUNCIL ENGLAND

The Donmar wishes to thank Arielle Tepper Madover
for her extraordinary support of this season

The Right Kind of Prostitute in Eugene O'Neill's *Anna Christie*

Following the unanticipated success of *The Emperor Jones* in 1920, Eugene O'Neill wanted to continue his innovation in carving out authentic portraits of American culture in a new kind of drama. While *Emperor* broke new ground in featuring an African American lead – played for the first time by African American actor Charles Gilpin (and *not* by a white actor in blackface) – *Anna Christie* looked to working-class and immigrant culture to offer a distinctly American version of the lower depths from the smoky seaport bars, dingy coal barges and brothels.

O'Neill was hardly the first American author to devote an entire work to a prostitute or 'fallen' woman. Ever since Camille first coughed her way to death in 1852, courtesans had been a favourite subject of playwrights, novelists and artists. From John Sloan's paintings of prostitutes outside the Haymarket Theatre, to the formation of numerous Vice Commissions (whose charge it was to monitor the traffic in women), to legislation that prohibited the so-called white slave trade, American Progressive Era culture (roughly 1900-20) invested enormously in the study, regulation and portrayal of prostitution. Important turn-of-the-century American novels like Stephen Crane's *Maggie: A Girl of the Streets*, Theodore Dreiser's *Sister Carrie* and Edith Wharton's *The House of Mirth* portrayed young women who 'fall' into being kept, or worse, on to the streets. During this time, the stage was a central site for thinking through – and literally embodying – social issues such as women in the workforce, sexology and prostitution reform. Indeed, to fully grasp the importance of *Anna Christie*, it is vital to understand its emergence within an already rich dramatic landscape of prostitute plays.

Popular from the mid-19th century to throughout the 1920s, prostitute dramas – such as *Mrs Warren's Profession* and *East Is West* – captivated American and British audiences. Prostitute dramas ranged from lowbrow popular entertainments to highbrow social-problem plays. Some of these plays dominated Broadway for over two years and others secured only a copyright date but never made it to performance. Obscure and well-known authors alike took turns at writing and producing dramas, some of which played with enormous popularity on stages across the United States, while many others became embroiled in sensational obscenity trials.

Anna Christie came at the tail end of this discursive explosion, opening in 1921. When it played in London in 1923, critic James Agate noted: "The theme of 'Anna Christie' is an inversion of that old French thing, the repentant courtesan. Every promising playwright since Augier and Dumas *fils* has had his whack at it, so that it comes into twentieth-century drama like a tin can kicked down the street by a parcel of vigorous schoolboys, and bearing the dints made by individual legs."

If the repentant courtesan was so familiar that she could be tossed down the theatrical row, then it was hardly shocking that Eugene O'Neill, America's Pulitzer Prize winning playwright, would put his dent in the old tin can. After all, O'Neill is known for his fascination – both personal and artistic – with prostitutes. His early one-act play, *The Web* (1913), involved a prostitute character, and no fewer than 14 'fallen' women appear in O'Neill's oeuvre, with five more prostitutes mentioned, but never appearing, onstage.

O'Neill's reinvention of the courtesan figure occurred at a significant cultural moment: just as red light districts in most major American cities were being closed. The prostitution problem appeared, in the early 1920s, to have been solved, thus handing a victory to reformists. Yet, while commercialised vice had been thought to have been effectively eradicated from the streets, it was still playing on the New York stage, created by the country's most prominent playwrights.

Despite their popularity, prostitute plays were often met with critical disdain or disgust. Few playwrights had penned a prostitute play without landing in court or prison. *Anna Christie*, by contrast, stands out as a commercial and critical success. At a time of public outrage about prostitution, many prominent brothel dramas, as they became known, had been embroiled in some of the most famous obscenity trials of the century. When George Bernard Shaw's *Mrs Warren's Profession* premiered in New York City in 1905 it created an unparalleled controversy. The play itself was banned for two years in the United States and until 1923 in the UK.

Amazingly, in this heated climate, *Anna Christie* not only escaped the censors' wrath, but also won the Pulitzer Prize for 1921-22, perhaps one of the most treasured prizes in American theatre. If *Anna Christie* in some ways recycled the familiar French courtesan plot with an American twist, what innovations catapulted it to critical success?

To begin, O'Neill diverged from the conventional portrait of a prostitute, treating her with greater compassion and making her a more compelling character in her own right. In the initial version of *Anna Christie*, called *Chris Christophersen*, Anna appears as a British, tea-sipping typist in a story more focused on old Chris. But like other playwrights before him, O'Neill soon realised that prim stenographers make less interesting subjects than their brothel sisters. As O'Neill revised the story, the plot centred more on Anna, who changed from typist to trollop. In locating Anna on the American side of the Atlantic and the other side of the underworld, O'Neill used the gritty Tenderloin to authenticate his increasingly compelling character.

From her first entrance in *Anna Christie*, Anna is portrayed as an independent, tough, rough-edged woman. Entering a waterfront saloon, she utters the lines made memorable by Greta Garbo in the 1930 film version of the play (they were her first spoken lines on celluloid): "Gimme a whiskey – ginger ale on the side... And don't be stingy baby." Using urban slang, one of O'Neill's many dialect innovations, Anna speaks unlike any previous prostitute character on the American stage. Rather than expressing love for or dependence on men, as was common for the courtesan prototype, Anna comes across as independent and strong. Moreover, Anna's heartbreaking story offers a sympathetic view of prostitution.

Anna is no Kitty Warren, who proudly defends her profession, nor a hooker-with-a heart-of-gold, nor merely a victim of desperate circumstances. The tribulations that Anna has suffered are not the play's primary subject. They provide the backstory. The real plot of *Anna Christie* concerns Anna's redemption. Anna is, in other words, not so much a revision of the repentant prostitute as "the right kind of prostitute", as Francis Hackett put it in 1921.

Despite the fact that Anna was seen as the "right" kind of prostitute, her fate at the end of the play has been debated by audiences and critics for almost a century. During its premiere, O'Neill felt that New York audiences misunderstood his last act. In an editorial to the *New York Times*, he attempted to correct these impressions, writing: "In the last few minutes of 'Anna Christie,' I tried to show the dramatic gathering of new forces out of the old. I wanted to have the audience leave with a deep feeling of life flowing on, of the past which is never the past – but always the birth of the future – of a problem solved for the moment but by the very nature of its solution involving a new problem." O'Neill intended the ending as a comma in the sentence, with more drama – more problems – waiting in the second clause, after the curtain comes down.

Dr Katie N Johnson is Associate Professor at Miami University, where she specialises in theatre, film, interdisciplinary studies and gender studies.