From Page to Stage

The journey of *The Count of Monte Cristo* from its publication in Paris in 1844 to the stages of Europe and the United States was long and tumultuous.

In 1848, Alexandre Dumas dramatized his own novel under the title *Monte Cristo*, but his version quickly proved impractical to stage. With 20 acts, 37 tableaus, 221 scenes and 59 characters, the author’s version required two evenings to perform. Its extravagant length caused a riot when it was performed by Dumas’ Théâtre Historique at London’s Drury Lane Theatre in 1848, where an observer noted that “a terrible scene ensued; benches were torn up and the audience became nothing more nor less than a howling mob, infuriated by this intrusion of Gallic players. . . . The company returned to Paris unheard and insulted.”

After this initial debut, other stage adaptations of *The Count of Monte Cristo* would go on to have various degrees of success. An American *Monte Cristo* opened in New York in 1848, a “spectacle” that managed to run for 50 nights and was three times. In October 1868, a new adaptation of the Dumas novel by actor Charles Fechter opened in London, with Fechter playing the title role. The production was a complete failure. An 1870 dramatization by Thomas H. Lacy proved to be as cumbrous as Dumas’ version and just as unsuccessful.

That same year, Fechter, now writing with Arthur Leclercq, drafted a slimmed-down version of his *Monte Cristo*, which met with better success on the stage. It was this version that James O’Neill—father of Eugene O’Neill, playwright of *Long Day’s Journey into Night*—first starred in as Edmond Dantès on February 12, 1883. The production received mixed reviews, but O’Neill’s tenacity and electrifying performance paid off as *Monte Cristo* gradually became a success. In 1885, O’Neill purchased the rights to Fechter’s version of *Monte Cristo* and made a number of revisions and improvements as he continued to play Dantès for the next 35 years. It is O’Neill’s version of *Monte Cristo* that forms the foundation for OSF’s 2015 production script.

—Lydia G. Garcia

An edited version reprinted from OSF’s 2015 Illuminations, a 64-page guide to the season’s plays. For more information, or to buy the full Illuminations, [click here](#). Members at the Patron level and above and teachers who bring a school groups to OSF receive a free copy of Illuminations.