Scenic notes on *A Wife for a Life*

-by Eugene O’Neil 1888-1953
-play written in 1913, copy written
-first work written for the stage (no evidence of production)
-O’Neil wrote this as a vaudeville sketch for a star actor
-He was young and still admired his father’s work in the theatre as the Count of Monte Cristo, a melodrama.
-A trivial and inept piece according to Travis Bogard, *Contour in Time*, *Fob*, *Before Breakfast*, *Fog*, *The Sniper*, *in the Zone*, *The Long Voyage Home*, *The Rope*, *The Dreamy Kid*, *Ile*, *Moon of the Carribees*, *Where the Cross is Made*, *Chris Christopherson*.

**Scene** – The edge of the Arizona desert
-a plain dotted with clumps of sagebrush
-a lonely butte on horizon, black and sinister, silhouetted against lighter darkness of sky with stars

**Time** – early hours of the night, during the gold rush (c. 1850)
-a ragged tent in foreground, flap open
-shovels and a pick or two leaning against it
-two saddles on ground
-campfire, smoldering
-stool and gold-miner’s panning tub (square box half filled with water)

**Dramatic Action**

211 set/its Older man stirs fire to flame.
211 snd hears noise of someone approaching.
212 prp? Old Pete enters, covered in dust, carries a quirt in his hand.
212 prp Pete takes telegram from pocket, gives it to Old Man.
212 ? Pete, “I was leaving Lawson.”
213 prp Jack enters (from same direction as Pete?)
214 prp Jack takes small bag of stones from pocket and shakes it.
214 prp Old Man rolls a cigarette paper, lights it from campfire and lights his pipe.
214 ? Old Man, “we’ve been good pals ever since that day in the Transvaal five years ago.”
214 prp Jack goes to tent, gets gold pan, sits down in front of panning tub and washes heap of dirt until a handful of dirt is left. A small heap of gold can be seen at bottom of pan.
216 prp Jack goes into tent and returns with a quart of whiskey, opens it [the cork] with his knife, pours two drinks in tin cups.
216 its Jack, “Here’s to you Yvette Minel” – mood shift.
216 its Old Man pokes fire during Jack’s long speech.
217 prp? Old Man nervously fingers gun in belt.
Jack takes small photo out of shirt pocket.
Jack goes to tent and returns with a soiled envelope.
Old Man reads letter and puts it back into envelope.
Jack walks back and looks into darkness.
Old Man gives Jack telegram.
Jack rushes off with saddle.
Old Man log narrative speech. [Need to help moment not become too hokey or sentimental]
Old Man, “Greater love hath no man than this, that he giveth his wife for his friend.”

Scenic needs
- large flat space, sage brush, sand or gravel, desert items
- horizon with silhouette of butte against night sky
- functioning campfire
- tent
- panning tub
- stool
- solitary desert environment
- a way to frame the space to provide focus and create mood
- moon?

Pivotal dramatic moments
- Campfire is central
- Entrance of Pete and Jack connected to landscape
- Moment when Jack is looking upstage and Old Man is staring at fire needs emphasis.
- Last speech by Old Man

Notes on presentation
- Very melodramatic in style, sentimental in mood, romantic in atmosphere.
- Modern audience would not take it seriously, present it as a genre piece.
- Emphasize the melodramatic qualities in color, light, shape of the stage.
- Emphasize solitude of setting. Butte as symbol of man’s honor?
- “Greater love hath no man than this, that he saveth his brother from himself.” Jamies’s line from Long Days’ Journey into Night, similar to last line here. A new friendship takes precedent over old anger. Love versus honor. Fairly simple, straightforward message.

Research: O’Neill’s early plays (other set descriptions), The Gold Rush, gold miners and mining camps, tents, deserts, Arizona, buttes, night skies, 19th century American painters (the Expansionists), theatre painting style around 1910, Lawson, Arizona, the Transvaal.