

Time Out

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**KUSHNER
COURTS AN
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We go a few rounds with

THE ICEMEN

*"We should
turn the tape
recorder off!
Daddy can't have
any more!"*

*"No, you
know what?
I want another
drink."*

Nathan Lane and Brian Dennehy

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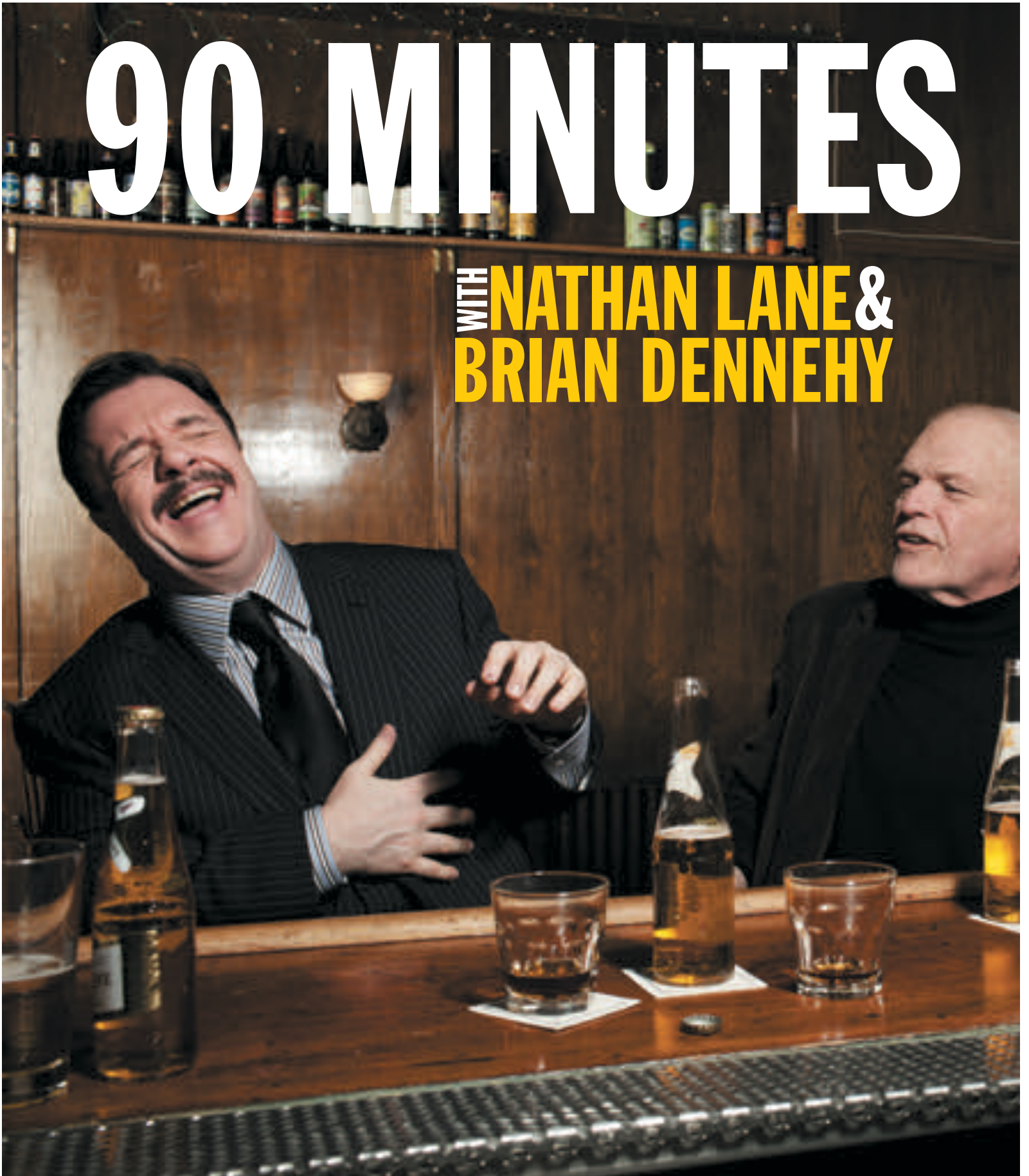
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Cover photograph by Paul Elledge.

HAIR AND MAKEUP: SUZANNE CIBA; PRODUCER: LEASHA OVERTURF; DIGITAL TECH: BRAD JOHNSON; PHOTO ASSISTANT: ELAINE MILLER

90 MINUTES

WITH **NATHAN LANE &
BRIAN DENNEHY**



ON THE ROCKS



THREE MEN WALK INTO A BAR... Lane, left, Dennehy and Falls at Kasey's Tavern in Printers Row.

Over rounds of merlot and single-malt, the actors hold forth about the Goodman's revival of *The Iceman Cometh*, their long friendship and "grabbin' the fucking audience by the throat." By **Kris Vire**
Photograph by **Paul Elledge**

Brian Dennehy has been here before. Nathan Lane has not.

I'm speaking of *The Iceman Cometh*, the Eugene O'Neill epic the two are pairing up for at the Goodman Theatre this month. Dennehy, 73, took on *Iceman* in a 1990 production helmed by Goodman artistic director Robert Falls, the first of an ongoing series of O'Neill collaborations between the two. Lane, 56, is tackling O'Neill for the first time.

I'm also speaking of Old Town Bar, the 120-year-old joint near Manhattan's Union Square where the two actors meet me on a February afternoon to talk about how the Goodman production came to be. Though Lane lives close by, he's unfamiliar with the place. But Dennehy, who's driven down to New York from his home in Connecticut, recognizes the bar's shabby decor as soon as we walk in.

"Yeah, I know this place," the barrel-chested actor says, adding that he used to frequent the Old Town with his Columbia University football teammate Bill Campbell, who went on to become chairman of Intuit. "I don't think I've ever seen this place in daylight," Dennehy says. "Or before midnight, for that matter. We always used to come here to finish off. It's a great old bar—"

Lane cuts him off as we settle in to a corner table. "You're like an FMDJ," Lane teases. "You just go on and on and on: 'Hello, Minnesota!' You've got the suspenders for it. 'Welcome, Minnesota!'"

The pairing of these two actors—burly, ruffled Dennehy, winner of two Tony Awards for serious dramas *Death of a Salesman* and *Long Day's Journey into Night*, and buttoned-down, droopy-eyed Lane, whose two Tonys came for musical comedies *The Producers* and *A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum*—for O'Neill's bleak portrait of the denizens of a New York City saloon much like the Old Town may have struck some as eyebrow-raising.

But as their banter suggests, Lane and Dennehy are longtime pals. "Are you not wearing suspenders? Let me see," Dennehy retorts. "You've got a better body than I got. I gotta wear suspenders. All belly and no ass."

"Really? Really?!" Lane replies with an exaggerated shiver. "Don't know how I'll get that image out of my head."

As our first round of drinks arrives—merlot for Dennehy, Guinness for me, Rolling Rock for Lane after our waitress shoots down his first few beer orders—the two actors explain how they met in 1980, when both were living in Los Angeles. Lane, struggling to make it in New York, had headed West with a comedy partner, Patrick Stack.

HAIR & MAKEUP: SUZANNE CIBA; PRODUCER: LEASHA OVERTURE; DIGITAL TECH: BRAD JOHNSON; ASSISTANT: ELAINE MILLER

Theater

Stack was friendly with actor Michael Talbott, who lived with Dennehy in a West Hollywood apartment. "You can insert your own joke here," Lane says drily, to a roar of laughter from Dennehy.

Dennehy was doing movies and television at the time. "But I always did theater—usually back East or in Chicago," he says. After less than two years in L.A., Lane ended up back in New York. The two kept up with each other—"I'd go see him in the theater, he'd come see me," Dennehy says—but never worked together.

"And now we get to do this," Dennehy says. "This is like the biggest jigsaw puzzle that you can possibly go to work on. The acrostic of all acrostics, this play."

"That's a good analogy," Lane muses. "A jigsaw puzzle. A big, Irish-Catholic, nihilistic jigsaw puzzle."

O'Neill's play, written in 1939, takes place in 1912 in a Greenwich Village saloon and rooming house peopled with rundown drunks clinging to out-of-reach dreams. They await the annual arrival of Theodore "Hickey" Hickman, a charismatic traveling salesman who's the life of the party, buying rounds, telling stories and making anything seem possible. But when Hickey arrives, he's a changed man, sober and determined to make his compatriots face the truths of their pipe dreams. Hickey preaches reform; the someday the saloon's derelicts are waiting for, he now insists, will never come.

The Iceman Cometh was tepidly received in its 1946 Broadway debut. But an Off Broadway revival a decade later, starring Jason Robards as Hickey, helped establish the play as one of O'Neill's greatest achievements, and Hickey as one of 20th-century theater's paramount characters. That the play is rarely revived—due in part to its large cast and four- to five-hour running time—helps to cement its standing.

"I consider this play, along with *Long Day's Journey into Night*, really the pinnacle of American drama," says Falls, talking in his office at the Goodman a few weeks after my outing with Dennehy and Lane in New York. "I think all modern American drama springs from O'Neill. And this is a play that Brian and I have just always talked about doing again, realizing it would be a very different production."

In the two decades since Dennehy played Hickey, he and Falls have gone on to tackle *A Touch of the Poet*, *Long Day's Journey into Night*, *Hughie* and *Desire Under the Elms*. This new *Iceman*, Falls notes, marks the first time in his professional career he's returning to a play he's directed before; Dennehy will shift roles to Larry Slade, a doomsaying former anarchist and chief foil to Lane's Hickey.

“This play is a jigsaw puzzle. A big, Irish-Catholic, nihilistic jigsaw puzzle.”



THEIR KIND OF TOWN Dennehy, center, and Lane, right, pour it out to *TOC* Theater editor Kris Vire at Old Town Bar in Manhattan.

Falls notes he's in his fifties, as was O'Neill when he wrote *Iceman*. "I thought that was interesting, because I do see the play differently now than I did 22 years ago. You understand different characters in a different way, you have a deeper understanding. I remember struggling with certain threads; now I think I understand the emotional architecture of the play." It was Dennehy's talking up the project in the press that got the ball rolling for a new production. "The chronology as I remember it," Falls says, "is that around 2008, Brian did an interview somewhere where he mentioned this as a play we want to do. I had not really talked with Brian about an actor to play Hickey, or anybody else in the cast. That's how sort of young the conversation was."

Over our second round at the bar, Lane acknowledges that his reputation as a comedian and musical-theater star may make O'Neill seem an odd choice for him—or he an odd choice for O'Neill. One commenter on *The New York Times*' article regarding the show's announcement last summer wrote, "I swear, for a moment I thought I was reading 'The Onion'..."

"[People] know you for some of the more well-known things like *The Producers* or *The Birdcage*, and that's how they see you. And I understand that," Lane says. "But if anyone happened to be following closely the stuff I've done in the theater, there has been a variety of things, and certainly a lot of plays—Jon Robin Baitz, Terrence McNally."

When he read that Dennehy and Falls might do an *Iceman* redux, he jumped. Not only had Lane long wanted to work on something with the two men, he says, but "this play that I had read as a kid and loved—that was sort of in the back of my

mind. The play had stuck with me. And I'd been wanting to take on a challenge like this, push myself. I was just compelled. I contacted Bob, sent him an e-mail and put myself forward."

"Believe me, when he put himself forward, that was the beginning and end of that conversation," Dennehy interjects. "It was just a question of when and how we do it."

Though Lane is a Broadway regular (most recently as Gomez in *The Addams Family*, which worked out some of its kinks in a pre-Broadway run at the Oriental Theatre), he says he's looking forward to a solely Chicago experience. "I've worked there a few times, and the audiences are genuine theatergoers. It's a part of their life, and they're very savvy and up for a challenge," he says as Dennehy nods along. "Not to mention the group of actors they have there."

"We're not exactly going to be under the radar, [but] we're just going to do the play. This isn't about trying something out for New York; it's just about having this experience."

It's clear both men have done their homework on O'Neill; they practically give me a seminar as the afternoon wears on. But Lane mentions that, alongside his O'Neill research, he's been reading a biography of Spencer Tracy.

"At one point Katharine Hepburn is quoted as saying something like—because she kept going back to New York to do plays, to take on some challenge—and she said, 'You know what, I would rather fail at something really difficult than succeed at something that comes easily,'" he says.

"I think that Hickey suits a lot of Nathan," Falls later adds. "His persona for a good part of the play, of—I hate to use the phrase *good old reliable Nathan*, from *Guys and Dolls*, but you know what I mean: The guys love him. He sings, he's ready for a party, he's funny, he's charming, and then it darkens as it goes along."

Lane and Dennehy cite similar Irish-Catholic backgrounds as reasons they're drawn to O'Neill's work, which is informed by a personal and palpable lapsed religiosity—a weary anger at the failings of an absent Savior, a lament of confession's lack of absolution. "It's pretty self-evident for me. Irish Catholic, lapsed Catholic, whatever the hell you want to call it," Dennehy



BUILDING CHARACTER Lane, center, as Theodore "Hickey" Hickman, rehearses backstage at the Goodman with Dennehy, left, as Larry Slade and Lee Wilkof as Hugo Kalmar.

says. "Somebody who's definitely gone 15 rounds with the booze, and wound up with a lot of black eyes and broken teeth as a result of it."

"It starts with being Irish Catholic," Lane concurs. "You know, in some early interviews in my life, I would very often refer to my childhood as 'bad Eugene O'Neill,' I guess because in those days I thought it didn't live up to the heights, but now looking back on it, I would say, Oh, yes, it [did]."

"The things that led me into having a sense of humor, or working in comedy or musical theater, are some of the very things that qualify me for [*Iceman*]
—my background, my family," he continues. "I come from a long line of alcoholics; my father drank himself to death. And I've had my own issues with alcohol. I understand the kind of self-loathing, self-destruction, the anger and rage."

"That's really what O'Neill is about," Dennehy adds, "is self-inflicted wounds."

It's sometime after Dennehy orders the third round, plus a round of single-malt, that I notice this: In our ever wider-ranging conversation about the history of *Iceman* and O'Neill, he and Lane have begun referring to great figures of the theater by first name only, leaving me to figure out the context.

It says something about these guys' standing in the industry and their familiarity with each other that Dennehy can casually mention "Mike" when referring to Nichols. "George." (Grizzard.) "Morgan." (Freeman.) "Maureen." (Stapleton.) "Vanessa." (Redgrave.)

Dennehy, clearly having attained the doesn't-give-a-fuck stage of his career, is more likely to tell tales out of school in a reporter's presence,

often eliciting cringes from Lane. Discussing Katharine Hepburn's turn as morphine-addicted Mary Tyrone in the film version of *Long Day's Journey into Night*, for instance: "Certainly it was a gutsy, ballsy thing for her to do," Dennehy says. "Oh, absolutely," Lane agrees.

Dennehy: "I mean, she always *looked* like somebody who was doing something she shouldn't have been doing involving intravenous feeding. But I thought she was great." Lane: "Yeah. Um, anyway..."

The best Mary Tyrone he's seen, Dennehy says, was Canadian actress Martha Henry at the Stratford Festival. He and Falls tried to get Henry for the Broadway transfer of the Goodman production, he says, but the producers wanted Jessica Lange, who had recently played the role in London. (Redgrave took the part after talks with Lange broke off.)

"Jessica really fucked us over," Dennehy adds, prompting Lane to interject in a baby-talk voice: "This is where we should turn the tape recorder off! 'Cause Daddy, Daddy can't have any more merlot!"

Dennehy responds by leaning in to my recorder and clearly enunciating: "Jessica Lange is a B-I-T-C-H. Bitch, bitch, bitch. Put it in the fucking magazine." To which Lane replies, again, "Um, anyway..."

A publicity assistant who arrived with Lane is waiting in the next room, out of earshot but in my line of sight; she's given me the "wrap it up" signal a couple of times now, but Lane and Dennehy are still holding forth. Lane digs into his bag to show off a gift from his partner, producer Devlin Elliott: a first edition of *Iceman*,

signed by the 1956 production's Hickey, Jason Robards, and director, Jose Quintero. The conversation turns to anxieties about the potential pitfalls of O'Neill.

"He asks you to go off the cliff with him to these places, these very, very emotional and complex places, the darkest part of your soul," Lane says. "And if you don't *really* go with him, then it does seem melodramatic or old-fashioned."

There's no half-assing O'Neill, Dennehy agrees, especially *Iceman*. "This play," he growls, "the only way to do it is to grab the fuckin' audience by the throat, shake the shit out of 'em and say, 'You think you're getting out of here alive? You're not. Prepare to spill your fucking blood, because I'm gonna spill mine, and you're coming with me.'"

"Well, don't soft-pedal it," Lane deadpans.

"They've heard it from me before," Dennehy says. "It's not like it's the first time they've heard Dennehy fulminate out of his fear."

Finally the publicist enters the room, saying, "All right, we gotta go, we gotta go."

"Why?" Dennehy booms. "Where do we gotta be?" "Uh, nowhere," she replies. "It's just 15 minutes over. Unless you guys want to keep talking?"

"No, you know what?" Dennehy says. "I want another drink."

"I know. We'll sing 'em all and we'll stay all night," Lane says, quoting *Judy at Carnegie Hall*.

Dennehy one-ups him, referring to the book as he calls for another merlot: "We're gonna stay long enough to read the goddamn thing."

The Iceman Cometh runs April 21–June 10 at the Goodman Theatre.