

A HISTORY OF THE IRISH NATIONAL THEATRE, 1899-1930

by

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INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this study is to trace the history and development of the Irish National Theatre, from the date of its birth, 1899, to the year 1933. Here also are discussed the major characters connected with the theatre as well as their works, and style of writing.

The nucleus of the Irish National Theatre was certain companies of amateurs that W. G. Fay assembled. The advisers looked to the Irish National Theatre to bring the drama back to the people, to whom plays dealing with society life meant nothing. They intended that their plays should give the people a quite natural pleasure.

Mr. Yeats' idea of an Irish National Theatre grew out of a contempt for the commercial drama of the day, which, in his belief, had declined, as an amusement, to the level of a fair, a circus, or a race-course.

The Abbey Theatre was a subsidized theatre with education as its object. A play to be suitable for the Abbey Theatre must contain some criticism of life, founded on the experience or the personal observation of the writer, or some vision of life, of Irish life by preference, important from its beauty or from some excellence of style.

For some time all went well, but gradually a process of disintegration set in. One by one the principal

characters of the original company seceded from the fold; Synge died; Yeats, Colum, and Lady Gregory produced nothing comparable to their earlier efforts; the new playwrights modeled themselves too strictly on their predecessors; the players became careless in their art and began to imitate their own methods. In 1919 it was said, "At the present day there is no longer an Abbey Theatre; there is only a theatre in Abbey Street."

To Arthur Sinclair, perhaps more than any other single individual, might be traced the decline of the Irish drama during the second decade of the Abbey Theatre's existence. Of the host of playwrights whose work was produced during this second decade at the Abbey Theatre very few gave promise of important work in the future.

In 1932 the Abbey Players again visited America. They carried with them the tradition of that cold welcome which they received just before the World War. They were surprised and delighted this time to find a welcome here as warm and hearty as any they had ever received.

EARLY HISTORY OF THE ABBEY THEATRE

The story of the Abbey Theatre has been a curious one, and is strikingly illustrative of the forces that have been at work in Ireland since 1899. The Abbey Theatre owes its origin to William Butler Yeats who has remained its guiding spirit up to the present time. It was his ambition to lead Ireland to the renovation of the poetical drama. The supplying of plays and the organization of the theatre fell, first of all, into the hands of William Butler Yeats, George Moore, and Edward Martyn.

The first play produced by the Irish Literary Theatre was William Butler Yeats's Countess Cathleen. This society employed only English actors, and did not assume to be purely national in scope. It came to an end in October, 1901. And in October, 1902, William Butler Yeats made the following announcement: "The Irish Literary Theatre has given place to a company of Irish actors."¹

The performances of the Literary Theatre, and its successor, the Irish National Theatre, have been a practical illustration of the ideas for which William Butler Yeats and his associates stand. These ideas grew out of a

1. Cohen, Helen Louise. One-Act Plays by Modern Authors, p. 27

contempt for the commercial drama of the day, which, in their belief, had declined, as an amusement, to the level of a circus, a fair, or a race-course. Things had come to such a pass, they felt, that people who loved literature and poetry found it pleasanter to read at home than to go to plays where all was for the eye and nothing for the mind, where sham sentiment, shoddy ideals, and melodramatic thrills reigned supreme. They maintained, too, that the true philosophy of stage effects was unknown where the object seemed to be to smother the play under splendid costumes, magnificent furnishings, and realistic scenery, that only served to distract the audience from the real business of the play, and to leave them agape at the ingenuity of stage-carpenters, costumers, and scene-painters.

In many respects the aims of those who founded the Literary Theatre were like the aims of the men who in London and Paris founded the Independent Theatre and the Theatre Libre. "They wished to substitute for the drama of spectacle, incident, vapid sentiment, and commonplace thought a drama of ideas and of sincere feeling, produced in a spirit of disinterested art, to please themselves and those who shared their tastes, without any thought of

catching the pennies of the crowd."¹

The Irish playwrights believed that Ireland was at that moment of her history when great drama was at least possible. They regarded their absorbed and enthusiastic audiences as one evidence of that. The Irish audience, they found, went to the play to be stirred, and was quick to kindle to sympathy or hostility, and differed entirely from the English audience, that went to the play to digest its dinner. All who witnessed the performances in Dublin in 1901 and 1902 were struck by this difference in temper.

It was at this time that Lady Gregory said: "It is a pity we have no Irish theatre where such plays can be given."² William Butler Yeats said that had always been a dream of his, but he had of late thought it an impossible one, for it could not at first pay its way, and there was no money to be found for such a thing in Ireland.

A letter which Lady Gregory wrote to a member in parliament gives us some idea of the aims or intentions of the Irish National Theatre:

"We propose to have performed in Dublin, in the spring of every year certain Celtic and Irish plays, which, whatever be their degree of excellence will be written with a

1. Krans, Horatio Sheafe. William Butler Yeats, p. 26
 2. Gregory, Lady A. Our Irish Theatre, p. 6

high ambition, and so to build up a Celtic and Irish school of dramatic literature. We hope to find in Ireland an uncorrupted and imaginative audience trained to listen by its passion for oratory, and believe that our desire to bring upon the stage a portrayal of the deeper thoughts and emotions of Ireland will ensure for us a tolerant welcome, and that freedom to experiment which is not found in theatres of England, and without which no new movement in art or literature can succeed. We will show that Ireland is not the home of buffoonery and of easy sentiment, as it has been represented, but the home of an ancient idealism. We are confident of the support of all Irish people, who are weary of misrepresentation, in carrying out a work that is outside all the political questions that divide us."¹

The first performance was announced for May 8, 1899, nearly a year after this letter was written. William Butler Yeats' Countess Cathleen and Edward Martyn's Heather Field were the plays chosen. A Cardinal who confessed he had read none of the play Countess Cathleen condemned it. Young men from the Catholic University were roused to come and make a protest against this "insult to their faith." There was hooting and booing in the gallery. In the end the gallery was lined with police, for an attack on the actors

1. Gregory, Lady. Our Irish Theatre, pp. 8-9

was feared.

The idea of an Irish theatre had been originally conceived in the obscurity of the patriotic societies which sprang up throughout the country after the fall of Parnell; and the young men of such societies were willing and eager to test the "intellectual excitement" which Yeats and his friends were about to afford. Though they cared little for literature they cared much for Ireland, and were ready with their criticisms of any enterprise that called itself National. They were quick to praise or blame the play which dealt with the life of the peasantry or with Irish history, and they would sit out even the play in verse for the sake of Ireland.

After the riot caused by the showing of John Millington Synge's Playboy of the Western World the directors of the Abbey theatre next tried a fall with Dublin Castle by producing George Bernard Shaw's play, censored in London, The Showing up of Blanco Posnet. They were able to do this because the censor's powers do not extend to Ireland. The picture won Dublin's approval, due not so much to the merits of the play as to the dislike of all classes for the Castle.

State aid for the Theatre did not find many advocates in England or America. The Irish Free State subsidized the Abbey Theatre in Dublin in 1903 to the extent of 850

pounds. This may have been due to an effort to show how un-English they were.

William Butler Yeats said in a speech: "This government subsidy and the continued support of the public will enable us to keep a brilliant company, and to offer in the future, as in the past a means of expression to Irish dramatic intellect."¹

The gesture of the Irish State in subsidizing the Theatre did not go unnoticed in London. The Daily Telegraph made the following statement:

"A grant of 850 pounds will not go far, even toward the modest expenditure of the little Dublin theatre where so many clever plays by Synge and Lady Gregory and W. B. Yeats and other Irish dramatists have first seen the light, and where so many accomplished actors have had their training. Yet the principle is more important than the exact amount to be voted. If the Free State subsidy helps to promote a fresh revival of Irish drama and also to turn the thoughts of the rising generation toward literature and away from sterile politics, the money will assuredly be well spend."²

1. Literary Digest, 86: 29, Sept., 12, 1925

2. Ibid., 30

DEVELOPMENT OF THE ABBEY THEATRE IN IRELAND

Plays were written by playwrights who had the desire and who felt they could write a real Irish play. These were submitted to William Butler Yeats and in answer to a play received, he wrote:

"The Abbey Theatre is a subsidized theatre with an educational object. It will therefore, be useless as a rule to send it plays intended as popular entertainments and that alone, or originally written for performance by some popular actor at the popular theatres. A play to be suitable for performance at the Abbey should contain some criticism of life, founded on the experience or personal observation of the writer, or some vision of life, of Irish life by preference, important from its beauty or from some excellence of style; and this intellectual quality is not more necessary to tragedy than to the gayest comedy.

"We do not desire propagandist plays, nor plays written mainly to serve some obvious moral purpose; for art seldom concerns itself with these interests or opinions that can be defended by argument, but with realities of emotion and character that become self-evident when made vivid to the imagination.

"The dramatist should also banish from his mind the

thought that there are some ingredients, the love-making of the popular stage for instance, especially fitted to give dramatic pleasure; for any knot of events, where there is passionate emotion and clash of will, can be made the subject matter of a play, and the less like a play it is at the first sight the better play may come of it in the end. Young writers should remember that they must get all their effects from the logical expression of their subject, and not by the addition of extraneous incidents; and that a work of art can have but one subject. A work of art, though it must have the effect of nature, is art because it is not nature, as Goethe said. And it must possess a unity unlike the accidental profusion of nature."¹

It was in 1897 that George Bernard Shaw gave a lecture on "Irish Actors of the Nineteenth Century." In it he said: "As to what an Irishman is, is a complex question, for whatever he may have been born, if he has been brought up in Ireland, that is quite sufficient to make him an Irishman... It is a mistake to think an Irishman has not common sense. It is a mistake to think the Irishman has feeling; he had not; but the Englishman is full of feeling. What the Irishman has is imagination; he can imagine himself in the situation of others...The Irish language is an effete

1. Gregory, Lady. Our Irish Theatre, pp. 100-2

language and the nation is effete, and as to saying there are good Irish actors, there are not, and there won't be until the conditions in Ireland are favorable for the production of drama, and when that day comes, I hope I may be dead."¹

Dublin had always been the centre of keen discussion upon theology and politics; but was not concerned about modern art and literature. It was indeed a surprise then to find the people occupied with a literary controversy at the time when the Irish Literary Theatre was established.

William Butler Yeats and his friends proposed to do in a small way for the Irish drama "what the Théâtre Libre and the Theatre de l'Oeuvre have done for French drama."² However, it was different from the outset: Irish law forbade dramatic performances for money in any but one of three patent theatres. So they pushed a clause into the Local Government Bill of 1898 asking for an occasional license for any such performance instituted for a charitable or purely literary purpose. The next step was to find a guarantee fund and list of guarantors, published in the beginning of 1899. George Moore acted as a sandwich man to the movement. He had the talent of awakening controversy

1. Gregory, Lady. *Our Irish Theatre*, p. 35
 2. *Fortnightly Review*, 70: 1050, Dec., 1901

and he succeeded in calling the attention of English critics to the Irish Literary Theatre. Mr. Frank Hugh O'Donnell was moved by some remarks of William Butler Yeats's to read the Countess Cathleen, and found much to shock him in the conception of an Irish peasantry selling their souls to devils to buy food. Upon this hint he raised a war whoop. Finally, then, an appeal from the Press brought out a letter from the Cardinal Primate (Dr. Logue) declaring that (although he had neither read nor seen it) "an Irish audience which could patiently sit at such a play must have sadly degenerated, both in religion and patriotism."¹

This was not a hopeful beginning for an enterprise that was to rest upon popular sympathy and support in Ireland. "The mind of Mr. Yeats and his artistic sympathies had been moulded away from Ireland; the public which he conceived was the public that applauds Masterlinck. Even at this, much was accomplished, for it awakened in Ireland an interest which was other than that of theological and political controversy and it gave fair warrant for George Moore to proclaim the first quickening of an artistic life in Ireland.

"Plays in February, 1900, did not attract so much attention as those of the previous year, but in that month

1. Fortnightly Review, 70: 1053, Dec., 1901

the daily papers were more exciting than the theatre. The Bending of the Bough had the interest for a Dublin audience that Attic comedy had for the Athenians. It hit, and hit home, at types which could be easily recognized among the audience.¹ Satire of the kind found in this play was a keen and much-needed intellectual stimulus in Ireland.

At this time George Moore took not only the literary theatre but the Irish language under his wing. English was worn out, and future literature of the world was to be written in the small languages, consequently the Irish Literary Theatre would do its best to help on the movement by producing some kind of play written in Gaelic. Dr. Hyde translated into the old tongue William Butler Yeats' piece, The Land of the Heart's Desire. It was a success not because it was an Anglo-Irish tragedy but because the comedy was written in Gaelic.

Previous to 1901 the Irish Literary Theatre had engaged professional actors. Now they felt the parts should be left to authors of the plays and this relieved the Irish Literary Theatre of any financial responsibility. Diarmuid and Grania was not so successful because people said that George Moore and William Butler Yeats had gone to Irish legend to find in epic tradition the plot of an average

1. Fortnightly Review, 70: 1054, Dec., 1901

French novel. On the other hand, Dr. Hyde's little one-act piece, The Twisting of the Rope delighted the people. "One began to realize what the Gaelic League was doing-- and one felt a good deal out in the cold because one had to rely on the translation."¹ (The translation was written by Lady Gregory.)

Both of the plays produced in 1901 received the fullest serious consideration, and the fact that the performances aroused even heated discussion shows pretty clearly that the movement they represented was one of no little significance.

The Irish Literary Theatre had for its immediate object the development of Irish dramatic art, through the presentation of original plays on Irish subjects, whether in English or Gaelic. The movement had a valuable ally in the Gaelic League, under the presidency of Dr. Hyde. This movement was an appeal to the native spirit to awake to its own and recover its treasures of legend and language before they were lost. After the Irish Literary Theatre had been in operation three years this statement was made: "How far the Irish speech and tradition may be restored to the Irish people, and how far the Irish Theatre has stimulated the Irish intellect, are at present, of course, matters of

1. Fortnightly Review, 70: 1055, Dec., 1901

speculation; but this is certain, that the League is a flourishing organization, and the Theatre has proved that people will come with a keen and critical interest to see an Irish play."¹

Those who started the movement proposed that it should continue for three seasons at the end of which period they would determine whether or not the project was a hopeless one. When this time came it seemed a pity to allow a plan so effectively begun to languish. The three seasons had revealed in Dublin and the rest of Ireland, a public sufficiently interested in dramatic art to make of the Theatre a real institution, provided the plays chosen were not "polemic, or didactic, or anything but cleanly dramatic."

It was also thought at this time that William Butler Yeats' desire to present some of the masterpieces of French, Spanish, Scandinavian, and Greek drama, if carried out would lift the project out of the reach of faction, for in Ireland it was difficult to keep the Theatre entirely clear of the political and religious strife that entered so vitally into all Irish questions of the day.

Mr. Gwynn, writing for the Fortnightly Review of December, 1901 says: "In so far as it has failed, it has failed from no lack of talent. But the drama needs to be in

1. Nation, 73: 395, Nov., 1901

touch with life, and Mr. Yeats, who is Irish, at least as much as Shelley was English, is, like Shelley or Blake, inevitably estranged from the ordinary citizen."¹

So we may say that the Irish Literary Theatre lasted three years. It was then, that while rehearsing the Gaelic-speaking actors for *Casaán an tSúgain* at the Gaiety Theatre, Frank J. Fay and his brother-actor, William G. Fay, an electrician who had become an elocutionist and comedian of exceptional parts, quite comparable with Coquelin Aine, first conceived the idea of forming a company of Irish-born players.

In 1902 it was commonly known that the Irish Literary Theatre had died with the last year's performances of Diarmuid and Grania. Deirdre was too literary and depended too much on the accidental beauties of that or phrasing and not enough on a central emotion. But the author of it demonstrated the possibility of a drama on an Irish heroic subject which should appeal to an Irish audience. George Moore's Bending of the Branch was a satire on Irish politicians; so was Edward Martyn's Tale of a Town. Both these men knew well how Ibsen handled these situations but they were not familiar at first-hand with local politics.

At this time it was said there was no money in the

1. Fortnightly Review, 70: 1060, Dec., 1901

Irish plays. Wherever they were played they represented a wholly different order of dramatic art from that which prevailed in the English theatre: and the difference lay in the fact that they were not designed to make money. However, "Mr. Yeats and his friends kindled in Ireland the desire for an art which was an art of ideas."¹

In 1902 William G. Fay got together a body of amateur players which steadily carried on the scheme of acting which he had created. The theatre was not sufficiently prosperous as yet to be able to pay its actors any salary, and the company came every evening from shop or office to give their services to the cause. Their enthusiasm and the Irishman's natural talent for the stage brought new life into the movement which from that moment entered upon a course of true development.

Frank Fay heard Mr. Russell read a play which he had just finished and liked it so much that he brought his brother to hear it too, and they soon decided to produce it. This was done on April 2, 1902, by William G. Fays' "Irish National Dramatic Company" (so called by the new body) at St. Teresa's Hall, Clarendon Street, Dublin. William Butler Yeats had given them his patriotic one-act play, Kathleen ni Houlihan, which was performed with triumphal

1. Fortnightly Review, 72: 1046, Dec., 1902

success on the same night.

Messrs. Fays' valiant enterprise had now fully succeeded and the Irish National Dramatic Company developed into the Irish National Theatre Society, whose first presidency was offered by the founders to William Butler Yeats. "The company's modest headquarters were the Molesworth Hall, Camden Street, Dublin. Eight plays were produced, two of which--In the Shadow of the Glen and Riders to the Sea, performed on October 8, 1903, and February 25, 1904, respectively--were the work of John Millington Synge, who made there a fairly successful debut."¹

In 1903 there appeared the names of two new authors who (with William Butler Yeats) have had the largest influence upon the Irish Theatre. They were Lady Gregory and John Millington Synge. Their work is in an atmosphere of romantic realism in contrast to the mystical idealism and almost human fantasy of William Butler Yeats.

The Irish Theatre now had established a footing in Dublin, but it had not been won without a struggle nor was it to continue without difficulties. William Butler Yeats soon began to make enemies where he might have looked for support. There was at this time a small but influential class of Nationalist opinion in Dublin, to which political

1. Bourgeois, Maurice. John M. Synge and the Irish Theatre,
p. 124

intrigue was the Alpha and Omega of obligation. "This class felt foul of Mr. Yeats' Countess Cathleen and the play was furiously attacked by the extremists in the patriotic and Catholic parties. The Shadow of the Glen, the first play of John Millington Synge's that was produced, raised an even more formidable storm. The same line of objection was taken to Lady Gregory's Rising of the Moon. The fiercest storm of all arose on the production of The Playboy of the Western World, in 1907. The play was kept on for a week, though often not a word spoken on the stage could be heard across the footlights!¹ On one night, it is said, the English director was anxious to call in the police but this the others could not endure, and, by way of compromise, a relative of one of them, a Rugby football player of commanding stature, was persuaded to bring some of his friends from Trinity College to help in maintaining order. The experiment, however, proved a failure, for the speech-makers, by way of combating the patriotic uproar from pit and gallery, sat imperturbable in their stalls, generally thundering "God save the King!"

This uproar had a good effect for the wind of storm which raged about the production of The Playboy reached as far as London and gave the Irish movement that suggestion

1. Contemporary Review, 100: 245, Aug., 1911

of a "succes de scandale" which seems the only chance of prosperity for any genuinely artistic enterprise in that Metropolis. When, a year or two later Dublin sheltered George Bernard Shaw from Lord Chamberlain by staging The Showing Up of Blanco Posnet, England began at last to realize the existence of the Abbey Theatre.

John Millington Synge continued to produce his little peasant plays with strange mixture of humour, irony, and exaltation; Lady Gregory wrote on, undismayed. Other writers began to make their appearance. Padraic Colum made the first step toward realism. The spirit of the age and their natural interest in the actual facts of Ireland's present and future inclined the younger school of writers more and more strongly toward realism. The plays of Messrs. Robinson, Fay, Murray, and St. John Ervine are good examples of the work done in this direction.

In 1903 the Irish theatre went to London to give its first performance. "The evening audience was the more Irish and Cathleen and The Pot of Broth got a great reception. The Foundations went well, indeed everything went well."¹ This was but the first of several London visits, and the good audience and good notices were a great encouragement.

1. Gregory, Lady. Our Irish Theatre, p. 29

In 1908 the original company was dispersed by the departure of the brothers Fay from Dublin. The company became independent in 1911. Previous to this Miss Horniman provided them with the little Abbey Theatre in Dublin and subsidized the company through all their early struggles.

In the year 1911 the Abbey Theatre Company visited the Court Theatre during the Coronation season and Charles Fennelson says of them: "They are not merely a body of excellent and unconventional actors who have produced some remarkable, and many interesting, plays; they represent also something, the existence of which very few people sufficiently realize, though it is, especially at this moment, when Ireland is destined shortly to step once more into the centre of the political arena, vitally important that it should be realized. The Abbey Theatre is the product of the new spirit which has come into Ireland since she began, under the influence of the Gladstonian policy, to realize the strength and possibilities of her position."¹

William Butler Yeats, who stands as a figure-head to this Irish Movement, was the first to state that he did not deliberately write plays for stage presentation. Thus, speaking purely from the dramatic standpoint, the company's deep indebtedness to William Butler Yeats was rather for

1. Contemporary Review, 100: 240, Aug., 1911

his judgment in selection, for his inspiration in matters of production, and for his guidance as artistic director and adviser than for any special direct dramatic contribution.

Let us turn then to the work of Lady Gregory, who assumed the position, a most essential one, of comic muse. Many of her plays are in one act, and a volume comprising seven may fairly be considered as representative. Among her plays we find: The Travelling Man; The Gaol Gate; Spreading the News; The Rising of the Moon; The Workhouse Ward; and Hyacinth Halvey which is the gem of this collection. "Acted with the inimitable humor of the Irish company, this is one of the wittiest of farces we have seen for many years--witty, literary, and human without a touch of the vulgar or a blemish of the cheap."¹

The death of John Millington Synge removed a landmark from the European drama of the day. He was a dramatist who, "through the medium of Ireland, found a sincerely artistic expression of life as reflected by a temperament that was sensitive to a point of genius. No one can be witness of Riders to the Sea without feeling a sense of the absolute, a sense of artistic unity and dramatic expression to which it is hard to find an equal."²

1. North American Review, 194: 570, Oct., 1911

2. Ibid., 572

Another point of marked individuality with Synge is found in the language of the plays, a language he learned from the fisher folk in the Aran Islands, from tinkers of Country Wicklow, and wanderers of western Ireland, and which has passed through the mint of his art until new inflections and a new rhythm of speech have found their coinage. Some of the more prosaic may question the realism of this, but to those who understand John Millington Synge such questioning is immaterial.

"Throughout all his work, dramatic and otherwise, there is the same blend of sympathy and philosophy, of observation and selection, of light and shade, that go to form the equipment essential to a great dramatist. Only half a dozen plays bear his name, but they are of more permanent value than a score of London's so-called "New Drama" productions."¹

1. North American Review, 194: 575, Oct., 1911

THE TOUR OF AMERICA

The Abbey Players made their first tour of the United States in 1911. They were ridiculed and scorned by the Irish faction during their entire stay. From the Gaelic American for October 14, 1911, I take this statement: "Resolved--That we, the United Irish-American Societies of New York, make every reasonable effort, through a committee, to induce those responsible for the presentation of The Playboy to withdraw it, and failing in this we pledge ourselves as one man to use every means in our power to drive the vile thing from the stage, as we drove McFadden's Row of Flats and the abomination produced by the Russell Brothers, and we ask the aid in this work of every decent Irish man and woman, and of the Catholic Church, whose doctrines and devotional practices are held up to scorn and ridicule in Synge's monetresity."¹

Theodore Roosevelt, president of the United States at the time made this statement about the Abbey Players: "In the Abbey Theatre, Lady Gregory and those associated with her--and Americans should feel proud that an American was one of the first to give her encouragement and aid--have not only made an extraordinary contribution to the sum of

1. Gregory, Lady. Our Irish Theatre, p. 280

Irish literary and artistic achievement, but had done more for the drama than has been accomplished in any other nation of recent years. England, Australia, South Africa, Hungary, and Germany are now seeking to profit by this unique achievement. The Abbey Theatre is one of the healthiest signs of the revival of the ancient Irish spirit which has been so marked a feature of the world's progress during the present generation; and, like every healthy movement of the kind, it has been thoroughly national and has developed on its own lines, refusing merely to copy what has been outworn. It is especially noteworthy, and is a proof of the general Irish awakening, that this vigorous expression of Irish life, so honourable to the Irish people, should represent the combined work of so many different persons, and not that of only one person, whose activity might be merely sporadic and fortuitous."¹

While on this trip the Abbey Players received the following letter attacking Birthright and Hyacinth Halvey: The letter was headed in large type, "Dr. J. T. Gallagher denounces the Irish Plays, says they are Vulgar, Unnatural, Anti-National, and Anti-Christian." The writer declared himself astonished at "the parrot-like praise of the dramatic critics." He himself had seen these two plays and

1. Outlook, Dec. 16, 1911

"my soul cried out for a thousand tongues to voice my unutterable horror and disgust...I have never seen anything so vulgar, vile, beastly, and unnatural, so calculated to calumniate, degrade, and defame a people and all they hold sacred and dear."¹

This is the statement from the Mayor of Chicago in regard to the showing of the Playboy: "The Examiner announces that the Mayor won't stop the play. He has said, 'I do not see how the performance can be stopped. I have read part of it and its chief characteristic seems to be stupidity rather than immorality. I should think it would take more than a regiment of soldiers to compel an audience to fill the Grand Opera House to see such a poor production. I certainly shall not see it.'"²

In the Freeman's Journal, October 26, 1912, we find this: "The Dublin public pulled itself together and began to take pride in its National Theatre, this theatre which has produced in a few years more than a hundred plays and a company of players recognized as true artists, not only by their fellow-countrymen, but by the critics of England and America. The Abbey Theatre has made it possible for a writer living in Ireland and writing on Irish subjects to win a position of equal dignity with his fellow-artist in

1. Gregory, Lady. Our Irish Theatre, p. 179

2. Ibid., p. 248

London or Paris; it has made it possible for an Irish man or woman with acting ability to play in the plays of his fellow-countrymen, and to earn a decent living and win a position of equal respect with any English or Continental actor."¹

Mrs. Mary F. McWhorter, National Chairman, L. A., A. O. H., Irish History Committee, writing in "The National Hibernian," 1913:

"When it was announced about two months ago that the Abbey Players would appear in repertory at the Fine Arts Theatre, in the city of Chicago, I made up my mind to witness all of the Abbey output, if possible, and see if they were as black as some painted them, and now I feel I have earned the right to qualify as a critic.

"Having seen them all, I have this to say, that, with one or two exceptions, they are the sloppiest, and in most cases the vilest, and the most character-assassinating things, in the shape of plays it has ever been my misfortune to see. If, as has been often stated, the plays were written with the intention of belittling the Irish race and the ideals and traditions of that race, the playwrights have succeeded as far as they intended, for the majority of the plays leave us nothing to our credit...

1. The Freeman's Journal, Oct. 26, 1912

"It is plain to be seen the self-styled Irish writers affect the present-day style in vogue among French writers. We have seen the result of all this as far as France is concerned. Today that once proud nation is in a pitiable condition. And so the Abbey crowd would bring about the same undesirable conditions in Ireland if they could. By clever innuendo they would take all the eplendid ideals and noble traditions away from the Irish and leave them with nothing high or holy to cling to. But the Abbey Theatre butchers will not succeed. They are reckoning without their host. The Irish character is too strong and too noble to be slain by such unworthy methods.

"The plays taken as a whole have no literary merit. The backers of the plays preach about Art with a capital A, but they have not artistic merit, for art is truth, and the plays are not true. The great majority of the plays are made up of nothing more than a lot of 'handy gab.'¹

One of the best criticisms of the Abbey Players after their visit to New York comes from a letter which Mr. John Quinn wrote to the Editor of a Dublin Newspaper:

"Dear Sir: Now that the Irish players have been to New York and their work seen and judged, the readers of your paper may be interested in the publication of one or

1. Gregory, Lady. Our Irish Theatre, p. 253

two facts in connection with their visit. For sometime before the company came to New York there had been threats of an organized attempt by a small coterie of Irishmen to prevent the performance of Synge's Playboy. It was difficult for many people in New York who are interested in the drama and art to take these rumours seriously. The attempt to prevent the New York public from hearing the work of these Irish players of course failed. There was an organized attempt by perhaps a hundred or a hundred and fifty Irishmen on the first night The Playboy was given here to prevent the performance by hissing and booing, and by throwing potatoes and other objects at the actors, and red pepper and asafoetida among the audience. The disturbers were ejected by the police. All the great metropolitan papers, morning and evening, condemned this organized disturbance. The second night, some six or seven disturbers were put out of the theatre by the police, and that was the end of the long-threatened attempt to break up the performance of these plays. The issue was not between the players and the disturbers, but between the New York public and the disturbers. This fight over Synge was of vast importance for us as a city. One night settled that question and settled it conclusively.

"I have seen in some of the daily and one of the weekly Irish papers a statement to the effect that The Playboy was 'hooted from the stage...after the worst riot ever witnessed in a New York playhouse.' The statement that it was 'hooted from the stage' is of course utterly false. The greatest disorder occurred during the first act. The play was not 'hooted from the stage'...

"Among other things it has been stated that the Abbey Theatre company was not a success in New York. On the contrary the success of the company has been beyond anything in my personal experience. The verdict of critical and artistic New York in favor of the work of the Irish Theatre has been emphatic. The pick of the intellectual and artistic public crowded the theatre during the weeks of the company's performances here and admired and enjoyed their work. In fact, intelligent New Yorkers are yet wondering what was the real cause of the attempt to prevent the hearing of the plays. This is one of the mysteries of this winter in New York. I am proud, as a citizen of New York, that New York's verdict of approval was so swift and decisive, and I am proud of New York's quick recognition of the excellence of the new Irish school of drama and acting!"¹

1. Gregory, Lady. Our Irish Theatre, p. 285

John Quinn also wrote in the Outlook in 1911 describing the players, who they were and what they had accomplished. In this article he pointed out the perfect naturalness of their acting, the simplicity of their methods, their freedom from all distracting theatricalism and "Stage Business," their little resort to gesture, the beautiful rhythm of their speech, the absence of extensive and elaborate scenery and stage-settings, and the delightful suggestion of spontaneity given their apparently deliberate throwing away of technical accomplishments in the strict sense of the word.

"This little company of Irish players and their directors have answered the question that is being so often asked in London and New York--how to make the theaters a success and yet give nothing that is not good art. They have done this by keeping to the road they have chosen, by nationality in keeping to the narrow limits to which they bound themselves--'works by Irish writers or on Irish subjects'--and by deliberate simplicity of staging, by which expense is kept down and they are not driven to put on plays for the sake of profit only."¹

1. Outlook, 99: 918-19, Dec. 16, 1911

THE PERIOD OF DECLINE

For some time all went well; the subsidy on which they existed was withdrawn, but the support they received in Great Britain and America was sufficient to tide over the less productive seasons at home. Gradually a process of disintegration set in. One by one the principal members of the original company seceded from the fold; John Millington Synge died; William Butler Yeats, Padriac Colum, and Lady Gregory produced nothing comparable to their earlier efforts; the new playwrights modeled themselves too strictly on their predecessors; the players became careless in their art and began to imitate their own methods. In 1919 it was said, "At the present day there is no longer an Abbey Theatre; there is only a theatre in Abbey Street."¹

It was at this time that Mr. Ernest A. Boyd, writing for *Living Age*, 1919, offered a way of salvation. "The way of salvation may be found in a return to the original intentions of the founders; the repertory of the Abbey Theatre might embrace both folk-play and psychological drama. So far the Abbey Theatre has made but little addition to permanent dramatic literature, and after an experiment of nearly twenty years duration there does not

1. *Living Age*, 300: 119, Jan. 11, 1919

seem to be any prospect of better results for the future. Until the Abbey Theatre gets rid of the indefinable art of breathlessness and amateurishness which pervades it, until some Irish author rises strong enough to people his stage with living characters 'in a concatenation according', we cannot expect to see in Dublin a native drama able to compete on equal terms with that of Paris or London."¹

In common with all the drama of England, the Irish drama slumped pitifully during and after the Great War. But it was revived again with the production of several plays by Sean O'Casey, by many thought to be the most significant dramatist developed in the British Isles since the war. "Violating the 'rules' of the older formal drama and even the practice of most modern realists, O'Casey constantly mixes up comedy and tragedy in grotesque juxtaposition, not only in alternating scenes but in the same scene. He carried the porter in Macbeth, as it were, through his entire play."²

The language of Sean O'Casey's characters is wittier and sharper than that of John Millington Synge's, as the characters themselves are urban folk, not of the soil; it is much less patterned and poetic. At times it falls into

1. *Living Age*, 300: 121, Jan. 11, 1919

2. Eaton, W. P. The Drama in English, p. 289

rhythm, and at times strikes poetic sparks, so that your imagination is caught up by an image, a turn of phrase. "Undoubtedly a realist, he is free from any set molds of photographic reproduction, and makes his realism serve his deeper purpose."¹

In the spring of 1919, having successfully weathered the years of the war the Abbey Theatre was threatened with shipwreck in the loss of its principal actor and manager, Fred O'Donovan, who left the theatre, taking with him several members of the company. The situation was perilous. However, they were quickly reassured by the return of Lennox Robinson, well-known author and playwright, to management of the Abbey. With amazing energy he mastered the situation, filled up the gaps in the company and the efforts of the autumn and winter of 1919-20 were as interesting, if not more interesting, than any previous Abbey season.

Perhaps the most important dramatic event of this season was the production of The Player Queen by William Butler Yeats. The Abbey audience went away full of discussion as to the true meaning of The Player Queen. From start to finish the play is poetry, pure and simple. "It is a dream play; the figures on the stage may be

1. Eaton, W. P. The Drama in English, p. 290

symbols but why not watch the carnival and enjoy it to the full, leaving the task of solving its riddles to Mr. Yeats."¹ It is not a great play, but it is a thing of genuine joy and beauty.

A letter from William Butler Yeats, written in 1920 to Lady Gregory gives one of the best descriptions of the Irish National Theatre:

"My dear Lady Gregory: Of recent years you have done all that is anxious and laborious in the supervision of the Abbey Theatre and left me free to follow my own thought. It is therefore right that I address to you this letter wherein I shall explain certain thoughts that have made me believe that the Abbey Theatre can never do all we had hoped. We set out to make a 'People's Theatre' and in that we have succeeded. But I did not know until very lately that there are certain things, dear to both our hearts, which no 'People's Theatre' can accomplish.

All exploitation of the life of the wealthy, for the eye and ear of the poor and half-poor, in plays, in popular novels, in musical comedies, in fashion papers, at the cinema, is a travesty of the life of the rich; and it impoverishes and vulgarizes the imagination, seeming to hold up for envy and to command the life where all is display

1. Drama, 10; 308, June, 1920

and hurry, passion without emotion, emotion without intellect, and where there is nothing stern and solitary... All this exploitation is a rankness that has grown up recently among us and has come out of an historical necessity that has made the furniture and the clothes and the brains of all but the leisured or the lettered copies and travesties...

Then, too, that turning into ridicule of peasant and citizen and lesser men in general could but increase our delight when the great personified spiritual power, but seems unnatural when the great are but the rich...

An artisan or a small shopkeeper feels, I think when he sees upon our Abbey stage men of his own trade, that they are represented as he himself would represent them if he had the gift of expression. I do not mean that he sees his own life expounded there without exaggeration, for exaggeration is selection and the more passionate the art the more marked is the selection, but he does not feel that he has strayed into some other man's seat... Our theatre is a people's theatre in a sense which no mere educational theatre can be because its plays are to some extent a part of the popular imagination...

When the Abbey manager sends us a play for our opinion,

if the handwriting of the MS or of the author's accompanying letter suggests a leisured life I start prejudiced. There will be no fresh observation of character I think, no sense of dialogue, all will be literary, second-hand, at best what Rossetti called 'The Soulless Self-Reflections of Man's Skill',...We have not been Puritans. Our dramatists, and I am not speaking of your work or Synge's, but of those to whom you and Synge and I gave an opportunity, have been excellent just in so far as they have become all eye and ear, their minds not smoking lamps, as at times they would have wished, but clear mirrors.

Our players, too, have been vivid and exciting because they have copied a life personally known to them, and of recent years since our Manager has had to select from the ordinary stage-struck young men and women who have seen many players and perhaps no life but that of the professional class, it has been much harder, though players have matured more rapidly, to get the old, exciting, vivid playing...It is this objectivity, this making of all from sympathy, from observation, never from passion, from lonely dreaming, that has made our players, at their best, great comedians, for comedy is passionless.

We have been the first to create a true people's

theatre and we have succeeded because it is not an exploitation of local colour, or of a limited form of drama possessing a temporary novelty, but the first doing of something for which the world is ripe, something that will be done all over the world and done more and more perfectly: the making articulate of all the dumb classes, each with its own knowledge of the world, its own dignity, but all objective with the objectivity of the office and the workshop, of the newspaper and the street, of mechanism and of politics.

We did not set out to create this sort of a theatre and its success has been to me a discouragement and a defeat ...You and I and Synge, not understanding the clock, set out to bring again the Theatre of Shakespeare or rather perhaps of Sophocles...We thought we could bring the old folk-life to Dublin, patriotic feeling to aid us, and with the folk-life all the life of the heart, using the word 'heart' as Dante used it to define the most interior being; but the modern world is more powerful than any propaganda or even than any special circumstance, and our success has been that we have made a Theatre of the head, and persuaded Dublin playgoers to think about their own trade or profession or class and their life within it...

The objective nature and the subjective are mixed in different proportion as are the shadowed and the bright parts in the lunar phases. In Dante there was little shadow, in Shakespeare a larger portion, while you and Synge it may be who have constant humour, and humour is of the shadowed part, much observation, and a speech, founded upon real life, resemble the moon when it has just passed its third quarter...

The outcry against the Playboy was an outcry against its style, against its way of seeing; and when the audience called Synge 'decadent'...it was troubled by the stench of its own burnt cakes...

I want to create for myself an unpopular theatre and an audience like a secret society where admission is by favour and never to many...I desire a mysterious art, always reminding and half-reminding those who understand it of dearly loved things, doing its work by suggestion, not by direct statement, a complexity of rhythm, colour, gesture, not space pervading like the intellect but a memory and a prophecy; a mode of drama Shelley and Keats could have used without ceasing to be themselves and for which even Blake in the mood of The Book of Thell might not have been too obscure...

Ireland has suffered more than England from democracy, for since the wild Geese fled, who might have grown to be leaders in manners and in taste, she has had but political leaders. As a painted figure is defined by its outline and taste by its rejections, I too must reject, and draw a clear outline about the thing I seek; and say that I seek, not a theatre but the theatre's anti-self, as art that can appease all within us that become uneasy as the curtain falls and the house breaks into applause...

Meanwhile the People's Theatre grows always more objective; more and more a reflection of the general mind; more and more a discovery of the simple emotions that make all men kin, clearing itself the while of sentimentality, the wreckage of an obsolete popular culture, seeking always not to feel and to imagine but to understand and see."¹

After twenty years had elapsed it was said the reputation of the Abbey Theatre was made during the first ten years of its existence and that very little of consequence has been done since. The death of John Millington Synge and the dispersal of the original company seem to have changed the outlook of the theatre, and variations in management aided in accentuating the change. The company of which Arthur Sinclair was the dominating

1. Dial, 68: 458-68, Apr., 1920

figure made the Abbey Theatre popular, but Sinclair, excellent though his acting very often was, reduced everything to the level of farce.

To Arthur Sinclair, perhaps more than any other single individual, might be traced the decline of the Irish drama during the second decade of the Abbey Theatre's existence. "During the past five or six years neither the plays nor the acting have been up to the standard which the theatre had set and for so long maintained. We have developed a new and clever school of Irish dramatists who say they are holding up the mirror to Irish peasant nature, but they reflect nothing but decadence."¹

Of the host of playwrights whose work was produced during this second decade at the Abbey Theatre very few gave promise of important work in the future. There were three playwrights from whom good work was expected--T. C. Murray, Brinsley MacNamara, and possibly Sean O'Casey.

"At present the supply of Irish plays would seem to have almost ceased, and the Abbey Theatre is given over to revivals of Goldsmith, Ibsen, and Shaw. The Irish literary movement began with poetry, developed into drama, and now apparently has settled down to novels."²

1. *Nineteenth Century*, 97: 578, Apr., 1925

2. *Ibid.*, 583

INFLUENCE OF THE IRISH NATIONAL THEATRE

What was it that actually gave the Irish National Theatre its success? Not organization, not direction, but a variety of causes--the fact that there was a personality at its head, William Butler Yeats; the fact that it was created and maintained by a national resurgence; that it had a few remarkable actors and actresses; that it had poets to write for it, and that it had an audience, which, however small was intensely alive.

It was the national enthusiasm in the players, in the audience, in the writers, that gave life to the theatre. In William G. Fay, however, the Irish National Theatre had a competent director. He had a wonderful feeling for speech and an exceptional faculty of producing clear and rhythmical speech from his pupils. "Frank Fay's great contribution to the Irish Theatre was that he gave the players in the early days an appreciation of speech and a method of delivering it clearly and beautifully."¹

Quoting Lady Gregory: "It is after all the old story of the two sides of the shield. Some who are lovers of Ireland believe we have lessened the dignity of Ireland by showing upon the stage countrymen who drink and swear and

1. Theatre Arts, 10: 580, Sept., 1926

admire deeds of violence, or who are misers and covetous or hungering after land. We who are lovers of Ireland believe that our Theatre with its whole mass of plays has very greatly increased that dignity, and we are content to leave that judgment to the great arbitrator, Time. And amongst the Irish in America it was easy for us to rouse feeling against us. Is not the new baby always the disturber in the household?"¹

The new Irish plays confirmed Matthew Arnold's characterization of the Celtic genius as a "reaction against the tyranny of the fact." Now and again they touched the political situation with a free hand. It may be suspected that one will find the Irish spirit far more subtly and powerfully expressed in old epics, legends and traditions than in the modern literature which deals largely and often picturesquely with Irish conditions. But this ancient heritage of the earliest fancies and faith of the Irish people formed the real introduction to the dramas which the Irish players produced in this country; plays almost without stage setting or properties, entirely out of the world of modern intrigue and commercialism, curiously devoid of theatrical device, stirring the imagination by pictures of life singularly bare in furnishing and singularly intimate

1. Gregory, Lady. Our Irish Theatre, pp. 254-55

with poetry.

"The Irish play has a wonderful freshness of style; it is written in the dialect of the people who live near the sources of wonder and awe in nature, and whose speech bears witness of their nearness to the splendor and mystery of the world. It is a clean play even when it deals with passionate offenses; but, in a very real sense, it is an unmoral play. It is a play of temperament rather than of character. It is the unexpected which happens in the Irish play."¹

The young Irish playwrights wrote their own plays charged with the insolence of rebellion, and in Dublin they boasted a theatre devoted to the Irish National Movement. While their contentions were chiefly esthetic, the drama, nevertheless, became in their hands a sword for Irish freedom.

The Irish playwrights are above all lovers of beautiful words. Their plays abound in rhapsodies, not in action. In writing The Playboy of the Western World, John Millington Synge remarks in his preface, "I have used one or two words only that I have not heard among the country people of Ireland or spoken in my own nursery before I could read the newspapers."² On the stage one must have reality and one

1. Outlook, 99: 562, Nov. 4, 1911

2. Current Literature, 50: 82, Jan., 1911

must have joy. "In Ireland, for a few years more, we have a popular imagination that is fiery and magnificent and tender; so that those of us who wish to write start with a chance that is not given to writers in places where the springtime of the local life has been forgotten, and the harvest is a memory only, and the straw has been turned into bricks."¹ Perhaps this is what helped to make the Irish players successful.

William Butler Yeats, in his original pronouncements against the commercial theatre of the day, outlined the program of the Irish National Theatre as follows: "First", he asserts, "we have to write or find plays which make the theatre a place of intellectual excitement. Such plays will require, both in writers and audience, a stronger feeling for language than one finds in the ordinary theatre. Second, if we are to restore words to their sovereignty, we must make speech even more important than gesture upon the stage. Third, we must simplify acting, especially in poetical drama, and in prose drama that is remote from real life. Fourth, just as it is necessary to simplify gesture that it may accompany speech without being its rival, it is necessary to simplify both the form and color of scenery and costume."² Local conditions favored the enterprise, in

1. Current Literature, 50: 83, Jan., 1911

2. Ibid., 84

that they secured it an immediate notoriety.

Charles Bewley writing in *Living Age*, 1913, says that no literary movement of that time ever met with so little adequate criticism as the Irish school of drama. Their tours were lauded as one long triumphal progress. Their acting was acclaimed as a return from the artifice and convention of the English stage to nature itself; their plays were hailed as masterpieces of literature; above all the Playboy of the Western World was accepted as a classic, as the supreme and perfect representation of peasant life, as the true interpretation of the enigma of Ireland for English audiences.

Even in America the cultured and literary world followed, as it usually does, in the footsteps of the English intellectual class. The same eulogies were pronounced, with added American emphasis, over the same plays. Yet in America there was what there was not in England, a strong current of adverse criticism.

I am listing some of the criticisms which Mr. Bewley gives of the playwrights of the Irish National Theatre:

1. The Irish playwrights do not penetrate into recesses of the Irish mind. They know people well from the outside but have never attained to deeper and more intimate

knowledge.

2. There is a gulf between the peasant and nobleman, or rich and poor, but wide as this gulf is, it may be bridged.

3. The adaptation by Yeats and Synge of French technical methods. (Example: Yeats' use of twelve-syllabled line is an adaptation of French Alexandrine.)

4. They also imported some of the ideas of the "literary man" of London or Paris and have placed them in the mouths of characters with Irish names.

5. Modern Irish dramatists have been chiefly attracted by the pagan element; thus their types are not recognized as true to life. They do not make the right interpretation of their religion. They make religion the mark of the weak-minded.

Yeats and Synge started on their careers as Irish dramatists with ideals born of the literary coteries of London and Paris, ideals of uncontrollable passion and of brute force. They found in the Irish peasant certain traits of character more or less in harmony with those ideals, and on that basis they proceeded to construct their plays. But they forgot, or could not see, that the most important element in Irish life as in Irish history, is the religious

element, and when they attempted to reduce that element to terms of neo-paganism, they fell into ludicrous and glaring error."¹

6. If dramatists are treating of the abnormal, they must treat it as abnormal. They must not take an abnormal type and present it as normal. It is here that the distinction lies between Macbeth and The Playboy of the Western World.

7. The failure to understand the religious sense of the Irish people implies a corresponding failure to understand their patriotic sentiment, which, after all, is based on a religious feeling.

The Irish movement, however, especially as exemplified by the plays of John Millington Synge, was not strictly a realistic development. It had, naturally enough, perhaps, a strong infusion of poetry, and the writers sought for a speech which should truthfully represent the flavor of Irish life while at the same time achieving an independent charm. John Millington Synge wished dramatic speech to be beautiful. "He sought, in other words, a modern equivalent of poetic metres, which could legitimately be employed in plays of realistic content."² He found it, at least for his

1. Living Age, 276: 410-18, Feb. 15, 1913

2. Eaton, W. P. The Drama in English, p. 287

own purposes. Imitators, trying to use his rhythms, have not produced quite the same effect of spontaneous poetry. But this search for what we may call a naturalistic poetry was taken up by others and still goes on, and may be seen in America today in much of the prose of Eugene O'Neill, for example, and in Paul Green's negro dialogues.

John Millington Synge was not a man with a message who believed that the theatre is a "criticism of life." He avowedly repudiated the ethical or sociological problem-play inaugurated by "Ibsen and the Germans," who, it may be recalled, had found a few disciples among the early Abbey Theatre dramatists. He also alluded to the danger which threatens a self-styled national theatre: "that of confusing the literary with the political standard, Nationalist logic-chopping and propaganda with drama proper."¹ John Millington Synge had no wish to change or reform anything; his contention was that the theatre, even in a hand of controversy like Ireland, must remain in its purely artistic sphere.

In regard to John Millington Synge's work it may be said: "It has the quality of greatness, and it is great because it has strength. Synge grasps reality. His peasants are creatures of passion and joy. He gives us a

1. Bourgeois, Maurice. John M. Synge and the Irish Theatre, p. 139

fearless picture of their lives. It is his power of presenting what he sees without disguise that stamps his work."¹

The blaze of notoriety which made the Abbey Theatre suddenly notable to two continents arose, in the first instance, less from its histrionic and poetic art than from its conflict with a peculiarity of the Irish temperament. When after the first performance of The Playboy of the Western World, the rumor spread through Dublin that some of the speeches were hostile to faith and morals and the fair fame of Irish character, everyone knew they would enjoy full houses for the remainder of the run. "For the only time in history the Abbey Theatre was packed to the doors night after night. The ensuing riots gave the company the advertisement they needed to draw public attention to the excellence of their performance."²

The Irish drama is limited, in the first place, by its lack of scope--its confinement, for the most part, to single situations and characters, and its tendency, when exceeding the limits of one act, either to draw the story thin or else to muddle it at the start. Another limitation of the Irish drama is its sacrifice of action to talk; many of the plays are little more than scenes in dialogue,

1. Review of Reviews, 45: 356, Mar., 1912
 2. Living Age, 300: 119, Jan., 1919

admirable by reason of their expression of character or their piquant phrasing, but undramatic. "Still other limitations of this product concern comedy and tragedy respectively,--in comedy a tendency to indulge in mere farce, in tragedy a tendency to indulge in mere pathos. Needless to say, a predilection for extravagant fun or for sentimental melancholy is inimical to the highest achievement in comedy or tragedy. Of true tragedy, indeed, all but the most recent Irish plays show very little."¹

It is in character, in ideals, in atmosphere, in color, that drama must be native, and in color and in atmosphere, in ideals and in character the Abbey Theatre drama is Irish. Reading of life and style are personal qualities, qualities of the artist himself, though they, too, may take tone and color from national life, as in the drama of many of the Abbey dramatists they do. These dramatists have been more resolutely native, in fact, many of them, than the national dramatists of other countries have been, of France and Germany today, of the Spain or the England of the Renaissance. The new Irish drama is more native in its stories than is the Elizabethan drama, as these stories, even when they are stories found in variant forms in other countries, are given the tones of Irish life.

1. Chandler, F. W. Aspects of Modern Drama, p. 275

These Irish idealists rejected from their range of subject-matter all themes suggested by the life of cities and by the manners of what are called the upper classes,— first, because such material was not definitely Irish, and second, because it was not—in any deep sense—human.

"The Irish authors decided also, from the outset, to revolt against that tyranny of merely technical achievement to which the international contemporary drama is subservient. Not plot, but character, was what they chose to care about, since people are more real than incidents. They renounced the technical empery of plot, and rejected the tradition of the well-made play. If they could reveal character sufficiently in situation, they did not consider it a further duty to set it forth in action. They did not deem it necessary to rely on stage-direction to convince the eye, since they could revert to an earlier stage of the development of the drama and rely on eloquence of writing to convince the ear."¹

They chose to make the drama less visual and more auditory than that to which we have become commonly accustomed in the international theatre of today. They decided that the surest way to return to nature was to return to literature. Actuated by these aims, the Irish playwrights found, in the peasant life of Ireland, innumerable subjects

1. Bookman, 24: 508, Jan., 1912

made to their harm.

They act for the love of acting. Their motto is "no one shall work for money, and no one shall work for fame, but each for the joy of working."¹

At a time when the art of the theatre had become sophisticated, the plays of the Irish were simple in theme and structure.--"in place of the problems of conventional society, they presented in their plays the natural life of a people free from mannered graces. In place of high-wrought technic, they offered a few single situations; and in place of 'well-made' plots, they exhibited character at a crisis. They cast back to the sources of things in nature for the representation of things in art."²

Much of the Irish drama was written in the one-act form and was simple in theme and construction so that it could easily be produced by amateurs. It was much acted in other countries and gave great impetus to the revival of one-act plays and to the creation of local and folk drama in various parts of the United States and Canada. Out of these countries and their theatres, out of their training in writing one-act plays have come some of our foremost recent American dramatists, notably Eugene O'Neill and Paul Green.

1. Bookman, 34: 511, Jan., 1912

2. Chandler, F. W. Aspects of Modern Drama, p. 233

The Irish players were taught to obliterate themselves as much as possible in order to concentrate the onlooker's attention on the speakers. The next point was to lower the pitch of the voice--"to act pianissimo, in a tone hushed as if in a sick-room, all grave and as it were oserworn." Thirdly, there were no "stars" in the company: apart from seniority, all actors were equal; all might have to play inferior parts, and none was allowed to monopolize the stage. Lastly, when the curtain fell, the theatre did not remain dark for a certain length of time, as a broad hint to continue the applause; and when it rose, the actors did not stand stiff, but bowed and smiled.

In short, while English acting may be defined as the art of showing off one's self, the Irish actors showed off the plays. In their dread of over-acting, they are apt to under-act. Hence their occasional amateurishness. "Their art's essential object is artlessness."¹

"It is not too much to say that the acting at the Abbey Theatre has had a markedly improving effect upon the acting of the English-speaking world. The ranting and raving has given place to a naturalness which is the distinguishing mark of the Irish acting."²

1. Bourgeois, Maurice. John M. Synge and the Irish Theatre,
p. 129
2. Catholic World, 126: 109, Oct., 1927

Mr. Clayton Hamilton in 1924 made this remark about the Irish National Theatre: "I am not yet convinced that, even at the present time, we have an American drama in the positive sense in which the phrase is used when we speak of even the Irish drama. It seems astonishing that so small a country as Ireland could have produced such a great drama in so short a time. In the short time of twenty years, the Irish have initiated, developed, and perfected a really great contribution to the drama of the world."¹

From the very beginning of the Irish National Dramatic Company, William Butler Yeats was an advocate of scenery that is background chiefly, and in no way divertive of attention from the play itself, its thought, its words, its acting. "He would have it, in a way, decorative, but subdued and in harmony with the subject of the play. A very few simple sets suffice for the plays of peasant life, a cottage interior, a village street, a crossroads in a gap of the hills, all to serve the action and words as background, and to be no more obtrusive than the background of a portrait."²

Probably no theatre has had more immediate influence on theatre art all over the world, and especially in

1. Catholic World, 126: 110, Oct., 1927
 2. Weygandt, Cornelius. Irish Plays and Playwrights, p. 29

America, than the Abbey. "It is a little by way of reverberation to find the newest play (1932) at the Abbey, All's Over, Then? by Lennox Robinson, credited by a correspondent of The Times of London, to the influence of the United States. The note says: 'A new play by Mr. Lennox Robinson is an event of some significance to the theatre in general. It was, therefore, not surprising that a large and distinguished audience should have packed the Abbey Theatre on Monday night for the premiere of his latest play. All's Over, Then? represents Mr. Robinson again experimenting; this time far away from both the tragic and rollicking peasants which have given him his reputation as a playwright. In some respects it is a 'throw back' to The White Black-bird, but its more likely affiliations are with the contemporary drama of the United States."¹

In 1932 the Abbey Players again visited the United States. They toured the country, where friends are friends and dramatic critics are open-minded. They carried with them the tradition of that cold welcome which they received just before the World War when they gave The Playboy of the Western World. They were surprised to find this time a welcome here as warm and hearty as any they had received.

The repertory included The Playboy of the Western

1. Theatre Arts Monthly, 692-95, Sept., 1932

World, Juno and the Paycock, and George Shield's The New Gloseoon.

George J. Nathan, caustic critic of *Judge* (New York), says: "The Abbey Theatre Company in a repertoire of modern Irish plays and--good news at last--something I can recommend to you to keep you out of even your favorite speak-easy."¹

When they were in the States this last time they hit upon the happy device of restoring to wearied New York audiences the simple pleasures of going to the theatre, of seeing good plays more than well-enough acted. Their efforts brought forth such wide and unstinted critical acclaim that they were rewarded with generous and unexpected public support.

Critics all feel that their greatest gift comes from their playwrights. Night after night they presented the masterpieces of Sean O'Casey, John Millington Synge, Lennox Robinson, William Butler Yeats, Lady Gregory and others, including newer playwrights, as fine a group of modern plays as the English-speaking theatre has to offer.

Synge's once-controversial masterpiece, The Playboy, proved to be the most popular and was the high point of the Abbey Players' repertory. "It is bad to believe that this

1. *Literary Digest*, 114: 17-18, Nov., 19, 1932

gusty, poetical farce could have called forth an outbreak of serious rioting when it was presented in this country for the first time nearly a decade ago. Seasons will come and go before the theatre will offer richer delights than the Abbey Theatre's performance of The Playboy of the Western World."¹

Their plays are full of humor, the acid of revealed character, or irony and fun and bitterness. Their characterizations are examples of thorough-going study. "Given composite playing as organically fine and well-tuned as exists anywhere, the Abbey Theatre and their audience are bound to feel a keen sympathy for the strange, earth-bound, imaginative, inconsistent, delightful thing that is the Irish character. And above all, there is the music of their dialect plays, their voices, full-toned and mellow, which produce a feast of sound. For sheer beauty of speech, there is nothing in the theatre to equal them."²

A year ago, consternation reigned in Dublin theatre circles and it was no secret that the first half of 1931 had been almost disastrous for the two repertory playhouses, and for the one theatre which made its bookings almost entirely through London. At the Abbey Theatre, ten

1. Theatre Arts Monthly, 12-13, Jan., 1933

2. Ibid., 14

plays were staged and, of these, four were first productions also from native pens.

William Butler Yeats' two short plays written in the Japanese Noh style attracted much comment. These were The Cat and the Moon and The Dressing of the Bones and they revealed William Butler Yeats in his most brilliant and happiest vein. The former is founded on a religious legend, simple and direct, but the latter is wholly original of theme.

The announcement of a new theatre was made recently at a meeting of representatives of Irish amateur societies held in the Gate Theatre during the period of the Dramatic Art competition held under the auspices of Aonach Tailteann.

The association places no restrictions on the plays to be produced by its affiliated members. It rather hopes to encourage a broad outlook among Irish amateurs and, while it will at all times foster plays by Irish authors without encroaching upon the province of the Abbey Theatre, "it will also endeavor to interest its members in the study and productions of the best plays of the world theatre, thereby establishing a wider scope and a greater versatility among Irish players and producers and bringing young native authors into contact with the work of foreign writers."¹

1. Theatre Arts Monthly, 922, Nov., 1932

The primary purpose of the Phoenix Theatre, on the other hand, is experimental and it proposes to stage the plays of new authors who are avowedly experimenting. The theatre, however, will differ from other experimental theatres in that it will endeavor to crystallize its efforts into a certain form. Its ultimate aim will be that co-ordination of all the arts, poetry, drama, music, dancing and architecture, which means the evolution of a new form of national drama. "This idea is not exactly new as Mr. Yeats had a similar idea in view when he founded the Abbey School of Ballet and had, in conjunction with this school, successfully experimented with short plays such as The Only Jealousy of Emer."¹

The new theatre is not intended to be in any way a competitor of the Abbey. It will set out to follow its own line and its main object is the preservation of Irish culture in its various forms and the welding together of all these elements into a new Art-form. At the same time, in its treatment of the classics, it will be governed entirely in interpretation by Irish traditions. "As part of its policy, it will co-operate with the National Amateur Association by providing a centre in which companies from the provincial towns and rural sections can present their

1. Theatre Arts Monthly, p. 923, Nov., 1932

plays. As an encouragement to such groups, the theatre will be placed at their disposal on payment of the bare expenses connected with performances and it is hoped that, in return, similar facilities will be granted to the Phoenix Theatre Company in the provinces in order that it may interest rural communities in its work with a view to expansion."¹

1. Theatre Arts Monthly, p. 924, Nov., 1932

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