

## Biographical Information

Thomas Stearns Eliot was born on September 26, 1888 in St. Louis, Missouri, and once wrote, “I feel there is something in having passed one’s childhood beside the big river, which is incommunicable to those people who have not.” His family, originally from the East, built a summer home in Gloucester, Massachusetts, and Eliot was an accomplished sailor.

He studied philosophy for his bachelor’s degree at Harvard, and returned for graduate studies that included Indian philosophy and Sanskrit. He moved to England in 1914 and shortly thereafter married Vivienne Haigh-Wood, but the marriage was not successful. The couple became estranged and Mrs. Eliot was eventually committed to a mental hospital, where she died in 1947.

Eliot published *The Waste Land* in 1922, worked at Lloyds Bank for several years before joining the publishing house of Faber & Faber in 1925, and he converted to Anglicanism and became a British citizen in 1927. He created and served as the editor for 17 years of *The Criterion*, the literary journal in which *The Waste Land* was first published. Contributors to the journal included Virginia Woolf, W.H. Auden, Stephen Spender, Ezra Pound, W.B. Yeats, and Hart Crane.

Eliot received the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1948. In 1957 Eliot married his secretary, Esmé Valerie Fletcher, who devoted herself, after Eliot’s death in 1965, to the preservation of his literary legacy, editing several books of his poetry and letters. Mrs. Eliot passed away in 2012.

# FOUR QUARTETS

A RECITATION FROM MEMORY OF  
T.S. ELIOT’S POETIC MASTERWORK

PERFORMED BY JOHN FARRELL  
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## Notes on this Production

I did not set out to memorize *Four Quartets*. I decided one day to memorize the first ten lines of Eliot's work, which begin, "Time present and time past / Are both perhaps present in time future..." Then, for reasons I will never really understand, and with no purpose in mind, over the next three months I memorized the remaining 876 lines.

To learn something by heart is to make it part of oneself, truly to *incorporate* it. I had not anticipated what it would mean to have Eliot's masterpiece embedded in my body and mind, to have its meanings and rhythms, its questions and beauties surfacing on their own in my day-to-day life. But I found carrying this work around inside me to be a wonderful and intense experience, and I suppose it was inevitable that, as an actor, I would begin to wonder what it would be like to share the poems out loud.

My first exposure to *Four Quartets* coincided with my first exposure to the Hindu mysticism of the *Bhagavad Gita* and the *Upanishads* in college. Though much of *Four Quartets* remained opaque to me over the years, I always found the issues Eliot wrestles with in the poems compelling and intriguing. On the other hand, the mysticism of the *Gita* and the *Upanishads* resonated very deeply with me and provided the language for understanding experiences I could not even describe to myself at the time.

In the course of memorizing *Four Quartets* I came to see Eliot not so much as the man who reinvented poetry for the 20th century, but as a visionary mystic and philosopher, a man who had transfigured his personal spiritual journey into poetry that simultaneously exalted and doubted that journey's purpose.

In a curious way, working for over thirty years in the puppet theater has been an invaluable preparation for the

challenge of reciting *Four Quartets*. Figures of Speech Theatre's philosophy of working with puppets is grounded in the idea that puppets are vessels waiting for the spirit that wants to reside in them, a spirit that's out there in the ether somewhere, which we allow to pass through us as cleanly as possible and enter the puppet. In preparing *Four Quartets* for performance I was very aware of wanting the poems to transit me in that same way, for them to assume an invisible corporeality in the space between me and the audience.

So I offer myself as a kind of conduit for Eliot's words, an instrument of transmission, in service to the spirit of his poetry.

## About the Performer

A native of Boston who grew up in Massachusetts, Holland and France, John Farrell's artistic explorations are rooted in his love of poetry and sculpture. As an undergraduate at Yale he pursued studies in fields as diverse as African history, Vedanta Mysticism, the anthropology of law, and Sioux religion. He quit law school in the middle of a Civil Procedure exam, and co-founded Figures of Speech Theatre a month later with dancer/designer Carol Llewellyn. FST has created 22 original works of theater, and toured the world for over 30 years. The company's most recent production is a theatrical setting of David Lang's Pulitzer Prize-winning composition, *the little match girl passion*. John has been an artist-in-residence at numerous colleges and arts centers, and has studied with the Japanese master puppet builder Toru Saito. In 1999 he was one of five American artists awarded a Creative Artists' Fellowship from the Japan-US Friendship Commission, allowing him to spend six months in Japan studying Japanese theater and gardens. That opportunity led to his founding of *hanamichi design*, where he creates gardens in the Japanese spirit for clients in New England. John and Carol live in the perpetually 250-year-old farmhouse in Maine where they raised two daughters.