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# IRISH DRAMA AND THEATRE SINCE 1950

Patrick Lonergan

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**Patrick Lonergan** is Professor of Drama and Theatre Studies at National University of Ireland, Galway. Among his books are *Theatre and Globalization* (winner of the 2008 Theatre Book Prize), *The Theatre and Films of Martin McDonagh* (2012) and *Theatre and Social Media* (2015). With Kevin Wetmore he is co-editor of Methuen Drama's *Critical Companions* series.

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*Patrick Lonergan*

*Series Editors: Patrick Lonergan and Kevin J. Wetmore Jr*

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METHUEN DRAMA  
Bloomsbury Publishing Plc  
50 Bedford Square, London, WC1B 3DP, UK  
1385 Broadway, New York, NY 10018, USA

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First published in Great Britain 2019

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A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

A catalog record for this book is available from the Library of Congress.

ISBN: HB: 978-1-4742-6264-4  
PB: 978-1-4742-6265-1  
ePDF: 978-1-4742-6267-5  
eBook: 978-1-4742-6266-8

Series: Critical Companions

Typeset by RefineCatch Limited, Bungay, Suffolk

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*For Saoirse*



# CONTENTS

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List of Illustrations	ix
Acknowledgements	x
A Note on Archival Material	xi
<b>Introduction</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>1 'Thank Goodness That's Over' – Irish Theatre in the 1950s</b>	<b>11</b>
Siobhán McKenna and Shaw: from <i>San Siobhán</i> to <i>Saint Joan</i>	17
Brendan Behan: from <i>An Giall</i> to <i>The Hostage</i>	22
Beckett: from <i>En attendant Godot</i> to <i>Waiting for Godot</i> to <i>Ag Fanacht le Godot</i>	29
<b>2 Secularization and the 'Post-Catholic' in Irish Theatre</b>	<b>39</b>
<i>The Righteous Are Bold</i> , 1946–63	43
Catholicism on the Irish stage in the 1950s	48
Catholicism in court: Máiréad Ní Ghráda's <i>An Triail</i> , 1964–5	53
Tom Murphy's <i>The Sanctuary Lamp</i> , 1975	57
Stewart Parker's <i>Pentecost</i> , 1987	61
Patricia Burke Brogan's <i>Eclipsed</i> , 1992	65
From <i>Eclipsed</i> to ANU's <i>Laundry</i> , 2011	69
<b>3 Internationalizing Irish Theatre</b>	<b>75</b>
<i>Philadelphia, Here I Come!</i> (1964) and the 'Second Renaissance'	75
1956 and all that	82
Towards a Brechtian Irish theatre: Tomás Mac Anna, Murphy and Friel	86
'I feel so extraordinary': Lynne Parker's <i>Rough Magic</i>	93
Chekhov in Ireland: Carr and Caldwell	98
Conclusion	109

## Contents

<b>4</b>	<b>Repeat and Revise – Recycling Irish Images, Narratives and Tropes</b>	<b>111</b>
	Rewriting James Joyce, 1961–2014	112
	Making Synge new: Garry Hynes and Druid Theatre, 1975–2005	118
	Inheritances: Christina Reid and the Troubles, 1983–9	126
	‘Let’s trust the Bard’: Marina Carr and the canon, 1989–2016	131
	Dirty deeds: Martin McDonagh, 1996–2015	139
<b>5</b>	<b>Encountering Difference</b>	<b>147</b>
	Introduction: <i>Translations</i> , 1980	147
	Sectarianism and difference: Charabanc and Marie Jones	155
	Sexuality and difference: Frank McGuinness	162
	Migration and difference: Enda Walsh’s <i>The Walworth Farce</i> and <i>Once</i>	171
	Conclusions	180
<b>6</b>	<b>After the Fall: Irish Drama Since 2000</b>	<b>181</b>
	The crash	181
	McPherson: selling our souls	183
	The spirit of the staircase: Mark O’Rowe’s monologue plays	187
	Fishamble and Deirdre Kinahan: rethinking relevance	196
	New directions	201
<b>7</b>	<b>Critical Perspectives</b>	<b>205</b>
	John B. Keane, <i>Sive</i> (1959) and the art of the amateur <i>Finian O’Gorman</i>	207
	An incomplete history of performance art in Ireland (and its blood relationship to theatre) <i>Áine Phillips</i>	217
	Stage design since 1950 <i>Siobhán O’Gorman</i>	227
	Notes	241
	References and Further Reading	243
	Notes on Contributors	253
	Index	255

# ILLUSTRATIONS

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1	Gate Theatre, <i>Saint Joan</i> show programme, 1959	19
2	Lyric Theatre, <i>Waiting for Godot</i> , 1975	35
3	Abbey Theatre, <i>The Righteous Are Bold</i> , 1963	46
4	<i>Life of Galileo</i> , directed by Tomás Mac Anna, Abbey Theatre, 1981	92
5	Shin-Fei Chen in <i>Three Sisters</i> by Lucy Caldwell, Lyric Theatre, 2015	108
6	Olwen Fouéré in <i>riverrun</i> , 2013	117
7	Druid co-founder Mick Lally bringing props for Druid's <i>The Playboy of the Western World</i> from a boat to the Aran Islands, 1982	120
8	<i>DruidSynge</i> , 2005	125
9	Druid Theatre, <i>On Raftery's Hill</i> by Marina Carr, 2000	133
10	Druid Theatre, <i>The Walworth Farce</i> by Enda Walsh, 2006	175
11	<i>Crestfall</i> by Mark O'Rowe at the Gate Theatre, 2003	196

# ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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In 2012 my home university, National University of Ireland, Galway, announced a plan to digitize the archive of the Abbey Theatre. That project made it possible to imagine a book such as this: one that would begin retelling the story of modern and contemporary Irish theatre by drawing on new archival material. For their work in securing an extensive archival collection about Irish theatre, I am very grateful to John Cox, Caroline Loughnane, Gearoid O'Conluain and particularly Jim Browne who, as university president until 2017, always sought to support research, teaching and practice in the creative arts.

Also at NUI Galway, Marianne Kennedy offered essential advice on Irish-language drama, and Ian Walsh's scholarship on mid-century Irish theatre has been a strong and valued influence. Barry Houlihan was immensely helpful in locating archival material and offering suggestions about its interpretation, and I am especially grateful for his help in sourcing and clearing rights for many of the images in this book. I'm also very appreciative of Charlotte McIvor's advice about theatre, the practice of writing, and much else besides. Thanks to the colleagues, students, archivists and artists who answered questions, sent unpublished material, assisted in securing important archival material, or helped in some other way. These include Beatriz Bastos, Nelson Barre, Lucy Caldwell, David Clare, Linda Connolly, Emma Creedon, John Crumlish, Bev Curran, Joan Dean, Mairead Delaney, Jill Dolan, Liz Elkinson, Paul Fahy, Lisa Fitzgerald, Nicholas Grene, Aoife Harrington, Miriam Haughton, Kieran Hoare, Aideen Howard, Erin Hurley, Garry Hynes, Margaret Kelleher, Aiveen Kelly, Michael Kenneally, Des Lally, Jose Lanter, Louise Lowe, Sarah Lynch, Emer McHugh, Trish McTighe, Chris Morash, Catherine Morris, Rachel Murray, Finian O'Gorman, Siobhán O'Gorman, Lynne Parker, Mark Phelan, Áine Phillips, Lionel Pilkington, Christina Reid, Tony Roche, Annie Ryan, Melissa Sihra, Matthew Spangler, Naoko Toraiwa, Shelley Troupe, Harry White, Willie White, Brenda Winter and Stacy Wolf.

Thanks to Mark Dudgeon at Methuen Drama for commissioning this book, to Lara Bateman for seeing it through to completion, and to the anonymous reader who provided very helpful feedback on an earlier draft.

Thanks finally to my family – to Therese, Saoirse and Cónall.

# A NOTE ON ARCHIVAL MATERIAL

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For ease of referencing, the following abbreviations are employed.

**ATDA** The Abbey Theatre Digital Archive at the James Hardiman Library (JHL), NUI Galway

**BF NLI** Papers of Brian Friel, National Library of Ireland

**DDA** Dublin Diocesan Archives, McQuaid Papers

**DTA** Druid Theatre Archive, JHL, NUI Galway

**GTDA** The Gate Theatre Digital Archive, JHL, NUI Galway

**LTA** Lyric Theatre/O'Malley family papers, JHL, NUI Galway

**NLI** National Library of Ireland

**TKA** Archive of the papers of Thomas Kilroy, JHL, NUI Galway

**TnaG** Taibhdhearc na Gaillimhe archive, JHL, NUI Galway

I often quote from newspaper articles, but have drawn them from multiple sources: printed records, online databases and archival press files. To provide consistency of referencing, I give the date of publication of the article in parentheses after quotations.

I want to acknowledge the extensive use I have made of the Irish Playography, which provides information about first productions of every Irish play since 1904. I am grateful to Jane Daly and Siobhán Bourke for their continuing work on that vital resource. Unless stated otherwise, dates of the premieres of any Irish plays mentioned in this book are derived from the Playography. Production histories for productions at the Abbey, Lyric and Gate are taken from the above archives. Those for the Dublin Theatre Festival are from the history featured in Grene and Lonergan (2008), *Interactions*.



# INTRODUCTION

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In October 2015, Fiach Mac Conghail announced his final programme as director of the Abbey, Ireland's national theatre. It should have been a moment of celebration, both for him and his institution. He had been appointed in 2005, a time when the Abbey had been perilously close to going out of business – and, during the following ten years, he had saved the theatre from collapse: restoring its finances, overseeing the renovation of its auditorium, re-engaging with established writers and premiering new plays. His last programme was therefore expected to allow audiences to reflect upon his achievements, and to wish him well as he made way for a new directorship.

Another important context was that 2016 would mark the centenary of the Easter Rising, the insurrection that had set in train events that culminated in the creation of the Irish Free State in 1922. The Abbey intended to play its part in the official state commemorations of that event: its productions would reconsider the histories of independent Ireland, and would explore how theatre and other creative arts had helped to shape that country. The programme's name was 'Waking the Nation', and the Abbey was using the verb in that phrase in at least two senses: to wake something can be to encourage it into action – but in an Irish context it can also mean to mourn something that has passed away. Mac Conghail seemed to be encouraging his audience to consider what kind of nation they might want to commemorate during 2016, to ask whether Ireland had become a genuine republic, a place in which all citizens are treated equally. But he was also leaving open the possibility that those audiences might want to kill off the Ireland they had inherited, to bury the past and create something new in its place.

His programming choices explored those ideas in many ways. Seán O'Casey's 1926 critique of the Rising, *The Plough and the Stars*, was revived in a new production – an assertion on the Abbey's part that its role in Irish society has never been to memorialize revolution but to interrogate it. Frank McGuinness' 1985 masterpiece *Observe the Sons of Ulster Marching Towards the Somme* also appeared, demonstrating the Abbey's engagement with the Unionist tradition in Northern Ireland – not to mention its willingness to create space for the expression of gay Irish identities. Ireland's troubled

## Irish Drama and Theatre Since 1950

histories with gender and emigration were explored in a revival of Tom Murphy's 1997 play *The Wake*. And there was also a production of *Othello*, staged to mark the 400th anniversary of Shakespeare's death – an inclusion that provided evidence of the transformed relationship between England and Ireland, given that Shakespeare, as an English dramatist, had been banished from the theatre's repertoire for much of the twentieth century (for further discussion see Lonergan, 2015).

Almost completely absent, however, was work by women. Only one play in Mac Conghail's programme was written by a female dramatist (*Me, Mollser* by Ali White), and only two productions would be directed by women. This gave rise to expressions of disappointment and anger from audiences and theatre-makers as, first in the semi-private world of Facebook and then in the public realm of Twitter, several female directors, writers, actors and designers came forward to recount stories of having been neglected, marginalized, ignored and discriminated against within the Irish theatre – solely on the basis of their gender. Led by the designer Lian Bell, the movement took the name #WakingTheFeminists, a phrase that was at once a reappropriation of Mac Conghail's 'Waking the Nation' title, and also an expression of shock and disgust (the acronym WTF is a slang phrase for 'what the fuck'). The Abbey's centenary programme became the focal point for those protests, but Bell's work in curating responses from both male and female artists demonstrated that the inequalities went far beyond the national theatre – and had existed for a long time.

On 12 November 2015, the movement held a public gathering at the Abbey, where dozens of female theatre-makers presented speeches about their experiences. At that event, Mac Conghail apologized for the omission of women from his 2016 programme and spoke about his need to reflect upon his own biases and blind spots. 'We can't have true artistic integrity without gender equality,' he said, pledging that the Abbey would seek to do better in the future.<sup>1</sup>

As a theatre scholar and teacher, I watched these events with excitement and hope – but also with trepidation. Irish theatre, I knew, had grappled with this kind of challenge before. Shortly before the #WTF movement had begun, my colleague Barry Houlihan had discovered a list that had been compiled at the Abbey in 1975, to coincide with a revival of Teresa Deevy's *Katie Roche* (1936). It named plays by twenty other female dramatists, aiming to promote further productions of their work. The writers were Alice Milligan, Lady Gregory, Mrs Bart Kennedy, Rose McKenna, Dorothy Macardle, Sadie Casey, Elizabeth Harte, Susan Glaspell, Cathleen M.

O'Brennan, Deevy, Margaret O'Leary, Maura Molloy, Maeve O'Callaghan, Mary Rynne, Elizabeth Connor, Nora McAdam, Olga Fielden, Margaret O'Leary, Máiréad Ní Ghráda and Eibhlin Ni Shuilleabhainn (ATDA, ADM\_00001093: 75) – names that usually appear in the footnotes of Irish theatre histories, if they appear at all. None of those plays was staged by the theatre.

Similar attempts would be made during the years that followed. As Eileen Kearney and Charlotte Headrick point out, the need to promote work by Irish women playwrights had been noted in the early 1980s, when the Dublin Theatre Festival and *The Irish Times* co-sponsored a competition for new plays by women: 'After examining the almost two hundred entries,' they wrote, 'the judges concluded that many were better than plays by male authors who had been produced in recent years' (2014: 15). Fewer than ten of those plays were staged.

At around the same time, in Northern Ireland, Charabanc Theatre Company was formed, aiming to redress not only the lack of work available for women in the theatre but also to challenge the quality of the roles that were being written for them. Staging more than twenty new plays between 1983 and 1995, Charabanc had a transformational impact on Irish theatre. Yet despite its influence, the position of women in Irish theatre remained fundamentally unequal twenty-two years after the company had folded. This, presumably, is what Charabanc co-founder Eleanor Methven was referring to when she declared at the #WTF meeting that she didn't need to be 'woken up' as a feminist Irish theatre-maker: 'I've been awake since 1976,' she said.

Perhaps the most infamous example of this phenomenon is the publication of the *Field Day Anthology of Irish Literature* in 1991. Prior to its launch, commentators were excited by what was expected to be a major redrawing of the Irish literary map. But that enthusiasm soon gave way to dismay, as it became apparent that the editors had excluded a very large number of female writers. Field Day subsequently published a fourth and fifth volume, focused on writing by and about women – but the impact of the original omission was lastingly damaging, both to the reputation of Field Day and the morale of countless Irish women writers. In an *Irish Times* column Nuala O'Faolain articulated a sense of outrage and a determination that nothing like this would ever happen again: 'the next time an anthologist bends to his task,' she wrote, 'he won't be able to forget that there are watchful women out there' (11 November 1991).

Two years after that debacle, Katy Hayes and Caroline Williams staged a festival of plays called *There are No Irish Women Playwrights* with Glasshouse

Productions. The title of the event was an ironic appropriation of the response that had been given to a visiting academic when she had asked a Dublin bookseller where she could find published scripts by female Irish dramatists; Glasshouse set out to show that in fact there are a great many such plays. That event was followed by a special issue of *Theatre Ireland* on women in Irish theatre, which was followed by a special issue of *Irish University Review*, dedicated to Teresa Deevy and other Irish women dramatists. With new work by Marina Carr appearing in the Abbey in 1994 alongside a revival of Deevy's *Katie Roche*, it seemed as if positive change was underway. Yet twenty-one years later, the same arguments were being made again. 'We thought we would change the world,' Hayes told me in 2014. 'But the world went back to its old tricks.'<sup>2</sup>



I've begun this book with the #WTF movement because it reveals at least two important things about theatre and how it is remembered.

The first is that, to repeat Hayes' remark, the world often goes back to its old tricks. In the chapters that follow, one of the arguments I'll make is that Irish dramatists usually present the development of their society as something that happens in cycles rather than in a linear fashion: history is always repeated, the past is always inescapable, and the best we can hope for is to fail better next time. The task and the challenge for many Irish characters is to break those cycles: to leave for America (as in Brian Friel's *Philadelphia, Here I Come!* in 1964), to finish telling the endless story (as in Tom Murphy's *Bailegangaire* in 1985), to escape from the legacies of a parent (as in Carr's *By the Bog of Cats* in 1998), or to accept that we must continue to wait for Godot, even as we know that he will never actually arrive. These and other examples will be explored in depth in the pages that follow.

But I also want to show how in the Irish theatre the content often mirrors the form, and vice versa. Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* (1955) was famously described as a play in which nothing happens – twice. In the brief outline above, I've discussed the recurrent attempts to call attention to the unequal status of women dramatists in the Irish theatre. It would be unfair to characterize those attempts as a pattern in which nothing happened at least five times, but it is notable that each iteration occurred as if for the first time. And on each occasion the response was the same: people in positions of power listened, they became engaged and they sometimes became enraged – but then they forgot, or allowed themselves to forget, and the status quo gradually reasserted itself.

These moments of forgetting demonstrate that anyone who writes about theatre needs to contemplate how and why some events are remembered while many are not. Just as theatre programmers can, in a sense, ‘perform memory’ by choosing to commemorate events in particular ways, so must theatre scholars think about the choices we make when we document the past. This book, then, is not just an exploration of Irish theatre since 1950 but an attempt to track relationships between apparently disconnected events – like those described above – so that neglected or unnoticed patterns can come into view. I make no claim to provide a comprehensive history of Irish theatre during this period (such a book would be considerably longer), but I do try to identify stories that I think need to be remembered, placing famous actors, plays and productions in conversation with events and people that deserve to be better known.

However, I also want to show how Irish theatre practitioners have succeeded at breaking negative cycles – that, through the efforts of successive generations, positive change has gradually been achieved in some areas. To return to the specific example of #WakingTheFeminists, in 2017 Brenda Donohue led the compilation of a report entitled *Gender Counts* that demonstrated how inequality runs through the Irish theatre sector in its entirety, showing that women were less likely to be commissioned to write or direct plays, and were under-represented in almost every other area of professional practice. In response, most Irish theatre companies put in place meaningful policies to promote equality, and it is likely that future state funding of the arts will be dependent upon evidence of the successful implementation of such policies. It remains to be seen if the pattern has fully been broken, but there is no doubt that #WTF has brought about substantial and positive change.

So one of the things that I want to show in this book is how Irish theatre has produced many such acts of gradual revolution, often brought about by individuals working in isolation from each other, and happening over several decades. What follows, therefore, is deliberately *not* written as a linear history but rather is an attempt to think about how our histories could be written. Rather than beginning at 1950 and working my way through to the present, I instead show the development of selected themes across the period – which means that chapters will sometimes overlap chronologically. My aim is to provide evidence of how the form has developed in cycles or waves: to capture repetition by sometimes being repetitious.

The second reason I have begun with #WTF is that the movement demonstrates that when history is made it often happens unexpectedly or

even accidentally. The Abbey's 'Waking the Nation' programme set out to provoke debate and to inspire change – and it did exactly that, but only because so many people rejected its claim to represent what the nation could and should be. Instead, the Abbey's output became part of a wider conversation in the society about equality, feeding into debates about equal pay, sexual harassment and reproductive rights. This shows how the Irish theatre does more than simply hold a mirror to its society: it is often an agent not just of reflection but of change. We'll find many examples in this book of how Irish theatre-makers and companies bring about change by positioning themselves in a symbolic relationship with their society, doing so to challenge norms about gender, religion, sexuality, nationality, race and much more. I want to show that the power of theatre to act in this way has not always been well understood, largely because (to make the point again) individual events have been forgotten. A major objective will be to tie together apparently disparate strands in order to reveal traditions and continuities that might not have been sufficiently visible before.

I begin with a chapter that charts the contours of this argument by exploring Irish theatre in the 1950s, showing how the period made possible much of what followed. By considering the work of three important figures – Siobhán McKenna, Brendan Behan and Samuel Beckett – I want to identify how Irish theatre was developing new ways of thinking about place, language, authorship and nation at the century's midway point. Those three figures – alongside many others – began a process of reinventing what Irish theatre could be, showing that it need not be focused on the three themes that then dominated Irish literature: religion, nation and land.

Chapters 2 and 3 show those acts of reimagining developing over several decades, focusing on two of those three themes. I want first to consider religion, to chart how Irish theatre changed the nation's relationship with institutional Catholicism, not only by exposing the abuses that were being perpetrated by members of the clergy (as well as by the institution more broadly), but also by shifting a cultural imagination rooted in Catholicism into a more secular context. I turn then to nation, to a consideration of how international influences helped to shape Irish theatre, exploring how dramatists and audiences responded to the innovations of figures such as Brecht and Chekhov.

In Chapters 4 and 5 I adopt a different methodology, showing how playwrights and directors attempted to tackle specific issues – and thereby devised strategies that would later be used to bring about change in a variety of other areas. First I explore the work of important female dramatists, actors

and directors including Mary Manning, Olwen Fouéré, Marina Carr, Garry Hynes and Christina Reid – showing how all (in different ways) used feminist strategies to change their societies' attitudes to gender, identity, space, the canon and authorship. I then want to demonstrate how those strategies created space for apparently unrelated developments, citing the example of how the career of Martin McDonagh has to be understood in the context of Garry Hynes' feminist reappropriation of the plays of John Millington Synge. This is not to suggest that Martin McDonagh is a feminist playwright (he isn't) but to show that, far from being one strand within Irish theatre practice, feminism has been centrally involved in every element of it – an involvement that has in some ways been rendered invisible or has been overlooked.

I make a similar case about how playwrights and actors responded to the Troubles by writing plays that explored the themes of difference and transformation. Change, they show, is painful – but it is also necessary; by dramatizing the lives of characters who experience transformation through interacting with otherness, Irish theatre showed that identities do not have to be permanently fixed, and showed too that it might be possible for communities in conflict to see the theatrical as offering new ways to live in the world beyond the theatre. We'll see that strategy being worked out in productions by Brian Friel, Marie Jones and Charabanc, and Frank McGuinness. But we'll also see how those innovations were adapted to other contexts: I conclude that chapter by showing how Enda Walsh drew on similar strategies in order to consider how Ireland had been transformed by inward migration. The aim in drawing that parallel is to start to explain why Irish theatre so often involves the repetition of old tropes, themes and characters: one way of understanding the new is to place it in conversation with the familiar – a dialogue that produces a creative tension that can be dramatically rich as well as socially impactful.

The sixth chapter considers Irish theatre now, showing the continuity of some of the patterns I have identified, but also pointing towards new developments. I'll consider how dramatists such as Conor McPherson, Mark O'Rowe and Deirdre Kinahan are developing the form by building on the achievements of earlier writers – but I also want to highlight the importance of figures such as Amy Conroy: practitioners who see themselves primarily as theatre-makers, and thus as free to move fluidly between the roles of acting, directing and playwriting (among other areas). The novelty of the concept of the theatre-maker is sometimes overstated in Ireland: as we'll see, Siobhán McKenna authored and acted in her own plays in much the same

## Irish Drama and Theatre Since 1950

way that Conroy does, and from earlier times figures from Boucicault to Lady Gregory could easily have been called 'theatre-makers'. But it is certainly true that Irish theatre since 2008 has become much more open to new ways of working.

In choosing these themes, I have been influenced by practical considerations such as the availability of particular archival records. But I have also sought to make visible the fact that any historian will inevitably choose specific perspectives from which to judge his or her subject, and that in turn means that many areas will be omitted. For example, I have little to say about dance theatre and the development of physical theatre since the 1980s, in part because of the existence of important and comprehensive work by Aoife McGrath (2011) and Bernadette Sweeney (2008) on those topics. But I also believe there is much more to be said about such themes as social class, community theatre and the practice of acting (among many other topics). As a way of pointing towards other possible approaches to this era, the final chapter presents three critical perspectives, in which Finian O'Gorman, Siobhán O'Gorman and Áine Phillips explore amateur theatre, design and performance art respectively. Book-length studies of those topics could easily be produced: indeed, both Phillips (2015) and Siobhán O'Gorman (2019) have written much more extensively about their subjects. These essays are included as having value in their own right but also aim to demonstrate that the history of Irish drama and theatre since 1950 is multifaceted and must continue to be explored.

In choosing plays and productions to discuss, I have been conscious of the need to include works that readers would probably expect to see – Friel's *Translations* (1980) or Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*, to give just two examples – as well as a discussion of such major companies as the Abbey, the Gate, Druid and so on. But (thinking again of the 'Waking the Nation' programme) I am also mindful of the risks associated with reproducing the canon. While I am sure I have my own blind spots, I have tried to include writers whose work has been neglected, as well as underappreciated areas as Irish-language theatre, adaptation and the role of actors and directors. The selection of case studies is evenly balanced between male and female theatre-makers, and I have also been conscious of the need to consider theatre produced outside Dublin and Belfast. I have also been very influenced by Cathy Leeney's observation that 'women's contribution to Irish theatre continues often to be considered as a separate topic' but that 'recognizing women's work also needs to happen' (2016: 269): a balancing act that is difficult to achieve but that needs to be engaged in.

Why start at 1950? I see the emergence of contemporary Irish theatre as having happened in a context that was informed by the declaration of the Irish Republic in 1948 (coming into force during the following year) and the destruction of the Abbey Theatre by fire in 1951. The Irish state did not participate in the Second World War, though Northern Ireland did – so the use of the term ‘post-war’ to describe the period is inappropriate in an Irish context. But Ireland was affected by the broader post-war environment internationally, and I attempt to maintain a sense of how theatre in that country was in dialogue with broader international events.

The decision to start shortly after the declaration of the Irish Republic gives rise to questions about what I mean when I write about ‘Irish’ theatre. That is a term that refers to plays made in both the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland – but an ‘Irish’ play can also premiere in London, Edinburgh, New York, Paris or anywhere else. I will show in Chapter 3 that ‘Irish theatre’ is a term that must include productions by such figures as Brecht and Chekhov, and which must accommodate the many new forms of identity that have emerged in Ireland since the turn of the century. Given that many Irish productions deliberately play with the multiplicity of potential meanings of the word ‘Irish’ – sometimes using it to describe geographic origins or settings, sometimes to describe generic or formal qualities – it can be counterproductive to define it too rigidly. My hope is that the specific origins of a play or production under discussion will be obvious from context, but I am aware of the risk of appearing to obscure important distinctions, especially between plays made in the Republic of Ireland and those from Northern Ireland. Since the signing of the Good Friday Agreement in 1998, we have seen the emergence of the term ‘Northern Irish’ as a signifier of identity – and while that term remains both contested and provisional, it might be important to begin thinking of ‘Northern Irish theatre’ as a distinctive tradition that must, to borrow a term from the title of Tom Maguire’s seminal book, be seen as existing ‘through and beyond the Troubles’ (2006), and which also moves beyond Ophelia Byrne’s important designation of the history of such work as happening on ‘the stage in Ulster’ (1997). In this book, however, I have tended to present the term ‘Irish theatre’ as encompassing work produced on the island in its entirety.

Methodologically, my approach has mainly involved consultation of archival resources, coupled with (where possible) my own attendance at the relevant productions. As I hope to show, the availability of large amounts of archival information can transform our awareness of the relationship between theatre and its society. A published playscript can show us what an

author intended, but a promptbook can reveal what the actors actually did on stage. A literary analysis of a dramatic text can reveal important social themes, but a consideration of box office figures can tell us how many people in a society actually went to see the play. Production photographs can show how directors sometimes seek to emphasize one feature in a play over another, and they also remind us that many plays contain ghostly traces of work that we've seen before. And, perhaps most importantly, the archive can help us to retrieve the voices and events that have been forgotten. This book considers some works that deserve to be better known, but the analysis of archival information also allows for new ways to think about canonical plays.

My overall aim is to show that Irish theatre has had a significant impact both on its society and on the development of the form internationally. I will make the (probably obvious) case that we cannot understand the development of Irish theatre without considering such phenomena as European integration, globalization, the impact of clerical child abuse scandals on Catholicism, and more. But I also want to make the (probably less obvious) argument that we cannot understand the development of Irish society without considering how it has been not just enriched but actively changed by its theatre. In these chapters, I want to bring to light some examples of how those changes were made possible – knowing as I do so that there is much more of the story still to be discovered and told. What follows, then, is an exploration of Irish theatre over a period of seventy years – one that is necessarily limited but which aims to provoke new conversations about how and why we remember this thing that we call 'Irish theatre'.

# CHAPTER 1

## ‘THANK GOODNESS THAT’S OVER’ – IRISH THEATRE IN THE 1950s

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On 18 July 1951, the Abbey Theatre was severely damaged by a fire. It was forced to relocate to the nearby Queen’s Theatre for what was intended to have been a short stay, but which eventually extended to fifteen years – causing the theatre to enter a period that is dismissed by most scholars and journalists as one of severe decline, both politically and aesthetically.

The 1951 fire signalled metaphorically what had been evident for some years: that the great age of Irish drama that had begun in 1899 with the first performance of the Irish Literary Theatre was now over, and had probably ended with the death of the theatre’s co-founder W.B. Yeats in 1939. The Second World War had delayed an acknowledgement of the Abbey’s decline: international conflict had meant that its actors were prevented from emigrating to London or Los Angeles, and had also prevented competition from visiting companies. But after 1945, the Abbey could no longer postpone facing its problems. Its best actors were leaving, its audiences were declining and it had produced few obvious successors to the great dramatists of its earliest years.

Those problems are movingly encapsulated by the promptbook for the play that was being performed on the night of the fire: Seán O’Casey’s *The Plough and the Stars* (1926). That document, which is now held at the Abbey Theatre archive, includes the original typescript as prepared by O’Casey himself; we find his additions to the text pasted over discarded passages, together with notes by Lennox Robinson about blocking and lighting effects. That script had been used as the promptbook for the play’s premiere, the now legendary opening that had provoked riots, and it continued to be used for every production of the play (of which there were at least thirty-five) that was staged at the Abbey until the 1951 fire.

The *Plough* promptbook could fairly be described as a national treasure. It bears the imprint of O’Casey and Robinson and was read by Yeats and Lady Gregory. It is a relic of one of the key moments not just in Irish theatre but in the development of independent Ireland, memorializing the Abbey’s willingness to resist attempts to stifle its freedom of artistic expression – at a time when Ireland was about to enter a period of rigid censorship. But the

iconic status of the promptbook also explains much of what was wrong at the Abbey: that it had been performing O'Casey's play in exactly the same way for a quarter of a century. Eileen Crowe and May Craig had appeared in the 1926 premiere; Craig was still playing the same role (of Mrs Gogan) twenty-five years later. Ria Mooney had played Rosie Redmond in 1926; by 1951 she had taken on the role of director. Even the interval music was largely unchanged (*La bohème* in 1926, *Tosca* in 1951) (ATDA, 3051\_MPG\_01, 3 and 3396\_MPG\_01, 4). Where *The Plough* had provoked riots at its premiere, it was now being presented as a museum piece.

The Abbey's fidelity to the original staging of *The Plough* was not unusual for its era, but it shows how the theatre had lost its dynamism and drive. Indeed, that complaint had been levelled at the Abbey during a previous run of *The Plough* in 1947, when Valentin Iremonger had made a speech ' lambasting the present directorate's artistic policy, describing it as being characterized by "utter incompetence"' (qtd by Welch, 1999: 153). Together with Roger McHugh, he publicly protested that the 1947 *The Plough* was a betrayal of a great play.

Such deficiencies have usually been attributed to the management of the theatre by Ernest Blythe, who took over as its director in 1941 and occupied that role until 1967. Blythe is mostly remembered for the writers whose work he rejected, but he has not been given much credit for those whose early plays he supported (such as Brian Friel and Hugh Leonard). He is criticized for having dedicated so much attention to the promotion of the Irish language but, as I'll discuss later, that policy allowed directors such as Tomás Mac Anna to devise innovations in both theme and design in ways that might not have been permissible in English. Irish-language plays also gave important actors such as Siobhán McKenna their earliest professional experiences. Blythe did show a preference for comedies over more serious works, but towards the end of his career, he would explain that this approach meant that difficult issues such as partition could be discussed 'coolly and with an eye to the future' – an assertion that was self-serving but which should not be dismissed (1963: 21). Finally, he kept the theatre in business during a difficult period, and did so with a tiny annual subsidy from the government – one that, as an *Irish Times* editorial pointed out, would not even have covered the operating costs of the Gaiety Theatre's annual pantomime:

For years the theatre has been operating under conditions of such difficulty that no producer from an outside national theatre could be brought to believe it possible that anything could be effectively staged

at the Abbey ... Scene 'flats' after fifty years use, had become so threadbare that they could not stand another coat of paint, but the theatre's treasury could not afford new ones. Dressing-rooms, wardrobe, and property storage space were inferior to their equivalents in the average village hall in Scandinavia

*The Irish Times*, 19 July 1951

It is revealing that this editorial saw the Abbey fire as an opportunity finally to oblige the Irish government to fund the theatre properly.

Leaving aside the funding (what theatre ever has enough money?), a further difficulty is that the Abbey was remaining static at a time when the nation it purported to represent was undergoing major changes. The Second World War had created a firmer division between the north and the rest of the island. As part of the UK, Northern Ireland had fully participated in the war, sending thousands of soldiers to fight in the British Army, and experiencing attack by the German air force. The rest of Ireland adopted a position of neutrality, and although many of its citizens left the country to contribute to the war effort anyway, its experience of the period was different from that of almost every other country in Europe.

As a further signal of Ireland's distance not only from Northern Ireland but also from Britain, the government declared the country a republic in 1948, leaving the Commonwealth and severing all ties with the British Crown when that act became law the following year. In one sense, this appeared to achieve the goal of the 1916 Rising, which had been fought to achieve an independent republic – but in fact the 1948 declaration was seen in some quarters as a betrayal of those goals, given that the state envisaged by the Rising's leaders was to have comprised the whole island. Implicit in the declaration of the Republic was an awareness that the partition of Ireland into two separate states was likely to persist for the foreseeable future. Acknowledging this likelihood in turn created the circumstances that allowed Ireland to play a more active role internationally, joining the United Nations in 1955 and, in 1961, applying for the first time to join the European Economic Community (EEC). Ireland's position in the world was therefore evolving rapidly at a time when its national theatre was homeless, underfunded and under the management of someone whose artistic outlook could not have been more different from that of Yeats and Gregory.

But if the 1951 fire diminished the importance of the national theatre, it also had the impact of inspiring new developments. The closure of the Abbey's smaller Peacock space, alongside Blythe's determination to stage

commercially popular works in order to meet the higher running costs at the Queen's, meant that the Abbey was moving away from experimental practice, poetic drama and most other forms of risk-taking other than the staging of new Irish-language plays. That left a gap that was quickly filled by the theatre clubs that had been opening in Dublin and Belfast, most of which played to very small (and often very select) audiences of between forty and eighty people. These included the 37 Theatre Club, which had been established by Barry Cassin and Nora Lever in 1951, as well as the Lyric Players' Theatre, which was established by Mary O'Malley in the same year in Belfast and which would ultimately become the main producing house of Northern Ireland. As Ian Walsh points out, these small theatres did not need to be particularly iconoclastic in order to challenge Irish theatrical orthodoxies. 'Cassin and Lever did not set out to be leaders of a counter-movement in Irish theatre,' he writes. They 'simply wished to produce plays that were "interesting and unusual" ... However, a commitment to the "unusual" was a daring act in fifties Ireland' (2012: 141).

By far the most important of these clubs was the Pike, a sixty-two-seat theatre established in 1951 by Alan Simpson and Carolyn Swift in a converted coach house in Dublin's Herbert Street. As we'll see, this was the stage that presented the world premiere of Brendan Behan's *The Quare Fellow*, as well as the Irish premiere of *Waiting for Godot* – and which would set out to do far more than simply produce work that was 'unusual'. As Walsh points out, even the theatre's title was a declaration of intent. Swift and Simpson 'named their theatre after a symbol of military Irish revolt: the pike was the weapon used in the 1798 uprising' against British rule (2012: 165). Their name expressed a desire not just to revolutionize the theatre but, by doing so, to change their society. As we'll see in the next chapter, that declaration would draw a retaliatory attack – one that would force the theatre out of business. But the Pike's legacies would be lasting.

Outside Dublin, a thriving amateur sector staged the first All-Ireland Drama Festival in Athlone in 1953. A competitive event that brought participants from across the island, it hosted productions that complicate the widely held view that Ireland at this time was wholly conservative and priest-ridden. Yes, the amateur sector was dominated by members of the clergy, many of whom directed plays or were otherwise prominent in the organization – but rather than acting as a force of censorship and repression, some encouraged the staging of experimental or provocative work from Europe and the United States.<sup>1</sup> The amateur sector was also (when compared to the professional sector) disproportionately driven by women, many of

them university graduates who had been forced to quit their jobs upon marriage. By the end of the 1950s, the status of the amateur sector had risen to such a point that John B. Keane's *Sive* – which began life as an amateur production by Kerry's Listowel Players – was performed on the stage of the Abbey, an admission by the national theatre of the quality and significance of Keane's play (which Blythe had earlier rejected). Finian O'Gorman writes in detail about this production in Chapter 7.

The amateur sector also allowed people throughout Ireland to realize that they could act, write, or direct, and thus inspired the development of professional careers. That relationship can be seen in one of the most famous anecdotes about modern Irish theatre, which concerns the composition by Tom Murphy and Noel O'Donoghue of *On the Outside* in the late 1950s. The two men were socializing in Tuam, the Galway town that Murphy was born in, and the setting for most of his dramas. At a loss for something to do, one of them proposed that they should write a play. Murphy wondered what its subject should be; O'Donoghue replied that he didn't know. 'One thing is fucking sure,' he said. 'It won't be set in a kitchen' (qtd by Kilroy, 1992: 139).

That story is often told to exemplify Murphy's rejection of the Abbey's style of kitchen comedies; it's a way of showing how he would later help to reinvent Irish drama after Blythe's departure in 1967. But what is less frequently noted is that Murphy and O'Donoghue considered it possible to reject the Abbey's ethos because they felt emboldened to write and stage a play themselves. They submitted *On the Outside* 'to the manuscript competitions at various amateur drama festivals, winning for its authors the fifteen guinea prize at the All-Ireland Festival in Athlone,' writes Fintan O'Toole (1994: 47). Murphy's career as a professional dramatist began soon afterwards.

An intensification of activity at local level was matched by a growing awareness of the importance of the international. Bord Fáilte, the Irish tourism development agency, was established in 1955, aiming to target the US market. That coincided with an incipient shifting of attitudes towards Ireland's literary heritage, as a result of which state agencies proved more willing to support artistic initiatives. The first major event to benefit from that shift had been the Wexford Festival Opera, established in 1951 with the aim of staging rarely produced works; it quickly became popular with opera-lovers internationally, and remains an important event. Two years later, an annual festival called An Tóstal was initiated, its objective being to attract tourists to Ireland during the late spring. An Tóstal hosted a variety of events: its first year featured an enormous pageant about Saint Patrick, which was

directed by Hilton Edwards and written by Micheál Mac Liammóir (see Dean, 2014). An Tóstal continued annually until 1958, when it was quietly abandoned in most areas (though it has continued in Drumshanbo, Co. Leitrim into the present). Yet it had a lasting influence, inspiring events as diverse as the Rose of Tralee Festival in Kerry and the Cork Film Festival.

Most significantly for the present discussion, it also gave rise to the Dublin Theatre Festival (DTF), an event created in 1957 by Brendan Smith, a producer who ran an acting academy and managed the Olympia Theatre in Dublin. The Irish Arts Council declined to fund the DTF at first; it was instead supported by Bord Fáilte. But that did not mean that its aim was to attract international audiences to watch Irish plays: Smith was also determined to host performances by high-profile international companies. Jean Vilar's Théâtre National Populaire was invited in the first year, presenting Molière's *La Malade Imaginaire* and Balzac's *Le Faiseur*. That experience was an unhappy one for the Théâtre National Populaire: Christopher Fitz-Simon recalls Vilar complaining that 'never, on their worst provincial tours, had [he] come across such a scruffy and ill-equipped *salle-de-théâtre*' as the Olympia (2008: 210). Nevertheless, the productions had a strong impact on those who saw them – not just because they displayed a level of professional and technical accomplishment that was beyond the means of most Dublin stages, but also because Smith's decision to invite the founder of the Avignon Festival was seen as an admirable expression of ambition.

By comparison, the offerings from the established Irish theatres seemed rather dull. The Gate presented the play that had made its name almost thirty years earlier, Denis Johnston's *The Old Lady Says No!* (1929). At the Abbey Ria Mooney presented *The Playboy of the Western World* (1907) and *Juno and the Paycock* (1924), while Tomás Mac Anna directed Douglas Hyde's *An Pósdh* (1902). Yet there was evidence of bravery from smaller Irish companies. Jim Fitzgerald staged seven of Yeats' plays, persuading audiences that those verse dramas could have a life beyond the Abbey. Also significant was the presentation of an adaptation of Brian Merriman's eighteenth-century poem *Cúirt an Mheán Oíche* in a late-night revue at the Pocket Theatre by the Irish-language company An Compántas. Frank O'Connor's English translation of the poem as *The Midnight Court* had been banned by the Irish censor only twelve years earlier (one of the absurdities of Irish censorship was that the Irish original remained available). Yet, according to Brian Ó Conchubhair, the company included English as well as Irish excerpts in their performance (Merriman, 2011: 111). An Compántas was apparently testing the strength of Irish censorship laws but, perhaps because they