Drámaíocht in Éirinn

THEATRE IN IRELAND

MICHEÁL MAC LIAMMÓIR

WITH ILLUSTRATIONS BY NORAH McGUINNESS

PRICE: TWO SHILLINGS

IRISH LIFE AND CULTURE

I

THEATRE IN IRELAND

Drámaíoċt in Éirinn

le

Miċeál Mac Liammóir

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THEATRE IN IRELAND

by

MICHEÁL MAC LIAMMÓIR

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Theatre in Ireland *is the first of an intended series published for the Cultural Relations Committee of Ireland, a body appointed by the Minister for External Affairs in 1949. The aim of the series is to give a broad, vivid, and informed survey of Irish life and culture, past and present. Each writer is left free to deal with his subject in his own way, and the views expressed in any booklet of the series are not necessarily those of the Committee.*

Micheál Mac Liammóir is a distinctive figure in Irish theatrical affairs. He was the first producer of Taibhdhearc na Gaillimhe, the Gaelic Theatre of Galway, and with Hilton Edwards he later founded the Gate Theatre in Dublin for the production of international plays. As actor and designer, as a writer of prose and of plays in Irish and in English, his experience of the theatre in Ireland is unique.

IN PREPARATION

The Irish Language by Daniel Corkery.

Early Irish Links with Britain and the Continent by Rev. John Ryan, S.J.

Twentieth-century Irish Poetry by Austin Clarke.

The Abbey Theatre by Lennox Robinson.

Early Irish Christian Art by Françoise Henry.

Leinster by Maurice Craig.

THEATRE IN IRELAND

BY

MICHEÁL MAC LIAMMÓIR

I

THE EIGHTEENTH CENTURY, which saw the final decay of the old Gaelic order, its tradition a dim and increasingly inaccurate image in the popular memory and its language reduced to the ignominy of a proscribed fireside jargon, was the witness in Ireland of more marvels yet. Georgian builders, crossing the sea in their slow-moving ships, gave to the country one of the few blessings of a long and on the whole unfortunate occupation; the latest expression of English architectural genius, and, with a rare exception or two, the only great style this land had known since Cashel. And as if in a mutual

giving and taking of compliments, after so many spirited examples of the reverse, England received in exchange a host of dramatists and wits.

She had not lacked for these since the passing of her Elizabethan heyday, having Vanburgh and Wycherley and a dozen other good-humoured if lesser men to make her smile, in a convalescent and gently bawdy fashion, after the severe attack of Puritanism from which she was still recovering; but these writers lacked perhaps the lightness and elegance which London, now no less than Paris and Vienna, demanded. And it was just then, with Molière still echoing in the European memory, that the Irish invasion of London began, with Swift and Congreve to begin the assault on pulpit and stage, and later with such nicely contrasted figures as Sheridan and Goldsmith to take possession of theatres and set the audience on a roar. For as these gentlemen looked about them at the English life they were to portray with such gusto in their *Ways of the World* and their *Schools for Scandal,* they saw everything with eyes that were at once familiar and foreign, and that perhaps was why they gave to England a new kind of laughter, as she glanced into the mirror they held up to her face and saw her own image reflected there a little strangely. She listened, too, to her own speech on their lips and found it all oddly and amusingly different, heard her own unquestioned traditions turned inside out, and noticed with delight their freakish oddity through the impudent spectacles of these half alien jesters. The whole thing was a charming and novel experience both for dramatists and patrons. It smacked of a light hearted affair between Irish wit and English appreciation, and nothing suffered on its account except the Irish nation, which, forgetful of its bardic tradition and deserted

by the men who could have served it, remained without dramatic interpreters and without a theatre it could call its own.

There was of course little time at this period for such things, for half-way between the two centuries the country was enduring the strangest experience of its history; not the mere torment and hardship of famine, insurrection and depopulation, but the slow transforming of its character and expression from a Gaelic to an Anglo-Irish nation. In speech, in manners, in customs, in dress, in almost everything but religion, the change was creeping in. The bleak poverty that accompanied it offered little material to writers who from Congreve to Shaw were essential comedians, and who had not discovered that laughter could be born amid rags and gloom, could gain indeed a new and irresistible tang from such surroundings. The eighteenth century had always used for the background to its joyous intrigues, stratagems and sallies, fine clothes, titled women, screens, fans and furbelows, all the paraphernalia of a leisured and luxurious life. Even the kitchen (a well fed if disorderly one) peered only occasionally through the drawing-room doors and was swiftly and respectfully withdrawn to let the gentry have its way with the action; and Oscar Wilde especially carried on this tradition almost as far as the turn of the twentieth century. It was for Seán O'Casey to discover the comedy of distress in its own setting and its own country, and before his appearance many forces had been at work to give a theatre of her own to Ireland.

II

The life of the country, then, found no interpreters on the stage but Boucicault, whose baroque ingenuity was strongly

influenced by the melodramatists already hard at work in England and America on lightning portraits of no human beings in particular, on the creation of a phantasmagoric world of lofty moral sentiment and a superb disregard both of life and of literature. This world, with its population of unscrupulous men and blameless virgins, of bounteous nobles, faithful boatmen and vernacular body-guards, found its expression in his work against a popular background of moonlit lakes, ruined abbeys, and peasants' cottages; the public, both in and out of Ireland, was delighted, and the country itself remained as it had been for centuries, with no theatre of its own and no voice to tell its story.

And then, suddenly, all was changed. A lyric poet, looking about him with eyes that were as shrewd as they were visionary, saw the lamentable state of things and decided, as he said himself, to create "a whole literature, a whole dramatic movement."

William Butler Yeats, for that was the poet's name, was in his early thirties at the time, and to turn from his absorption in his own life and work must have cost him some effort. Indeed he tells somewhere how he, Lady Gregory, and Mr. Edward Martyn, whose help he had enlisted—one always, if one has a programme, finds helpers, and Yeats had a very definite programme—decided that the Irish Literary Theatre, as it was agreed to call the adventure, was to be carried on for three years in the form they had projected.

"We thought," he wrote at a later date, "that three years would show whether the country desired to take up the project, and make it a part of the national life, and that we, at any rate, could return to our proper work, in which we did not include theatrical management, at the end of that time."

There is the effort it cost and continued to cost him, for in spite of a temperament fundamentally opposed to what was then known as the spirit of the theatre, in spite of his natural aversion to its atmosphere of brazen showmanship and of appeals to the lowest level of public taste, in spite of board-meetings that must have dismayed, wrangles with the press that must have exasperated, and wrestlings with the public that must have exhausted him, he never did return so completely to his own work "in which theatrical management was not included" that his labours in the Irish Theatre were abandoned. The first play of his to be produced was "The Land of Heart's Desire," the date was 1894, the place the Avenue Theatre in London, and the result, from the angle of commercial popularity, was negligible. The second offering was "The Countess Cathleen" which was played in the Molesworth Hall in Dublin in 1899 and created some scenes of indignation on theological grounds. During these years he was learning a great deal about stage craft as opposed to the making of lyric and heroic verse; Irish writers in both Gaelic and English were gathering about him, and by 1901 he was able to write with admiration of Mr. Fay who had "got together an excellent little company which plays both in Gaelic and English . . . I may say," he continues, "that we have turned a great deal of Irish imagination toward the stage. And in the same paragraph he genially observes, in summing up the year's achievements, that he "may be writing an epitaph" though he must have known quite well he was doing nothing of the kind. He and Lady Gregory, the Fay brothers, Edward Martyn; and for a short and incredibly cocksure visit (when one remembers, as a worker in the theatre, how little he knew about it) George

Moore, had lighted the fire, and the winds that blew it with such indignation and from so many quarters could only set the flames leaping higher.

III

Gone then, with the new and at that time unsuspectingly war-like and destructive twentieth century, were the days of Ireland's dramatic emigrants, the literary Wild Geese, who had flown so heartlessly away to wring success from the quick and appreciative hands of the Londoners. The Sheridans, the Wildes and the Shaws, if they continued to be born, were forced, as by some magical power (with Yeats, as always, weaving the most potent spells), to remain in Ireland and—even if they drew their breaths in pain, as indeed was often the case—to tell her story. Even poets as far removed from the theatre in spirit as A.E. contributed plays to the new movement; the only contemporary writer of importance that comes to the mind as standing aloof from it was Standish O'Grady who in eloquent language begged the dramatists not to try to show the ancient bardic stories on the stage.

His plea, whether it was well or ill-founded, was unheeded, for these stories had been the original inspiration of the quickening into life of the new Ireland, and Yeats himself was the link between them and the stage—had he not said somewhere that the Celtic movement, as the nineties called it, was " but the opening of this fountain of legend ? "—and by 1901 he and George Moore were collaborating on a play of *Diarmuid and Gráinne* which was produced at the Gaiety Theatre in Dublin with Sir Frank Benson and a company

of mainly English actors, and was accompanied by *Casadh an tSúgáin* by Dr. Douglas Hyde, the first play in Irish to appear on the professional stage.

The Gaelic movement, whose revival had run parallel to Yeats's in those astonishing years, had also turned its face toward the theatre, and its most important figures, Dr. Douglas Hyde, Father Ó Duinnín, Father Peadar Ó Laoghaire and others were all at work on playwriting. They suffered however, even more than Yeats, from the illusion that the theatre was purely the business of the writer, and as far as one can gather from a study of the period, they produced no actor of note but, it seems, Dr. Hyde himself, whose performance in a comedy of his own was praised by Lady Gregory, no poor judge of the actor's art. With the movement in English it was different. Yeats himself, essentially as we have seen a literary rather than a theatre man, was far too shrewd not to perceive, after a few months of work, the importance of that tiresome being, the actor, if the dramatic movement was not to become a matter of speculation merely, and in 1902 he made an interesting discovery; that while the plays themselves were to be creations of literature, the business of the poets, their interpretation was dependant on another art; and it is with equal interest that we learn of the growing importance of the work of William and Frank Fay, who alone among actors in Dublin at that time were genuine professional men who knew enough of tradition to be able effectually to rebel against it; and of the appearance in the same year of Maud Gonne as Cathleen Ni Houlihan.

Had Ireland had a different history or had this woman possessed a different spirit, she, with her great beauty and power would have been, I think, its leading tragic actress.

As it was she became deeply engrossed in other labours and the stage suffered the loss. Those who remember her performances will agree with me; and for us who know her as she is there can be little doubt.

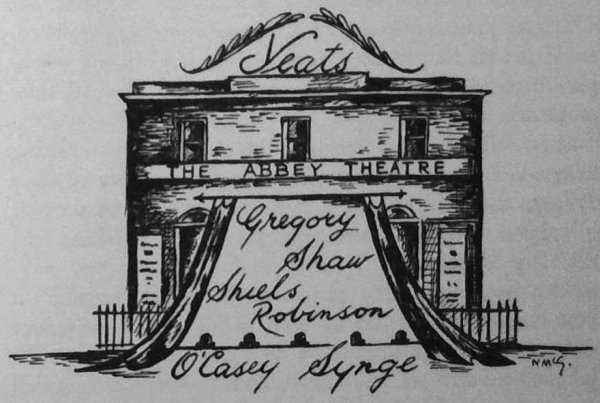
IV

"A generous English friend, Miss Horniman, had rearranged and in part rebuilt, at very considerable expense, the old Mechanic's Institute Theatre, now the Abbey Theatre, and given us the use of it, without any charge, and I need not say that she has gained our gratitude, as she will gain the gratitude of our audience." So the leader of the movement was able to write in 1904, an eventful year for the dramatic history of the country. "We are," he continued, "and must be for some time to come, contented to find our work its own reward, the player giving his work, and the playwright his, for nothing; and though this cannot go on always, we start our winter very cheerfully with a capital of some forty pounds."

So it was that the Abbey Theatre was born, as so many fine things are born, in a setting of austerity and of faith; and if it showed early symptoms of developing differently from the manner designed by its parents one has only to go into the garden and watch the vagaries of flowers, or observe the tabby kitten of some great Siamese, and say "Nature is like that."

"We did not set out to create this sort of theatre," the poet wrote to Lady Gregory in a letter entitled 'A People's Theatre,' "and its success has been to me a discouragement and a defeat." He had wanted to make a theatre for Ireland and for poetry;

his ideas were unpopular; the plays he cared for were to be "remote, spiritual, and ideal"; and it is with a curious interest, half amused, half sad, that we observe the pattern his organisation took when its life became as strong as his own. Writers like A.E., James Cousins, and Fiona Macleod, who shared his mystical and romantic sympathies but not



his dramatic power, passed swiftly out of the theatrical movement; Lady Gregory, although she shared so much of his thought, found that on the stage her talent was for comedy, and earthy comedy at that—there is little that is remote about *The Workhouse Ward* except its geographical setting, little that is spiritual except in the French sense of the word, and nothing that is ideal at all—and the new writers he had discovered were to bring things to earth with a loud and sometimes, as in the case of John Millington Synge, a deafening thud. Shaw, of course, like so many profoundly romantic

and religious natures a hater of the outward forms both of religion and romance, and already up to his ears in triumph as "England's most provocative thinker" (I quote from a contemporary English newspaper), foresaw all this with a certain pleasurable pugnacity. "Mr. Yeats, like most people who have asked me to write plays, got more than he bargained for," he observes in the preface to *John Bull's Other Island,* which he presented to the Irish Theatre in 1904, but which could not yet be produced as there was, it seems, no one to play Broadbent; and one wonders was this a sound view of Yeats's intelligence.

Shaw seems to have imagined that the poet was expecting to receive through the post something like his own *Shadowy Waters,* and that he was aghast with surprise at the unmistakable Shavian manuscript, his spectacles falling into the soup as he read.

"An uncompromising picture of the real old Ireland" is how the author goes on to describe his new comedy, and this too may be questioned, for the oldest things in it are the jokes about the pig and the Round Tower, the most real the reactions of Father Keegan to Larry Doyle's profound vulgarity, and nothing about it is particularly uncompromising in the sense that Joyce is uncompromising. *John Bull* in fact is in the main a most mellow, agreeable and entertaining portrait of a portion of the Ireland that existed somewhere around the '80's of the last century, and is essentially a study of what was no more than a transitory phase, whereas, ironically enough, Yeats's own images and symbols, though designed for the imaginative pleasure of a learned and limited audience, show far more the changeless reality of the land itself.

A point never raised I think before, but one that has amused

me to turn over in my mind, is that Shaw's deliberate breaking up of the early mystical manner was not without its influence on the younger men. Here was a palace of elaborate beauty woven out of twilight airs and dim with fantastic tapestries, and many a young Corkman, "all eyes and ears" as the high-priest had observed, and many a new writer from less famous places than Cork, may have hesitated on the threshold before daring to enter in his tweeds and heavy boots. But once that Fabian figure had bounded so fearlessly forward with his paraphernalia of brightly lighted office sets and whiskeys and sodas and wide awake Irishmen and hearty, bellowing laughter, the coast seemed clear, and, freed from all temptations to perform a half-hearted and imitative ritual of the mysteries, heartened too, no doubt, by the spectacle of Lady Gregory's gay and gentle comedies, they came crowding in; the Pádraic Colums and William Boyles and T.C. Murrays, each with his own story to tell, each with a knowledge greater than Shaw's if its skill was less, of the life of the farm-house, the country road, and the village shop. Among these men was George Fitzmaurice, a kind of literary Rousseau le Douanier, who bridged the worlds of fantasy and reality in a manner that is only to-day beginning to find a real appreciation; and a little later came the versatile and individual figure of Lennox Robinson, of all makers of comedy the most prolific and the most faithful to the Irish stage. His faithfulness indeed is doubly admirable from the national point of view, for here was an Irish writer who was at heart an urban and urbane man of the world, and whose talent for life in a broader field than Ireland had to offer would have made him welcome in far more remunerative theatres.

The whole period, however, is overshadowed, quite

naturally, by Synge, whom Yeats had discovered in Paris and persuaded in a moment of uncanny insight to return to Ireland. In him the hopes of the movement seemed to find, for the few brief years in which he lived to write, its fulfilment. There was the unerring flair for dramatic form, the mastery of beautiful words that Yeats had pronounced essential to the creation of the new drama, the ear for living speech for which the older poet longed and which was denied to him, and above all there was the power of moulding out of the wild earth that had borne them, characters that seemed half human half titanic; big, laughing, voluble creatures who ride towards us, as it were, out of some distant elemental tumult, live out their lives in a brief hour or so, and are gone. Can it be that these country men and women of his share in some mysterious way the unearthly life of those ancient figures of mythology round which Yeats had built so much of his own symbolism, and that this hidden fire, glowing through the outer modern and recognisable portraits, give to them their violent power? Certainly the realists who followed him, and who had, it is likely, guessed nothing of the hidden blood flowing through the arteries but had observed simply the play of surface muscles under the skin, lacked, even as imitators, his essential qualities, and though the realist school of the Abbey Theatre produced some distinguished figures it could boast of no master until the appearance, nearly twenty years later, of Seán O'Casey.

V

This was not the case with the actors of the Abbey, who from the first moment of the theatre's history excelled in

naturalism. It is true that the Fays had taught them to speak verse, those early, unpaid, shy and ardent men and girls who were drawn into the stage's net, and Sara Allgood more than any, perhaps, of her contemporaries, learned from these two brothers and from her own unfailing instincts a moving and deeply individual art; but even she I think found herself most completely in the inexorable reality of O'Casey's speech; and Máire O'Neill, the finest interpreter of Synge that Ireland has discovered, as well as Arthur Sinclair, Fred O'Donovan and the rest, proved very rapidly in which direction their talents lay. It is interesting to observe that those early figures in the Abbey scene who might well have become important romantics, such as Maud Gonne, Máire Nic Shiubhlaigh, Dudley Digges and others, passed out of the regular working routine of the theatre to some other form of expression, or at the most made only occasional appearances at the Abbey when Yeats's dramatic poems and Lady Gregory's folk-tales were produced; and Yeats himself in his later experiments with an aristocratic form borrowed from Japan, was driven, when searching for designers and dancers, to look outside Ireland for help, "for where but in London or Paris can I find what I am seeking?"

It is the same to this day. Look through the long list of the names of players the Abbey has made or helped to make famous, from F. J. McCormick, Barry Fitzgerald, Eileen Crowe, Maureen Delaney, Shelah Richards, Cyril Cusack, down to those young and often brilliant men and girls who are acting there as I write these words, and you find that they are not romantics, nor symbolists, nor stylists, but realists; not the children of Mallarmé, Cocteau, or Yeats, but of O'Casey, Robinson, Brinsley MacNamara, and George

Shiels. And this, it may be, is one of the Abbey's tragedies: that its actors, in spite of the fine work that is being done among them by Austin Clarke and Ria Mooney to revive the early poetic inspiration, are still at their best in the interpretation of any Irish dramatic writer that comes into the mind sooner than that of their original prophet; and one wonders, as one's thoughts wander to England's greatest playwright, what would be the result if a similar state of affairs were to arise in the theatre by the banks of the river that flows through Stratford.

VI

Any analysis of the Irish Theatre must return from time to time to the Abbey, and we too will doubtless meet with it again in these pages, but for the moment we may I think follow the fortunes of a man who did not look upon Irish theatrical destinies with the same eye. Edward Martyn, one of the original collaborators in the movement, left it as we have seen at an early stage, and some years later was to experiment with a small theatre of his own, where the aims and ideas were so different from those of the older organisation that they make a definite claim on the interest.

George Moore has described in *Ave* how his own interest in the Irish literary awakening was first stirred by Martyn's saying to him in London that "he wished he knew enough Irish to write his plays in it." Such a remark even to-day would cause a look of faintly amused surprise to appear on many faces, but it could hardly have the effect that it had in the late nineties. Dr. Hyde, it is true, had already in 1893 published his *Love Songs of Connacht* in a bilingual edition,

and educated people were becoming once more aware of the existence of a language that had not been heard east of the Shannon for many years, but the idea of creating a dramatic literature in that language was indeed an innovation, and Moore, jaded with the sensations and inventions of Montmartre and growing already a little restless in the English atmosphere which he loved with too much violence not to feel surfeited by it now and then, was all excitement. His own enthusiasm, however, led to nothing but a translation by Torna, the Gaelic poet, of a couple of his novels: he never mastered or indeed began to master the Irish tongue, and neither it appears did Martyn; but on the latter writer his interest in it had its usual unexpected and not generally recognised effect of awakening a desire in his soul for two things: the expansion of Irish expression beyond the limits of peasant life, and the linking up of Ireland with European tendencies other than English.

He began to dream in short of a theatre that would present, whether in Irish or English, translations of continental masterpieces and encourage a school of Irish playwrights and actors who would deal with phases of national life outside the peasant sphere.

The outcome of this desire was the establishment in 1914 of the Irish Theatre in Hardwicke Street, Dublin, and, short-lived as the venture was, it was also full of interest. Housed in one of those dull-red, four-square, slowly decaying mansions for which the north side of the city is famous, it had, one must admit, most of the disadvantages that seem to accompany lofty ideals in the theatre everywhere. The stage was inadequate—I acted there once, and on another occasion painted a mountain-side set for one of Martyn's own symbolic

plays, a gaunt Ibsenic affair in which Máire Nic Shiubhlaigh gave a memorable performance, so I know—the seating was haphazard in arrangement and uncompromising as to carnal comfort (one pushed chairs about in the front rows and sat on baskets, I remember, in the back). Even the lighting was of that curiously sad and glacial quality one associates with political meetings of an intimate and conspiratorial nature; but they did, as well as Edward Martyn's own works, plays by John MacDonagh (the theatre's producer and one of its leading actors), as well as varied works of Tchehov, Maeterlinck, and Ibsen. I quote these three authors because I saw their work played there, but there were many others. The settings, except when Martyn got going on me for his mountain-side, were as well as I can remember mainly curtains, but the acting, although it was uneven, was interesting. Paul Farrell, I think, was their finest player, and although the movement never grew into a popular one it did the invaluable work of preparing the palate of a growing minority of the public for new and adventurous tastes. When Lennox Robinson, Arthur Shields and their friends invented the Dublin Drama League somewhere about the year 1919, there was found to be a considerable audience for something that was neither the introspective Abbey comedy of country manners nor yet the soufflé of the last London season but three, reheated and dished up by English touring companies of a strangely declining distinction. Andreyev, Pirandello and the Martínez-Sierras were all presented to Sunday night audiences who gratifyingly increased as time went on, and it should not I think be forgotten that the way for these had been trodden, though not perhaps finally paved, by the pioneers of Martyn's Irish Theatre experiment. Their

work, indeed, came near to being as valuable to the development of Ireland's maturing theatrical intelligence as the early work of the Abbey had been; for when Yeats had said to the nation "Behold yourself, behold your penury and your magnificance," there was, in this land of Cinderellas morbid with the consciousness of their own drab and uninviting qualities and tremulously in awe of the glittering ballroom of which they were allowed, thanks to the touring companies, an occasional glimpse, a great need for his words. But when, in later years, the nation having (most unexpectedly), obeyed the Yeatsian call, having indeed taken it so literally that for some time it seemed that she would never again be able to free herself from the engrossing contemplation of her own perfections and peculiarities, then came the time to open the windows once again and look, not at the glimpses of a world that England chose to show, but at the world itself.

It was and is hard work, this invitation to Ireland to give herself to the study of the European scene. Never in a brief thirty years or so has a public, once so diffident and uncertain of its own significance, gained such an overwhelming and in the main unfounded self-confidence as the Irish. Led by the eager and delighted audiences at the Abbey, every characteristic real or unreal of the national temperament is noted and gloated; every twist of phrase, every stroke of wit, every gleam of humour, of oddity, of quaintness, every allusion to a constitutional virtue; piety, bravery, chastity and the like, is taken for granted or cheered to the echo. Every suggestion made by a writer that Ireland may share in the imperfections common to humanity throughout the planet is questioned with a very sincere indignation by members of the public (and not infrequently of the actors) and obliquely attacked

by sections of the press with ridicule and belittlement. They are fierce dragons to fight, these strange and self-imposed images of moral impeccability, and maybe their existence is natural enough in a nation geographically isolated from all but a powerful neighbour whose ways, however derided, are almost invariably accepted in the end as inevitable, even if they appear in our midst under some Gaelic label; an influential and persuasive neighbour who herself has never been famous for freedom from prudery and self deception. They are dragons that are inimical to the intellectual growth of any nation, and the means of their overthrow lies, I think, in the will of the leaders of the arts, and of the art of the theatre in particular, to turn the gaze of the people outward on to Europe as well as inward on to the truth of one's own soul.

VII

In the middle of the 20's, with O'Casey as undisputed ruler of the day at the Abbey; with Robinson at work on that series of tribeless and nationless comedies which reflected more of the restless decade's fashion than of himself; with Yeats in the throes of his plays for dancers, and with the country itself emerging, with a certain bitter gaiety, from the ardours of civil war—to be precise in the summer of 1925—a young actor of Irish birth, Anew McMaster, decided, in the middle of a vastly varied career, to tour with a repertoire of classic plays, mainly Shakespearean, to be presented, not in Dublin, but in the country towns of Ireland. It was a bold and unexpected move, for the places destined for the experience had known little hitherto but popular dramas and comedies imported mostly from London long since and

played by such companies as Dobell's, Carrickfords, O'Brien and Ireland's and others. These included in their programmes favourites as deeply dyed and tried as *Shall we Forgive Her, East Lynne, The Lights of London, The Bad Girl of the Family* and *Charley's Aunt,* and towns like Cahirciveen or Ballinasloe or Athlone were considered unsuitable for more austere ventures. But McMaster, an odd sort of man, thought otherwise and his productions of *Hamlet, Othello* and *Macbeth,* after a few months of uneven and occasionally disastrous business, began to attract a surprising public. Shakespeare, and later Sheridan and Goldsmith, became the fashion of the country towns, and there is a story famous in, I think, the County of Clare, of how, when some modern comedy was announced for Saturday night, an old man standing at the back of the pit shouted out that they of the town were "too backwardy for them highbrow shows, and what about giving us Julius Caesar?"

McMaster certainly had done much for the taste of country audiences, though there was nothing about his programme

that even remotely reflected or revealed the national life, and although at later dates he appeared for successful seasons at the Abbey in Dublin with such famous artists as Mrs. Patrick Campbell, Sir Frank Benson and others, his real business in Ireland was and still is with those townspeople who formed for him a public that was in many ways nearer, in the alertness of their ear and the purity of their speech, to that of Shakespeare's own day than are the jaded spectators of the big theatres, who endure the long Elizabethan periods mainly in order to find out how some fashionable player or producer will handle them. It is certain too that McMaster's influence on the amateur players of these towns has been as considerable in its way as the influence of the Abbey playwrights who provide for them most of their material, and the amateur movement cannot be overlooked in the dramatic history of any country as new to the theatre as Ireland or as sparse in population, for where but among these can players or public, isolated from the life of the big cities, receive their first experience?

It was in McMaster's company, two years after its inception that I met with Hilton Edwards, and decided that here was the man with whom I wished to experiment with a new sort of theatre in Ireland. I had wondered for a long while what it was in the Abbey's policy that failed to give to me an entire personal satisfaction, or what, in the spasmodic presentations of Edward Martyn's Irish Theatre or the Sunday night performances of the Drama League, or of the Comhar Drámuíochta, its simpler Gaelic equivalent, seemed incomplete. The demands of Dublin too, real or imaginary, had been for many years an obsession; I thought of nothing but of Ireland's need for a capital city and of that city's need for something more than a national theatre which interpreted

but a portion of the national life, a couple of good touring centres which contributed nothing not shared by Belfast, Birmingham, or any fair-sized provincial town, a handful of inexperienced groups playing, now a foreign masterpiece in curtains, now a last season's London success in borrowed scenery, and one or two amateur musical and operatic societies. All these things I felt were good in their way, but there was a need for something as well as the Abbey that would be as permanent and as serious, and should spring from a totally different conception of the theatre and its relationship to Irish life.

All this, and that will of the artist of which I have spoken to turn the eyes of the people outward on to the world, was in my mind when Hilton Edwards and I began our discussions together, and I decided that here, if he were willing, was not only my future partner, but the latest victim on the altar of the theatre in Ireland. Even his English nationality, though this seemed to him a mildly amusing complication in the already complicated and rather immature scheme we were forming in our minds, appeared as no obstacle to me, or as things turned out, to the nation itself. How indeed could we foresee, Ireland or I, that he, with the Englishman's uncanny knack of turning tables, would make us both work far harder than we had bargained, setting me running from pillar to post with paint-brushes and scripts, and driving players, musicians, architects, solicitors and shareholders half wild with his demands?

We had both received our education in the English theatre, his school being the Old Vic and mine His Majesty's in the days of Beerbohm Tree, and we were both as deeply indebted to the manner and tradition of these centres as we were in

rebellion against them. Most of all, however, his face was set against two factors in Ireland which it had taken me no pains at all to point out to him. The first of these was the lack of visual sensibility of a nation whose ears had always been its strongest point of aesthetic perception, and whose eyes, deadened by some of the drabbest and most imitative modern architecture and dress in Europe, had never been helped by Irish or English stage presentation. The second was the automatic acceptance by the public mind of Dublin as a provincial town which should be more than contented, theatrically speaking, with what she already had. "If Dublin is no more, if there is no serious wish to rebuild a capital city, I'd as soon work in Manchester" he had once said. "The population is bigger and wealthier, to me it's nearer home, and in Manchester one would find no disadvantage in being an Englishman."

Both these points found in me a passionate supporter: the country, long since habituated to the image of herself as an entertaining slattern, had acquired a certain indolence of approach, which, together with her inherent indifference to visual style, could too easily lead her theatre into a placid and mediocre acceptance of the second best, into a facile reliance, where voices were naturally rich, tongues eloquent, and ears receptive, on sound alone; and these things were among the many pitfalls we determined, not merely to avoid, but to cure if we could.

VIII

Our beginning, like that of the National Theatre Society, nearly thirty years previously, was at once ambitious and severely, almost ostentatiously, small. The Peacock Theatre, designed and constructed by Michael Scott for some experimental idea of Yeats and Lady Gregory, was situated next door to the National Theatre; it seated a select gathering of spectators in perfect comfort (no need now for the kitchen chairs of Edward Martyn's day) and had a tiny stage and a lighting equipment which we augmented with lamps and a switchboard of our own on money borrowed from friends. Here Hilton Edwards and I, with Gearóid Ó Lochlainn, one of the leading actors of the Gaelic movement, and Madame Bannard-Cogley, got together with our leading lady, Coralie Carmichael, with whom we had worked in McMaster's company, and opened on a night in October, 1928,

under the title of the Dublin Gate Theatre Studio to a capacity house of one hundred and two people. There were almost as many players on the stage as there were spectators in those appropriately peacock-coloured tip-up seats, for the play we had chosen was Ibsen's *Peer Gynt*. Two seasons we had at the Peacock Theatre and the plays we did there included Elmer Rice's *Adding Machine*, Tolstoy's *The Power of Darkness*, Raynal's *The Unknown Warrior*, my own *Diarmuid and Gráinne* which I had translated into English for the occasion, the first public presentation in Ireland (or England) of Wilde's *Salomé*, and a new play by Denis Johnston, then a very young and unknown writer, *The Old Lady Says "No."*

Financial success or even maintenance was of course impossible in a theatre of such small capacity, but the work done there was liked, and less than two years later—to be exact in February 1930—we had moved to new premises in the Rotunda, where The Dublin Gate Theatre (the Studio had been left behind in the Peacock) opened with Goethe's *Faust*. We have worked there, though with frequent spasmodic gaps ever since, and have produced something less than three hundred plays by authors from nearly every country in the world. Shakespeare, Yeats, Ibsen, Aeschylus, Shaw, Tolstoy, Sheridan, Kaiser, Wilde, Martinez-Sierra, Cocteau, O'Neill, Strindberg, Tchehov, Wilder, and Gertrude Stein have been among our authors, and here and there a new Irish play has appeared which hints at the discovery of the qualities we seek: a vision of certain phases of national life other than that of cottage or tenement; a style that is at once analytic and formal rather than imitative; an attempt to express the heart beating under the ribs as well as the colour and texture of the covering flesh. Denis Johnston, I think, has come the nearest to giving

us what we have looked for so long. *The Old Lady Says "No"* and *A Bride for the Unicorn* both contain action, poetry, humour, adventure, and what I must call an astonishing control of freedom, and are only barred from an ultimate victory anywhere by the too intimate localism of the first play for any but an Irish audience (though next to *Hamlet* and O'Neill's *Mourning Becomes Electra*, it is the most certain of our Dublin successes) and by the too involved cabalistic structure of the second to ensure a full understanding with any but a public supremely well-educated in mythology and psycho-analysis. This is a doubtful quantity to gamble with anywhere as the Gate knows, having, like the Abbey, toured widely in Europe, Africa and America.

IX

The actors of the Gate Theatre, having more dramatic ground to cover than their brothers at the Abbey, have a correspondingly wider technical range and, I think, a less sharply defined manner. One recognises the Abbey player anywhere: from Barry Fitzgerald and May Craig to Michael Dolan and Bríd Ní Loingsigh, one knows the leisurely sure gestures, the rise and fall of the voices, but who could tell, in spite of the firm and individual style of Hilton Edwards' direction, that Coralie Carmichael, Orson Welles, Peggy Cummins, Geraldine Fitzgerald, James Mason, Meriel Moore, and Betty Chancellor all found themselves, at one time or another, under his hands?

So it may be that the writer, rather than the producer, shapes the manner of the stage and of its people. But, as the

Abbey failed, by the very strength of its popular appeal, to realise the dream of its creator for a poet's theatre where the players, robed dimly and chanting in many voices, should recreate the arts of minstrelsy, of dancing, and of a symbolic celebration of the mysteries, so have we failed in the main to discover those authors who shall write for us our masterpiece.

The real business of the Gate as it turned out was with methods of acting, production, design and lighting; and it is in this direction that its influence, at its best and worst, has made itself most strongly felt. We saw before we started our work in Dublin how seldom in its theatre had anything beyond the two main arts of the playwright and the individual performer received a serious attention; how the stamp and rhythm of the "two hour's traffic of the stage" had been at its most successful a lucky chance, and how, when this chance failed to work through the want of a great writer or of a happy accident of casting, the result was an evening lacking in style.

We secretly hoped, and indeed are still hoping, that through our experiments in the field of ancient and modern plays from all sorts of places, and from the varied methods that the handling of the plays demanded, we would at last discover a way, more evocative than literal, more suggestive than photographic, that might serve as the mould for the Irish dramatist of the future, as the Elizabethan way served as the mould for Shakespeare, Marlowe and Ben Johnson, or the modern picture-frame stage's way has served for Wilde, Capek, and Noel Coward. To this end we have our eye on a new form of stage whose problems no less than its solutions will, we hope, lead the theatre in Ireland to further adventure.

X

Adventures are certainly what are needed, and here the difficulties that beset us in Ireland, as indeed in other countries, become entangled with a factor that should not under ideal conditions have anything to do with the arts at all: the problem of selling our wares at a sufficient profit to guarantee a livelihood. This sordid aspect of things should never be touched upon by me or by anyone else who cares for the theatre, nor indeed would it be but for the fact that financial considerations have changed, distorted and delayed so much of theatrical development that they have made a sad and gay little history of their own and should be noted.

The Irish Government, early in its history, came nobly to the aid of the theatre which seemed in the late twenties to be in danger of a total eclipse through the final establishment of the talking film. It was too early perhaps for all but the most far seeing to realise that the film, far from being a deadly rival, could spur the art of the stage to a new life of invention and experiment as the camera, some fifty years before, had helped to spur the art of painting to its discovery of impressionism and the schools that followed it; and commercially, there was no doubt of it, the stage of the living actor was in a bad way. Then suddenly the Government abolished the entertainment tax in theatres (though not in the cinema) and subsidies were given to the Abbey and later to the two chief Irish-speaking theatrical companies, the Taibhdhearc of Galway and the Comhar Drámuíochta of Dublin. Ireland however is a small country and her claims to fame have never been founded on her wealth. The subsidies, though generous, could not have put the organisations they helped out of

financial peril, and these as we have seen, were only three; nor could the rescue from taxation do more than cause a small sigh of relief to escape from the fevered lips of a host of suffering patients. Actors, producers, managers, designers, musicians, electricians, carpenters, and wardrobe-women must, in Ireland as in other places, eat, drink, and presumably pay some sort of rent to somebody; so too must other members of an often bewilderingly numerous back and front of the house staff; and in order that they may do so as well as in order that we, who wish to enjoy ourselves, may continue to express our fundamental egoistic and exhibitionary natures by producing from time to time the sort of work we really wish to produce, and that the English-speaking public at least has never been know to demand, we must, if only occasionally, meet our dragons half-way by providing plays of a type known as popular successes, sneered at, derided, and solidly patronised.

Outside the Abbey Theatre, where it makes a not unfrequent appearance under a slight local disguise (thus cutting the sneer-opportunities down by about a third), the Popular Success has generally run in London, or it maybe New York, for a year or two before Dublin gets the opportunity to flock to its doors before (or after) indulging in her scornful comments, and its chief purveyors in the past were the English touring companies I have mentioned and with whose visits the recent war and certain political changes in the country dealt severely. They ceased indeed to cross the sea at all during the early forties, those representatives of the English legitimate and variety stage, and their absence from our principal cities offered to Ireland at once many opportunities and a handful of artistic pitfalls. Mr. Louis Elliman, the manager of the

Gaiety which, with the Theatre Royal, had always been the leading centre in Dublin of imported production, was swift to seize the opportunities and shrewd enough to fall into but few of the pits. He gave the chance to our own and to several other organisations to play to a far bigger public than we had

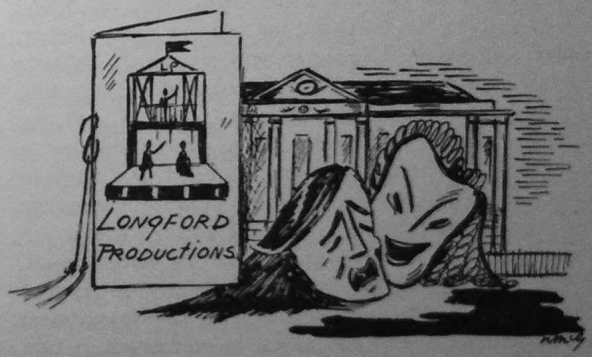
reached before; he opened the doors of the Gaiety to Jimmy O'Dea, a brilliant comedian, and to his company, and under the influence of O'Dea and of his partner Harry O'Donovan, that essentially British institution, the Christmas pantomime, became an Irish national event. Companies of opera and ballet too were invited by Mr. Elliman to the same theatre, and at the Royal he began to create a genuine tradition of the art of the music-hall and the development of Irish music-hall artists.

The pitfalls of the new conditions in Dublin, from the point of view of the legitimate drama, are obvious if one thinks of the city as a capital rather than as a prosperous provincial centre. It is true that commercially, and from the angle of casting and productions, the performances given were in the hands of resident artists and directors, but the choice of plays—and our own Gate Productions have sinned as much in this direction as any other group, and probably will sin again on account of that strange habit of eating and drinking I have already commented on—has tended to a second-hand rehash of a dish already served, and often served supremely well, in the bigger city. I refer to the growing taste of the West End or Broadway commercial success, never in the English language, to be done quite as well by Irish actors as by British or American ones, so that in the very moment of their performance or the enjoyment of their results there is always the dull conscience-stricken pang that one is doing, or reaping the benefit of, a slightly second rate thing; a thing which one knows can be and has been done more perfectly elsewhere. In this field, satisfactory and tantalising at once as it is to the English-speaking artist whose work lies outside the two biggest cities of his world, we, Shelah Richards, Stanley Illsley and Leo McCabe, and occasionally, though very occasionally, Lord Longford, have been, in Dublin, the outstanding providers and offenders.

XI

Lord Longford, who joined the board of directors of the Gate in 1931 and soon became its Chairman, formed in 1936 a company of his own which shares the Gate building

with us, each of the two companies being in residence for a half of the year. A good deal of confusion has arisen among people who do not live in Dublin (and many who do) as to the identity of our two groups, and indeed the aims of the Longford Productions and of the Dublin Gate Theatre Productions in many ways are much alike. Lord Longford, like ourselves, believes in Dublin as the capital of Ireland, and in the importance of two things: the contact with the main stream of theatrical manifestations in various countries and periods, and the creation of centres in Ireland that will not force the Irish artist in the theatre to seek experience or livelihood inevitably outside his own land. He has an inordinate love for the plays of Greece, and his own English translations from Aeschylus and Sophocles are, as I think, the finest things he has done. He has felt too, consciously or unconsciously, the same desire that we had felt ourselves for a new kind of Irish play, and Lady Longford whose



novels had already begun to appear in the early thirties, presented the Longford Productions with some of their most successful plays, in which her own very individual style, which is less sensitive than that of Teresa Deevy, another fine woman writer for the Irish theatre, but more irresistibly diverting, reveal a kinship rather than an indebtedness to the Misses Austen and Edgeworth and, more subtly and unsuspectedly, to the strange blank humour of Gertrude Stein.

XII

The Gaelic dramatic movement, which had been active though separate from the movement in English from the earliest days of Yeats and Douglas Hyde, began, after Yeats's death in 1939, to invade the Abbey rather than the Gate, although Gearóid Ó Lochlainn and I, both directors of the latter theatre, had done a good deal of work in the service of the language as a dramatic medium; Ó Lochlainn producing and acting for the Comhar Drámuíochta in Dublin, and I succeeding him there when my own four years as director, author, actor and translator had come to an end in Taibhdhearc na Gaillimhe which I had inaugurated, under Government support, with my own *Diarmuid agus Gráinne* in 1928, the same year that saw the opening of our Gate productions in the Peacock. Ernest Blythe and Roibeárd Ó Faracháin, however, became Abbey directors in 1935 and 1940 respectively and under their influence the theatre became, and is still becoming, more and more linked with the Gaelic revival. Many of the present leading Abbey players were recruited from the Comhar Drámuíochta, and with very few exceptions the actors are bilingual and appear in productions in both

languages. The enemies of the language were not unnaturally provoked by this, for like so many people who have a quite sincere hatred for what they do not understand, they confuse the object of their hate, as I believe, with something else. Irish, they will tell you has a useless quaintness, a naive obscurity, a sense of isolation from the world of to-day, and a total inability to cope with ideas, words, or even place-names outside the narrow confines of the world it was intended for; and all these accusations are true, not of the language itself, but of the limited and archaic alphabet it was some misguided sentimentalist's idea to dig up from the archives of the past that it might serve as a highly decorative tombstone for something which had never really died at all. But however the mistrust of Irish came about, it reared its head at the turn things had taken at the Abbey, many people, not wholly inimical to the language, thinking it unwise to mingle the forces of the Gaelic revival with what had always been essentially an Anglo-Irish tradition, and certain of the actors themselves were swept into the maelstrom. Maelstroms however can on occasion bring forth results of an unexpected interest, and it was with a sympathetic expectancy that Dublin watched certain of the younger artists of the Abbey, among them Liam Redmond and Eithne Dunne, forming a new group called the Players' Theatre. Helen O'Malley designed their settings and costumes and gave them generous support, and their most distinguished writer, Gerard Healy, who graduated from the Gate Theatre, has presented them with at least two plays of value.

At the same period, Shelah Richards, who had played both with the Abbey and the Gate, extended her experiments with presentations of her own, most notably *Romeo and Juliet,*

St. Joan, and the later plays of Paul Vincent Carroll; Stanley Illsley and Leo McCabe continued to provide Dublin as well as the leading provincial cities with sound productions of British and American successes; a company playing Shakespeare and modern plays under the management of Ronald Ibbs, Gerald Pringle and Carl Bonn went on tour in the smaller towns in the paths already prepared by McMaster, their younger blood continuing the tradition he had established; and in Dublin, Brendan Smith's company, the Jewish Dramatic Society and others, gave periodical performances in various theatre, but have so far found no permanent home.

In Cork and Belfast too there has been a constant succession of dramatic groups, both cities producing from time to time a writer or a player of distinction—Rutherford Mayne's talent, both as dramatist and actor, was discovered through the creation, more than thirty years ago, of the Ulster Players—and the Group Theatre continues to do important work in the North. And in Cork, that microcosm of the Irish world, that curious compromise between city and country life, there are at least two companies that one could wish to see in Dublin and elsewhere if they would enlist one of the many dramatists of the South to reveal their personal qualities and those of their own clime, complexion and degree. It is in the expression of profoundly local and intimately known types and places that the dramatist comes closest to the secret of universal portraiture; and though Hamlet and Œdipus have passed beyond portraiture and nationality alike until they seem to us eternal symbols of the tragic powers, as Harlequin is the symbol of the mysteries of the comic art, so Falstaff and Toby Belch and Pegeen Mike and Fluther Good remain forever, I think, images of recognisable humanity and of

known and well loved places and the nature of the soil that made these should serve well enough for us in the next few years.

Certainly it was this desire to dig into the earth of Ireland that drove our greatest dramatic poet to his work, that led him to goad Synge into the labour of watching and listening, and that may even have urged him—mistakenly, as I think—to reject O'Casey's play about the 1914 war; this, and the impulse to give Ireland a stage for the performance of plays in verse; and it is perhaps a mingling of these two purposes that has led Ria Mooney and the poet Austin Clarke to their work in the Lyric Theatre Company, which performs poetic plays on various Dublin stages and has given to the city some of its most interesting evenings. They have produced many plays, ranging from a revival of *The Countess Cathleen,* some of Clarke's own best works, and a most successful experiment with a freakish and stimulating creation in the form of a histrionic ballad called *Happy as Larry* by Donagh MacDonagh. I could wish that they, or preferably we, would turn the eyes of attention more to the plays of Jack B. Yeats, whose dramatic work has the same iridescent wildness as his painting, and a dreamlike yet logical exuberance that reminds one of Lewis Carroll.

XIII

A number of new plays had found their way to the Gate and the authors of these included Lennox Robinson, Pádraic Colum, T. C. Murray, Robert Collis, M. J. Farrell, the Longfords, Frank Carney, David Sears, Dorothy Macardle, Mary Manning and Percy Robinson; and although the theatre has never discovered, even in Denis Johnston, the

unique dramatist it seeks, as the Abbey at an early stage discovered Synge, yet each movement it has made in style of interpretation has called forth echoes everywhere. This in itself should be gratifying: in Ireland there are few ways of measuring success but by the rods of imitation or of enmity: yet to whom if not to the writer can one look to help the theatre towards those discoveries on which its continuance depends?

My own plays fill both my partner and myself with despair. These in the main are attempts to express what personally interests me most in Ireland, and this neither reflects the interest of the majority, nor does it demand any form of revolutionary manner or method of presentation. I am fascinated by the moods and sensations of the human mind; by dreams, by magic, by the personages of folk-lore and myth, and also by the occurrence among ordinary people of extraordinary things; and what I have written hitherto for the stage, in spite of many generous welcomes in and out of Ireland, would probably be as effective if not more so in the form of novels. I find myself more at home among the images of what is popularly termed fantasy than in the world of social or political problems, of the makers of war or the wreckers of homes; but I have not yet had the courage or the discipline to divorce from my plays, on the one hand those small and easy appeals that my actor's knowledge tells me will give me a larger audience, or on the other hand to go honestly out to meet that audience with the subject matter that lies nearer to its heart than to mine. And so the Gate turns from Denis Johnston, too occupied with other work to be a great playwright, and from myself, too torn by conflicting desires to become a frankly popular one, and peers once more into the darkness.

What precisely does it hope to find there? To whom shall it look to bring about the change? With other arts, depending as they do on the individual creator, it is easy enough to point to the leaders.

In my own generation, for example, one can say that Stravinsky, Joyce, and Picasso were the leading figures of those who wrought the important alterations in music, literature and painting. In the theatre, which depends on the united labours of many people, such definition becomes less simple. Should the reformer be the playwright? I am not certain. Seldom in the past has the playwright felt the urge for a change of form: the greatest as well as the most popular among them were content with the stage of their own day and with the conventions imposed by that stage, and this is true of the age of Euripides, Shakespeare, Molière, Sheridan and Shaw, down to that of Giradoux, Kataev, Sartre, Rattigan, and O'Casey. The later O'Casey it is true has contributed to an insurrectionary movement in style, but the plays that mark this epoch seem to me the fruit of outer influence rather than of that pure and individual fire which illuminated much earlier and technically more conventional work. The modern names that come into the mind among those writers for the theatre who are innate rebels against the tyrannies, whether their rebellion has been successful or not, are Toller, Cocteau, Thornton Wilder, Denis Johnston, O'Neill and Yeats; and it is interesting to observe Joyce himself, in his only dramatic experiment, turning contentedly to the foursquare stage convention of his day and abandoning all thought of the extensions he was planning for his novels. Among producers and even designers it is easier to find guides: the names of Appia, Gordon Craig, Granville Barker, Rheinhardt, Meyerhold

and a score of others crowd into the memory, but by some irony these men had generally to turn back to the works of classic authors for their subject matter rather than to those modern writers who might create for them the plays they sought.

So it is with the Gate Theatre in Dublin, where the search goes on for those authors who shall deliver it from the cumbersome drawingroom and library set, from a list of properties as long and not half as revealing as a Shaw preface, from the limitations of those literal and representative surrounding which the film, for obvious reasons, can achieve so much better; and which at the same time shall give those qualities of clarity, sincerity, passion, humour, and warmth so often lacking in experimental dramatic writing. We search for them now with more impatience than before because we believe we have discovered the method for the interpretation of at least the beginnings of such work, and because we believe too that Ireland, who after many centuries of preparation for a national rebaptism has groped her way to the church door and is at least in sight of the font, is also, unless she exerts every muscle, in danger of falling into the dazed reaction of a prisoner who has waited too long for his release, into the complacency that will produce nothing but eggs and butter and bacon for a world that may rightly expect far more.

That the Minstrel Boy, his wild harp sundered by his own hands should speak no more in slavery is an admirable intention, though it was never, I would suggest, much more than that, for seldom have slaves or harps spoken more volubly; but that silence should descend now on the eve of release, that the passionate prisoner should be transformed into a prosperous mute farmer or manufacturer's agent is not to be endured. Yet that a period of uncertainty, even perhaps of

stagnation in the Irish theatre and its literature may be at hand seems likely. Drama is concerned with discord; with Othello maddened by suspicion, with Œdipus torn by conscience, with Electra filled with thoughts of vengeance, not with the spectacle of an ultimate appropriate reward for good behaviour among the clouds of this life or the next; and that is why, in a country where the discord of a collective suffering and struggle has all but ceased, we must I believe look for our future material, not among national movements and convictions, but into the life of the individual soul.

XIV

It may be that the times are against us, for Ireland, absorbed by her own image, finds herself on the brink of her natural heritage at a moment when the outside world, torn by struggles in which she had little part, has created a body of intellect that is highly equipped, thoroughly instructed, profoundly despairing, and weary unto death, as well it may be, of all national obsessions and of the miseries that grow out of them. We in the theatre in Ireland, when we look beyond our own horizons for a hearing, must not expect to find the world that forty years ago was eager to listen to the recital of a romantic and almost unknown story. The clouds that lent to us mystery as well as gloom have lifted, and something more than mere dramatic statement of quaint and unfamiliar faces and landscapes will be expected; some form of expression which apart from its Irishry shall have the intrinsic values of universal discovery. A new philosophy of life and of the arts of the theatre is what is needed, and I think it may not be too fantastic

to hope that Ireland, taking her place at last among the nations of a changing world, shall prove that the dramatic inspiration with which she entered the century was a prelude to a great period rather than the swan-song of a captive.

With her innate resentment of the specialist, her dread of perfection, her conscience-stricken sense of inherent artistic inferiority which leads her at times to assume an attitude that is cynical without knowledge, blasé without experience, and full of the deep suspicion of uncertainty, Dublin of course is not ready for the reception of great drama, of a great dramatist. Few cities are.

"You have disgraced yourselves again!" Yeats shouted at the disturbers of an Abbey audience, the fury of these at the Ireland O'Casey had painted having found its usual outlet—the sensibilities of Mr. Hyde, one might say, in rage at not seeing Dr. Jekyll's face in the mirror—but his despair need only have been momentary, and his indignation not confined to Ireland. Did not Wagner carry a gun before he took up his baton to conduct *Tristan?* And was not the *Sacre du Printemps* hissed from the stage in both Paris and London before it found a universal acceptance? These manifestations of failure to understand a new work of art and of determination to assert the rights of that failure to win a battle are seldom more than passing disturbances, like the fusing of an electric light: at least they serve to show that there is a living power hidden somewhere in the wires, a point of contact between artist and public, and that in the theatre is the first essential. It is not, I feel convinced, the violence of opposition that we should fear in Ireland so much as indifference, stagnation, and that inability to distinguish between a fine and a spurious thing that is the outcome of

a fundamental dishonesty in the Irish artist, and of an idle and sentimental prejudice in the public taste.

The audience must be led towards a fuller understanding of the art of the stage, an art which may yet be doomed to eclipse by that of the screen unless we discover a new and varying series of forms and expressions, and here a great school of criticism might serve as a guide.

Of this however there are few signs in Ireland. It remains, I think, to the theatre itself, to its interpreters, and to its patrons, the people, to build the Irish drama of the future. That this should be evocative in manner, imaginative in style, and at once national and European in its choice of subject matter is my personal hope. That it should arm itself to the teeth, if it is to survive this stormy and inventive century, with boldness, purity of purpose, an insatiable lust for adventure, and should find for itself a pair of shoes to tread the paths no film may venture in, is I think inevitable.

Rome—Marakech—Venice.
July-August, 1949.

BOOKS FOR FURTHER READING

Una Ellis-Fermor
The Irish Dramatic Movement (1939)

Lennox Robinson (ed.)
The Irish Theatre (1939)

Daniel Corkery
Synge and Anglo-Irish Literature (1931)

W. G. Fay
The Fays of the Abbey Theatre (1935)

Augusta Gregory
Our Irish Theatre (1913)

Andrew E. Malone
The Irish Drama (1929)

W. B. Yeats
Plays and Controversies (1923)

W. B. Yeats
Essays (1924)

Micheál Mac Liammóir
All for Hecuba (1946-47)

Lennox Robinson
Lady Gregory's Journals (1946)

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