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# Departures: The Abbey Theatre on International Stages 1975-2005

A thesis submitted to the University of Dublin,  
Trinity College, in fulfilment of the requirement for the degree of Doctor of  
Philosophy

2012

Lisa Coen

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## Summary

This thesis and the included production history of Abbey Theatre tours form part of a broader project under the aegis of the Irish Theatrical Diaspora, *The Internationalisation of Irish Drama, 1975-2005*. This project includes Shelley Troupe's research and production history of Druid Theatre Company, Galway from 1975-2005 and her Ph.D. thesis *Theatre and Space: Druid's Productions of Tom Murphy's Plays, 1984-1987*.

This thesis undertakes a detailed study of the international tours of Ireland's national theatre from 1975 to 2005 in order to explore the dialectical tension between the Abbey's tours and the circumstances in which they are performed, to show how they are constituted within local, international and global performance networks. This study argues that, during the thirty-year period under consideration, there have been crucial 'departures' in the internationalisation of Irish drama by the Abbey theatre.

The Abbey Theatre has always been cast in an international context, and the manner in which the nation is performed by the Abbey abroad, and in which such performances are received by different audiences, has profoundly contributed to the evolving symbol of the national theatre, and to Irish drama in general.

The main methodological approach used is archival investigation of theatre productions in combination with textual analysis of the texts of selected plays to create a detailed examination of all the elements that built up to the staging of an Abbey Theatre tour. The dissertation includes analysis of scholarly writing on the Abbey Theatre, but the major research focus is on primary archival material. This includes: local and international newspaper coverage (tour announcements, theatrical reviews, pre-production interviews, advertising and special features), radio coverage, theatre programmes, posters, flyers, technical production notes and production or publicity images from the Abbey Theatre and from many of the hosting venues, policy documents by the Artistic Directors, Arts Council reports and publications. This is supplemented with a number of interviews conducted with theatre practitioners involved in the tours discussed. For each production a historical conspectus is necessary to show the importance of context to an Abbey Theatre production on international stages.

The introduction sets out the empirical approach to analysing the Abbey's international tours and goes on to demonstrate how the Abbey's early tours established a precedent for later tours. Chapter 1 begins with an analysis of the Abbey Theatre 1976 *The Plough and the Stars*, a play that has dominated the touring repertoire. The chapter shows that the financial circumstances at the beginning of the period forced the repertory of a commercial theatre on its programming at home, while the extant international reputation of the Abbey created limited range for touring. The work of practitioners involved in these productions, the political contexts for their staging and the rise in international arts festivals all offered opportunities to subvert expectation.

Chapter 2 describes a period of prolific touring during profound social, cultural and economic change for Ireland. Selected plays are chosen to demonstrate how



international touring of plays such as *Dancing at Lughnasa* became an even greater impulse for change for the Abbey Theatre, in terms of both critical and commercial success. In Chapter 3 it is argued that, from the mid-1990s to the millennium, a more politically-assertive Abbey theatre brought to international audiences more new writing while also encouraging a revival of the repertoire to recast the national theatre. The years preceding the centenary, as detailed in Chapter 4 address the problem of performing the Celtic Tiger on international stages. Assimilating recent national and international developments in Irish theatre was a significant basis for the perceived failure of the *abbeyonehundred* centenary programme. However Chapter 5 argues how the programme, at the mercy of substantial extra-literary events, was successful in its quietly celebrated production of *The Plough and the Stars*.

An analysis of a company representing Ireland and bringing that representation on tour must include a consideration of three things: theatre, audience and text. That is, firstly, what the theatre claims to represent; how its reputation may or may not align with that intention, and whether the company chose to reinforce or challenge expectations. Secondly it must allow for the degree to which the audience and critical response to the company can, directly or indirectly, control its choice of repertoire, and finally how the text chosen by the company in touring reflect its intentions. The audience's reading of that text is contingent on context, but established canonical texts are also modulated by time and political circumstances. Overall the thesis argues for a shift in critical focus away from considering the Abbey Theatre in a purely Irish context, and argues the importance of its participation in international theatrical discourse. However, the conclusion reached is that, perhaps paradoxically, productions conceived for an Irish audience have the most to offer international audiences.

A detailed production history of the Abbey Theatre's international tours from 1975-2005 is included as an appendix to the thesis.

## Acknowledgements

This study was funded by the Irish Research Council for the Humanities and Social Sciences as part of a larger research project by the Irish Theatrical Diaspora Project. Developed by Professor Grene at Trinity College and Dr. Patrick Lonergan at NUI, Galway, *The Internationalisation of Irish Theatre, 1975-2005* includes the companion study *Theatre and Space: Druid's Productions of Tom Murphy's Plays, 1984-1987* by my colleague and friend Shelley Troupe. I was very fortunate to benefit from the expertise and advice of fellow ITD team members. The study includes a comprehensive database of our findings, which was developed and uploaded by our Postdoctoral Researcher, Dr. Natalie Harrower. The database is available at: <http://www.irishtheatricaldiaspora.net/databases/index.html#totaltop>. Completion of the study was made possible by a higher education grant from Dublin City Council in the final year.

I am grateful to the archivist Mairéad Delaney and the staff of the Abbey Theatre for granting me access to the Abbey Theatre archives. I was also ably assisted by Sharon Lehner and her colleagues at the Brooklyn Academy of Music archives, the staff of the Skirball Center for the Performing Arts, New York University, the staff of the Lincoln Center for the Performing Arts archive, Sylvia Wang at the Shubert Theater archive on Broadway, Bruce Elsperger at the San José Repertory Theatre in California, The Royal Court archive, London, Justin Furlong and Honora Faul at the National Library, Ireland, Mary Clarke and Ellen Murphy in the Dublin Theatre archive at Pearse St, Dublin. Des Courtney at the Irish Equity Group and Aine de Paor, author of *O'Punksky Theatre Company, 1989 - 2000* provided valuable research assistance. Thanks also to the staff of Trinity College, Dublin and my fellow grad students.

Interviews with people who participated in the tours were essential to this study, and I thank the following, most of whom are currently busy contributing to Irish theatre, for their time: Fiach Mac Conghail, Patrick Mason, Maelíosa Stafford, Derry Power, Joe Dowling, Eamon Morrissey, Thomas Kilroy, Sharon Lehner and my dear friend Dermot Moore.

I would especially like to thank my supervisor Professor Nicholas Grene for his advice, patience and characteristic meticulousness throughout this project. Nicky's expertise and insight were vital to my completion of this thesis. In addition, his good-humoured and steadfast attention to etymological detail has certainly influenced my writing and critical thinking. With that in mind I sincerely thank him for his encouragement, in the 15<sup>th</sup>-century sense of the word: 'to inspire with courage'.

Many thanks are due to my family, and my friends, especially Shelley Troupe, Aoife Spillane-Hinks, Michael McInerney, Melanie Hayes, Dr. Marie Kelly, Dr. Carol Ní Ghiollarnáth, for her inspiring friendship, and the Old Hams PhD support group. Finally, this study would not have been completed without the unwavering support and understanding of Edward Mulchrone, who had to hear all about it. Thank you.

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## **Introduction:**

### **Performing The Nation**

'Tradition is a constructed rather than a purely objective property, and the longevity of a practice alone does not establish its traditional quality.' Rogers Brubaker.<sup>1</sup>

'Man is an animal suspended in webs of significance he himself has spun.' Max Weber.<sup>2</sup>

This thesis will explore the dialectical tension between the Abbey Theatre's international tours and transfers from 1975-2005 and the circumstances in which they are performed, to show how they are constituted within local, international and global performance networks. It argues that in 30 years of international touring the Abbey Theatre, in its representation of the nation on stage, underwent a series of departures from the given reputation of the Abbey and its own aesthetic established by preceding tours.

### **The Irish Theatrical Diaspora**

This study was funded by the IRCHSS completed as part of a larger project under the Irish Theatrical Diaspora International Research Network.<sup>3</sup> Established in 2002, the ITD is a collaborative venture involving many scholars in Ireland and abroad, to develop and co-ordinate research on the production and reception of Irish drama in its local, national, and international contexts. It is responsible for a

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<sup>1</sup> Rogers Brubaker, 'Civic and Ethnic Nations in France and Germany,' *Ethnicity*, ed. by John Hutchinson and Anthony Smith (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), p. 169.

<sup>2</sup> Cited in Clifford Geertz, 'Thick Description: Toward an Interpretive Theory of Culture' in *The Interpretations of Cultures*, (New York: Perseus, 1973), p. 5.

<sup>3</sup> See <http://www.irishtheatricaldiaspora.org/>

number of conferences, online projects and published works on Irish theatre ranging from 1700 to the present that encourage reassessments of Irish theatre as a global phenomenon.

This project, *The Internationalisation of Irish Drama 1975-2005*, a collaboration between Trinity College, Dublin and National University of Ireland, Galway, with research being conducted in both institutions and online, gave rise to the establishment of an inter-institutional research team. Three different strands of research (Druid Theatre company, the Dublin Theatre Festival and the Abbey Theatre) sought to locate the development of Irish theatrical culture during this period in an international context, emphasising the evolving symbol of the Irish nation during this period of profound change. Shelley Troupe's thesis *Theatre and Space: Druid's Productions of Tom Murphy's Plays, 1984-1987* is a companion to this study. In addition, a comprehensive database of our findings was developed and uploaded by our colleague, Postdoctoral Researcher, Dr. Natalie Harrower.<sup>4</sup>

Irish theatre history has tended to neglect theatre productions in favour of studies of dramatic texts, and a shifting emphasis in theatre studies on the broader contexts of productions is a major focus of this study, as an increasingly globalised Ireland comes to grips with its changing identity. As Patrick Lonergan argues in *Theatre and Globalization: Irish Drama in the Celtic Tiger Era* globalisation is a force for change in theatre, as national borders become more fluid. Lonergan examines how the effects of globalisation (which he defines as: 'a cultural phenomenon, an economic process [and] a mode of rhetoric') have been manifested in the recent development of Irish theatre.<sup>5</sup> He identifies worldwide changes in theatre brought about as a result of globalisation: social changes, formal developments in theatre and the alteration of the concepts of 'nation' and 'region'. In his focus on production history and therefore the many interlinking

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<sup>4</sup> <http://www.irishtheatricaldiaspora.net/databases/index.html#totaltop>.

<sup>5</sup> Patrick Lonergan, *Theatre and Globalization: Irish drama in the Celtic Tiger era*, (Basingstoke: Palgrave, Macmillan, 2009), p. 4.

processes now brought to bear on theatre, Lonergan shows how Irish theatre 'has historically tended to function internationally as well as nationally.'<sup>6</sup>

This thesis, then, offers a detailed survey of the Abbey Theatre's international tours during the period 1975-2005, without rejecting outright the importance of the dramatic text, particularly the significance of an audience's familiarity with a text in a given production event. What this thesis argues for is that analysis of the text and production history may be co-ordinated into a coherent understanding of recent Irish theatre.

As the following will show, as distinct from its own tradition within Ireland, the Abbey Theatre has an equally important international reputation. In negotiating some initial pitfalls, the theatre inadvertently laid the groundwork for an often inflexible expectation which it has, ever since, sought both to engage and subvert.

### **'Thick Description'**

In this thesis I take an empirical approach to undertake an analysis of the complexity of factors involved in theatre-making. The Abbey's tours and therefore engagement with international audiences have to be seen in the larger contexts of the political and social contexts in which they take place, in Ireland and in the host country. In addition to continuing the stated intent of the Abbey Theatre's founders to show the world the best of Irish theatre, the tours are events that document a moment in time for the national theatre and, in the varying reception and responses, the centrepiece of my analysis, for the nation itself.<sup>7</sup>

The plays toured by the Abbey represent often unexpected convergences of timing, funding, writing and politics, but as this thesis will show, every play staged internationally offered a story rooted in a specific historical, cultural,

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<sup>6</sup> Lonergan, p. 23.

<sup>7</sup> When discussing the manner in which the Abbey Theatre engages with the evolving symbol of Irishness and best interprets it, on its own terms, it is important to reiterate that the Abbey is not a homogenous identity, but rather a series of events formed by the Artistic Director's ambitions for the theatre, the writing they accept and stage, the audiences and critics who attend and shape reception and the unanticipated extra-literary events that intervene.



political and social context which needs to be acknowledged in order to allow a better understanding of this strand of the national theatre, and, as such, the nation. Therefore I investigate the events leading up to a tour, beginning with the historical context, and the impact of expectation and reception on the subsequent tours by focussing on archival material: press coverage such as newspaper reviews, previews, radio reviews, interviews with people directly involved in the Abbey tours, the play texts and the theatre's own accompanying literature in the form of programmes, press releases and of course the play text, where applicable. This allows me to discuss the surprisingly unforeseeable nature of the international tour, the importance of reputation and expectations, and how the Abbey has been an agent of change in its international reputation.

This mode of study is the most pragmatic methodological approach to the Abbey Theatre's international touring, as I wish to consider not just play texts, but the choice of plays toured and their performance as text, as well as the degree to which the text is known by an audience and therefore known to be changed in a given context to achieve a 'thick description.' As anthropologist Clifford Geertz argues:

The concept of culture I espouse [...] is essentially a semiotic one. Believing, with Max Weber, that man is an animal suspended in webs of significance he himself has spun, I take culture to be those webs, and the analysis of it to be therefore not an experimental science in search of law but an interpretive one in search of meaning.<sup>8</sup>

Dilthey and Collingwood argue that to understand historical events one must understand them as human productions. It is helpful to be aware of intentions behind literary undertakings, in order to thereby interpret them.<sup>9</sup> As Gallagher and Greenblatt argue, 'the notion of culture as a text [...] vastly expands the range

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<sup>8</sup> Geertz, p. 5.

<sup>9</sup> Wilhelm Dilthey, *Pattern & Meaning In History: Thoughts On History & Society*, ed. H. P. Rickman (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1976), RG Collingwood, *The Idea of History* (1946), revised ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993).

of objects available to be read and interpreted,<sup>10</sup> but a cautionary note may be borrowed from Geertz:

What we call our data are really our own constructions of other people's constructions of what they and their compatriots are up to.<sup>11</sup>

This is certainly the case, and of course it is conditioned by the fact that, 'most of what we need to comprehend a particular event, ritual, custom, idea, or whatever, is insinuated as background information before the thing itself is directly examined.'<sup>12</sup> As the following reviews and interviews show, there can be no 'objective' account of any given night of any given tour or transfer. What this thesis aims to demonstrate is that this very ephemeral nature of theatre is what is being described here, to reveal the complex intertextual concerns at play in an international tour or transfer, to make sense of the web. Each chapter will list the tours and transfers undertaken during that period, but specific focus will be given to individual productions that best illustrate the Abbey on tour in the traditional sense (invitation accompanied by funding), the Abbey participating in international festivals and the Abbey Theatre in a commercial run on the West End or Broadway.

It is intended that this thick description approach will go toward representing a sense of the complex factors in a theatre event coming together to create an experience that is at once ephemeral and of indelible historical consequence. In order to do so, this thesis has assimilated detailed archival research and focuses on epitexts in order to build as detailed a survey as possible.

### **Texts and Epitexts**

In *Paratexts: Thresholds of Interpretation* Gerard Genette delimits 'epitext', in spatial terms, as 'any paratextual element not materially appended to the text within the same volume but circulating, as it were, freely, in a virtually limitless physical and social space. The location of the epitext is therefore anywhere

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<sup>10</sup> Catherine Gallagher and Stephen Greenblatt, *Practising New Historicism*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), p. 9.

<sup>11</sup> Geertz, p. 9.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid*, p. 9.

outside the book'.<sup>13</sup> In the terms of this study, Genette's 'anywhere outside the book' is replaced by 'anywhere outside the play text'. These ephemera include: programmes and press releases distributed by the Abbey Theatre and hosting venue or festival, newspaper and magazine pre-show previews, reviews and interviews, radio coverage concerning the production, lectures, performances preserved on recordings, and interviews. This phenomenon of 'epitext' is a source of detailed study by Genette, and is a helpful approach for scholars of the history of theatre production. After all, the printed text of *The Playboy of the Western World* remains, for the most part, the basis for theatrical productions over the last 104 years, but the changing context into which the play is staged, performed and viewed is acknowledged and explained by the accompanying 'epitexts': if a theatre programme includes a glossary for the word 'shift', it is clear to the modern observer that the word will no longer cause a riot.

Epitexts display the degree to which an audience are expected to have knowledge of a play (ironically, it is in theatre programmes they are most frequently informed that a play is a 'classic'), or indeed indicate the change in that knowledge, through the inclusion of glossaries. Even the font size of the printing of a theatre's name across a programme goes some way toward building a picture of opening night expectations.

As Genette observes, the temporal occasions of the epitext are varied: they may be anticipatory or delayed. In the case of a review following an opening night, or indeed a review of a play late in a run (as late as a year after, in the case of *Dancing at Lughnasa*, for instance), the epitext then offers a picture of the evolving critical, cultural and popular status of a play on tour.

The most commonly occurring epitext in this study is, by sheer proliferation, the newspaper review, which, however limited, is the most reliable because often the only source of the impressions of opening night and audience response.

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<sup>13</sup> Gerard Genette, *Paratexts: Thresholds of Interpretation*, trans. by Jane E. Lewin (Cambridge University Press, 1997), p. 344.



## The Audience

As British theatre critic Michael Billington wrote in 2010: 'The critic is the audience's delegate rather than representative: there to express opinions, not sum up the majority view.'<sup>14</sup> This is an important point, and as the following shows, the critic is not always a proxy for the audience, and it is not always accurate to assume a bad review reflects a bad run for a production. On the other hand, the newspaper review is a useful source of information: to begin with, it is the immediate response of at least *one* audience member, and, very often, critics capture the essence of a crowd on a given night: with descriptions of audience members laughing at a play, falling asleep, or storming out with anger. It is certainly the case that international reviews of Abbey Theatre plays on tour have a profound influence on the audience back in Dublin. Additionally, a journalist's decision to recommend a play or not reflects the mediating role they take on; their digest of the play into 300-700 words can offer a great deal of insight into the status of the company and whether or not they live up to presumed standards, and whether they need to be interpreted (for example, it is later shown how some US reviews caution audiences that accents are difficult to understand, or advise them that 'pregnant pauses' are characteristic of European theatre). It is an essential tool in building up the image of the elusive figure of the Abbey audience.

Wherever possible, I have included audience surveys from theatres visited. The Lincoln Center in New York published a detailed study three years before the Abbey Theatre brought Brian Friel's *Freedom of the City*, and so we can be confident that the audience coming to see the Abbey that summer in 1999 were predominately white, upper-to-middle class, well-educated Manhattanites, aged upwards of 45. For the Peacock's visit to the Baltimore's Festival in 1981 on the other hand, Eamon Morrissey recalled that his one-man show was assigned venues booked by the festival well before the Abbey was, and so the most accurately profiled audience members he could identify were the members of

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<sup>14</sup>Michael Billington, 'The Best Seats in the House', *The Guardian*, 27 October 2010.

the 'Senior Citizens Save the Whales Foundation' who attended a matinee of *Joycemen*.

At Brooklyn Academy of Music, the archivist Sharon Lehner could confirm that *The Plough and the Stars* in 1976 was direct marketed to the Irish-American community through various organisations: this was also the case at the Skirball Center, where the Abbey brought its 2004 *The Playboy of the Western World*. BAM has found it valuable to market to a specific audience, Irish, Russian etc, for a given play. On the other hand, the Abbey's 2001 production of *Medea*, because of problems detailed in Chapter 4, was more of a Deborah Warner- Fiona Shaw production than one under the Abbey brand when it got to BAM, and so the presence of a well-known star in the title role, which resulted in people queuing around the block to see *Medea*, makes its audiences harder to pin down. The only certainty is that they were 'less Irish' than the audience for *The Plough and the Stars* in 1976.

Another dimension to this record is the addition of interviews and consultations with people who were there. Refracted through the memory of an actor or director, the information is invariably skewed through the positive or negative experience of participating in the show, but lends vital insight into the multifarious nature of an Abbey tour.

### **Success or failure? Judging the Abbey Theatre**

This thesis does not seek to judge the individual toured productions, *per se*; rather it is a focussed study of the evolving symbol of the Abbey Theatre in international contexts, including an analysis of the tours, with a major focus on expectation, reception and reaction. It is in this context that a note on 'success' and 'failure' is pertinent here.

It is difficult to define 'failure' when it comes to the Irish theatre and to the Abbey Theatre's productions. Commercial success does not always accompany positive critical responses. Controversial does not equal thought-provoking. Negative or lukewarm reviews do not always impede an interested audience.

Poor box office and walkouts do not constitute an aesthetically bad production. The broad parameters of success as far as this thesis is concerned includes criteria such as critically-admired, reasonably well-attended, and, if not lucrative at the box office (not officially a goal of the Abbey Theatre anyway), then at least not ruinous, commercially or in terms of reputation. Most importantly, the productions under scrutiny will be assessed as much as possible within the stated and implied objectives of the Abbey Theatre itself to examine a series of ways in which the Abbey, within its own objectives, worked or did not work. In spite of perceived failures, for example, the abbeyonehundred touring programme was part of a bigger, transnational discourse of Irish theatre at that time and ultimately its contribution was important.

### **Tours and Transfers**

It is important to distinguish between a 'tour' and a 'transfer'. This thesis is not concerned with national touring by the Abbey Theatre, which remains an opportunity for significant study for theatre scholars. Here 'tour' refers to a deliberately mounted international visit by the Abbey Theatre to perform a given play. Additionally, a 'transfer' refers to a play that was staged in Ireland by the Abbey Theatre and which was subsequently invited to an international venue or festival, usually as a result of its having been seen by festival organisers or well reviewed in Dublin. A transfer is distinctive in that it represents the extension of the life of a production that was not necessarily arranged with an international audience in mind. If a single conclusion is to be drawn from this study, it is that, on the whole, plays not initially destined for international audiences, that is transfers rather than tours, are the most successful.

### **Performing the nation: The Early tours**



'Performance bears the hallmarks (and scars) of the process that generated it.'  
Henry Bial.<sup>15</sup>

'Too often the view from our modern Irish windows is cluttered up with  
distracting monuments to the dead and glorious past of politics and art.' Thomas  
Kilroy.<sup>16</sup>

In *Imagined Communities*, Benedict Anderson posits that it is in the participation  
in communal imaginings that the nation takes form.<sup>17</sup> An aspect of the ideology  
of the Irish Literary Revival as it manifested itself in the later years of the 19th  
century was an impulse toward a new, distinctly Irish literature as a forge in  
which the national consciousness would be created: to project, as Robert Welch  
argues, a 'positive view of the Irish people and advance national self-esteem'.<sup>18</sup>

In 'The Necessity for De-Anglicising Ireland', delivered before the Irish National  
Literary Society in Dublin, on 25 November 1892, Douglas Hyde criticised the  
'folly of neglecting what is Irish, and hastening to adopt, pell-mell, and  
indiscriminately, everything that is English, simply because it *is* English.'<sup>19</sup>  
Emphasising the need to return to a state of high culture and classical learning  
through the prism of the Irish language, Hyde underlined the need to be  
perceived by the world as a separate nationality, and not an imitation of Britain:  
'We must teach ourselves to be less sensitive, we must teach ourselves not to be  
ashamed of ourselves.'<sup>20</sup>

The nation exists, cultural theorist Ernest Renan argues, because people will it to  
exist. Collective memory situates the identity of the individual in the context of  
the nation and an agreed past, as Ian McBride argues, and the past becomes

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<sup>15</sup> Henry Bial, *The Performance Studies Reader*, (London, New York: Routledge, 2007), 264.

<sup>16</sup> Thomas Kilroy, 'Groundwork for an Irish Theatre', in *Studies* 48, (Summer 1959), 192-8.

<sup>17</sup> Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 1983).

<sup>18</sup> Robert Welch, *The Abbey Theatre 1899-1999: Form and Pressure* (London: Oxford University Press, 1999), 25.

<sup>19</sup> Douglas Hyde, 'The Necessity for De-Anglicising Ireland' (1892), republished in *Douglas Hyde, Language, Love, and Lyrics*, ed. Brendan O Conaire (Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 1986), 153-170.

<sup>20</sup> Hyde, 169.



stabilised through this collective process.<sup>21</sup> The initial intention of the Irish Literary Theatre, founded in 1899 by WB Yeats, Lady Gregory and Edward Martyn, was to establish a new, distinctly Irish theatrical aesthetic, because although traditional poetic conventions and mythologies were available for reinterpretation, no authenticating indigenous theatrical form existed. Performing 'certain Celtic and Irish plays' written with 'high ambition', to bring on stage the 'deeper thoughts and emotions of Ireland', the new Irish national theatre would show Ireland as the 'home of an ancient idealism', simultaneously building a canon while engaging in formal experimentation 'not found in theatres of England,' thus creating a national and traditional theatre, and in doing so reconstructing collective ideas of the nation in order to show that an Irish nation with a great heritage existed, and was a culturally homogenous unit.<sup>22</sup> If the assertion of 'National' theatre was a means to construct a shared past and spiritual principle, then touring as that theatre, as Richard Cave notes, represented a 'going forth', on behalf of the nation.<sup>23</sup> As such the Abbey Theatre has always been a globalised entity, as the very act of nation-defining which drove its inception necessitates an engagement with the world in which the new Ireland was to be positioned.

From the beginning the directors were conscious of the benefits of touring in developing the Abbey's international reputation. Touring began as early as 1903, before the theatre company settled in Abbey Street. The first tour ever given by the Irish National Theatre Society was in London, where the company staged two performances at Queen's Gate Hall.<sup>24</sup> By 1910 British tours were an annual event.<sup>25</sup> The first tour to the United States, which began in 1911, however, was undertaken pragmatically for fund-raising purposes as a means to help with

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<sup>21</sup> Ian McBride, 'Memory and National Identity in Modern Ireland', in *History and Memory in Modern Ireland*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 6.

<sup>22</sup> Lady Gregory, *Our Irish Theatre: A Chapter of Autobiography* (Gerrards Cross: Colin Smythe, 1972), 20.

<sup>23</sup> Richard Cave, 'The Abbey Tours in England', in *Irish Theatre on Tour*, eds. Grene and Morash, (Dublin: Carysfort Press, 2005), 10.

<sup>24</sup> Early tours were of the ensemble performing a repertoire of Abbey plays, and as such the actors' versatility as well as the distinctive 'Abbey style' became an important brand by which they were recognised.

<sup>25</sup> Christopher Fitz-Simon, *The Abbey Theatre: Ireland's National Theatre the First 100 Years*. (London: Thames & Hudson, 2003), 39.

unstable finances. The directors also saw the role that touring could play in developing the Abbey's international reputation. Moreover they soon saw how the success of an international tour could be parlayed into greater cultural capital in Dublin (plays well received abroad tend to enjoy greater success back in Dublin by an audience conscious of international reputations). The Abbey has since then continued to tour internationally throughout its controversial history, continuing to visit the US as recently as 2011 with *Terminus* by Mark O'Rowe. The theatre has also represented the nation on stages in Moscow, Singapore, Melbourne, Prague, Toronto and Hong Kong, among others.

I will briefly trace the problematic history of touring by the Abbey Theatre to show how decisions taken in the initial tours, and the emphasis placed on the ensuing controversy, resonate in the period 1975-2005. Secondly, I will argue that the Abbey developed a dual identity, into the 1930s, touring the US with a type of conservative, middle-class comedy at odds with the first Abbey tour and performances undertaken elsewhere. In doing so, the duality was reinforced by the Abbey's continuously being lauded in the US as representing the authentic Ireland. This misunderstanding would lead to the company's being restricted to bringing only commemorative style tours of heritage plays to satisfy audience expectation and maintain, what was from the 1930s onwards, a crucial financial benefit of touring. The decisions of the Abbey directors in the early stages of the company's foundation, therefore, had far-reaching consequences still being grappled with in the 1970s and 80s in tours and transfers.

In 1904 WB Yeats set out on a lecture tour of the US and Canada, organised by the Irish-American lawyer and arts patron John Quinn. While Yeats had achieved recognition and support in the UK, there were more tangible financial benefits to gain in the US if the company won the recognition of the politically powerful Irish-American community there. The repertoire of lectures included 'The Irish National Theatre' and 'The New Ireland'. Advance notices identified Yeats's credentials as poet and founder of the Abbey Theatre who would present on 'the new Ireland that has come into being... He is more than a first class lecturer. He is a genuine world celebrity, gifted with genius of a high order.' RF Foster points out that Yeats, in dealing with the press, was careful to contrast the new with the



old, 'subtly implying that Irish-America was out of touch with the current dispensation.'<sup>26</sup> Such was the ground-work laid for the Abbey Theatre a few years later.

After Annie Horniman withdrew her subsidy from the Abbey in 1910 the theatre was faced with a financial crisis to which Yeats and Lady Gregory responded with the organisation of another series of lectures as well as appeals to wealthy friends, and the decision to tour the company in the United States. The survival of the Abbey was 'for the first time being assured by a three months guaranteed tour of America'<sup>27</sup> and touring was at this point elevated in priority. This intention is evident in Yeats's decision to ask Nugent Monck to train a second company to substitute for the main company on tour. As such it would be possible to maintain a permanent touring policy upon which the economics of the theatre depended.<sup>28</sup> Furthermore, Yeats envisaged that this company would then tour nationally while the main players were home.<sup>29</sup> In that first tour to the US in 1911 Lady Gregory and WB Yeats displayed a canny understanding of the international reputation of the company to profit from potential income-generating opportunities. The tour was so successful it ran for more than six months instead of the expected three.

### **The First Tour: How The West Was Spun**

The 1911 tour was sponsored by Liebler and Company Theatrical Agency of New York and was expected to last a little over three months. The fifteen members of the company performed sixteen plays by nine authors, and the plays chosen all dealt with themes concerned with the emergence of the modern Irish nation. Liebler's stipulated before the tour that JM Synge's *The Playboy of the Western World* must be one of the plays produced. It had been four years since riots at the

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<sup>26</sup> R.F. Foster, *WB Yeats, A Life. Vol II: The Arch-Poet 1915-1939* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), pp. 453-4.

<sup>27</sup> Hunt, p. 92.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>29</sup> Monck's residency was short-lived, ending when the company returned from the US. He arranged performances of *The Interlude of Youth*, Yeats's *The Land of Heart's Desire* and *The Countess Cathleen*, including plays by Lady Gregory and Douglas Hyde.



Abbey had established *The Playboy* as a provocative play, and it was still the subject of heated debate. The decision of Liebler's to insist on the inclusion of *The Playboy* was to be an important one. It is not clear whether the agency felt that *The Playboy* was of such political and artistic importance that it should be seen by a curious audience who could then participate in the debate, or if it was merely a shrewd decision that would help box office and press notices, but the Abbey authorities were surprised to have been asked. The directors' caution is notable in their decision to tone it down, as Maire Nic Shiubhlaigh pointed out: 'most of the passages in Synge's play which, in Dublin had caused offence, had been eliminated.'<sup>30</sup> This included the infamous reference to a drift of chosen females 'in their shifts itself'. Although Paige Reynolds sees the visit as having been 'conceived in part as a promotional stunt capitalising on the 1907 furore surrounding the Dublin premiere of Synge's *The Playboy of the Western World*', the Abbey at this point did not necessarily make a choice to go forth and confront their (largely ex-pat Irish) US audience with a play notorious for its perceived insult to the rural Irish.<sup>31</sup> Trouble ensued nonetheless, and the resulting disagreements were ironically to help to establish the international reputation of Ireland's national theatre.

On 14 October 1911, two days before *The Playboy*'s opening at the Boston Plymouth Theatre, the *Gaelic American* ran a piece by the 'United Irish Societies of New York', denouncing the play. Some mild booing ensued among the Boston audience, and further newspaper reviews and reports grew increasingly incensed. In Washington the play was well received, but by the time it reached the Maxine Elliott Theatre in New York on 27 November a riot broke out and objects were thrown onstage at the actors.<sup>32</sup> When trouble was rumoured ahead of the New York visit, the Abbey as a group had made a decision to stand over their billed productions. This hostility was not damaging to the company and, despite playing with the houselights up the following night, for the rest of the week they played to capacity audiences. On the second night of the *Playboy* in

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<sup>30</sup> Maire Nic Shiubhlaigh, *The Splendid Years*, ed. Edward Kenny, (Dublin: James Duffy, 1955), p. 117.

<sup>31</sup> Paige Reynolds, 'The Making of a Celebrity: Lady Gregory and the Abbey's First American Tour', *Irish University Review*, Vol 34:1 (Spring-Summer, 2004), 81-93.

<sup>32</sup> Gregory, p. 112.

New York, Lady Gregory invited former president Theodore Roosevelt to the theatre, resulting in a packed auditorium, and an extremely amenable audience who followed his cue and laughed 'at every line'. This was supplemented by a positive article Roosevelt published in *The Outlook*, after having gone backstage and congratulated the players for their 'courage'.<sup>33</sup>

The company were offered a further three weeks in New York by the Liebler's Agency, and the concluding week of the tour was considered by Lady Gregory to have been 'a real triumph'. From there the company performed in Philadelphia's Adelphi Theatre on January 16, 1912 where another riot broke out. In her journal for 17 January in Philadelphia Lady Gregory wrote that the company were asked to take *Playboy* off the bill at the Adelphi, and that she refused to do so.<sup>34</sup> This time the cast were arrested and charged with 'presenting plays likely to corrupt the morals of the good citizens of Philadelphia'.<sup>35</sup> The trial was very helpful in publicising the play, and, intervening on behalf of the company, John Quinn's entertaining cross-examination undermined the opposition, elevating the Abbey players as noble but put-upon artists in the public eye. In the end, the judgement was in favour of the players.

Again in Chicago there were disruptions from the audience, but at this point the tour was considered to have been 'a great victory'.<sup>36</sup> A profit had been netted, and Nic Shiubhlaigh reported that at a benefit show held for the company in Boston the company earned over five thousand dollars, before sailing home two days later. Touring, at this point, was found to be unambiguously lucrative, and so an exhaustive tour schedule ensued.

At the end of the year the Abbey returned to the US and this time included a tour in Canada, where hostility was limited to newspaper pages and was not manifested in the auditorium. Returning in May 1913, the company almost immediately commenced another British tour, which included six weeks at the Court Theatre. The result of this rigorous touring, according to Hunt, was 'a

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<sup>33</sup> Nic Shiubhlaigh, p. 131.

<sup>34</sup> Dan H. Laurence and Nicholas Grene (eds.), *Shaw, Lady Gregory and the Abbey: A Correspondence and a Record*, (Gerrards Cross: Colin Smythe, 1993), p. 69.

<sup>35</sup> Hunt, p. 95.

<sup>36</sup> Gregory, p. 120.



handsome profit'. However, it was at the expense of the theatre's perceived integrity, as critics found that 'few plays of importance had been seen on the Abbey stage' that season. It is certain that constant performance which had to be adapted to different crowds and buildings would take its toll on the exhausted company, but in the absence of Horniman's subsidy, the directors' decisions were pragmatic, and the Abbey had come to depend on the funds raised from touring overseas.<sup>37</sup> In 1914 the company toured America under the management of Lennox Robinson. The tour lost money, for which Lady Gregory blamed Robinson. He resigned and was not to return to the Abbey for a further eight years.

This loss and the impending war would be the beginning of a hiatus in the company's touring. By the 1930s the theatre resumed its American tours in the face of economic depression and the reduction in its government subsidy. By the end of their 1930s touring the players were accustomed to carrying a repertoire of twelve or more plays on their American tours, and nightly changes of bill were not infrequent. In October 1931 the Abbey toured seventy-nine venues in the US and Canada. As with the original US tour, the company's need to raise money was evident in the substantial workload undertaken. In 1932 when Yeats undertook a lecture tour of the US to promote the recently formed Irish Academy, his celebrity status ensured that when he walked onstage before the Abbey's touring production of *The Words Upon the Window Pane* (1930) he was greeted with a capacity house. No doubt the alignment of the ageing poet's legendary status with the touring company enhanced the brand considerably. By now audience response was extremely positive, but there was still much objection from the Irish-American nationalist groups amid criticism at home over the perceived diminished quality of the theatre. Eventually the objections from America succeeded in having questions raised in Dáil Éireann, embarrassing the new Irish government into responding. In 1933, after ongoing complaints by influential Irish-American societies, the office of the Minister for Finance, prompted by Eamon de Valera, made a complaint to the Abbey Theatre about the plays brought by the company to the US that were said to have been 'open to serious

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<sup>37</sup> Hunt, p. 101.



objections', to contain 'filthy language, drunkenness, murder and prostitution', and that undermined the Irish character in general. The government subsidy was under threat, and might be reduced from £1,000 to £750, censorship of plays was threatened, as was the appointment to the Board of an unwelcome (i.e. hard-line Catholic) Director.<sup>38</sup> Mindful of the success both artistic and financial of past tours, and the fact that, as far as he was concerned, history had by now vindicated Synge and O'Casey (as they were the subject of study in some US institutions), WB Yeats responded that the theatre would 'retain its freedom' and that it would 'refuse further financial assistance from your government.'<sup>39</sup> De Valera withdrew the threat, but government relations continued to be strained.<sup>40</sup>

There were three more US tours until the Second World War caused a halt after 1938. It is roughly at this point, as Adrian Frazier argues, that the Abbey's success in the US led to the rise of the Hollywood careers of many Abbey actors.<sup>41</sup> As the US tours tapered off, Abbey players such as Barry Fitzgerald, Arthur Shields, Sara Allgood and Maire O'Neill found work in film and so began another strand of the international brand of a new Ireland that had begun with the literary revival. Additionally, the regular casting of Abbey players in major mainstream films by the well-known director John Ford contributed in a profound way to the international reputation of the Abbey Theatre proper in its absence from America. There is no doubt that the stereotypical representations of Ireland in widely-seen films like Ford's *Plough and the Stars* (1936) and *The Quiet Man* (1952) would cast a long shadow.

In the intervening years, visits from the Abbey to Britain and Europe still continued. In April 1968 the Abbey brought *The Shadow of the Glen* and *The Shadow of a Gunman* to the Teatro della Pergola, Florence, for the city's theatre festival.<sup>42</sup> The following September the Abbey participated for the first time in

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<sup>38</sup> Foster, *Yeats, Vol II*, p. 465.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>40</sup> This is treated in more detail in Lauren Arrington's *WB Yeats, the Abbey Theatre, Censorship, and the Irish State Adding the Half-pence to the Pence*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011).

<sup>41</sup> Adrian Frazier, *Hollywood Irish: John Ford, Abbey Actors and the Irish Revival in Hollywood*, (Dublin: Lilliput Press, 2011).

<sup>42</sup> After an audience with Pope Paul, the company presented him with a specially bound copy of *The Playboy*, objections to which were raised in the *Evening Herald* on April 24. The presentation

the Edinburgh Festival with a production of *The Playboy of the Western World* directed by Tomás Mac Anna, while at home the theatre's international image was bolstered with productions of Strindberg, Genet and O'Neill. In 1970 the Abbey returned to the US, when Mac Anna's production of *Borstal Boy* was presented in New York (starring Niall Toibín). It won a Tony award for Best Production of the Year.

In 1973 with Ireland's entry into the European Economic Community, there was a notable move toward representing a modern Abbey Theatre's international identity, justifying the company's national status not as a self-consciously 'de-Anglicised' entity, but now as a member of a new, shared discourse. Sean O'Casey's *The Silver Tassie*, once rejected by the Abbey, was chosen for production and attended by the Archbishop of Dublin in a production by Hugh Hunt.<sup>43</sup> The play was taken to the Finnish National Theatre on May 17-18, 1973, then the Théâtre Royal des Galeries in Brussels on May 25, where it was attended by the Irish Ambassador and representatives of the Common Market countries. Hunt also recalls his 1970 production of *The Hostage* by Brendan Behan which visited Antwerp, Zurich, Frankfurt, Cologne and Vienna, as a tour 'to carry the Irish Theatre into Europe'.<sup>44</sup>

In *Theatre and Nationalism in Twentieth-Century Ireland*, Robert O'Driscoll observes that 'great moments of theatrical achievement have often coincided with moments of national excitement and tension'.<sup>45</sup> What this brief overview of the history of the Abbey Theatre's international touring shows is that, from the beginning, the Abbey Theatre directors were mindful of how international critical kudos could be capitalised upon to maintain the company's reputation as well as crucially benefitting its unstable financial circumstances. As a result, two significant events took place. Firstly, the initial tour was a tremendous success both financially and critically. However, as Paige Reynolds points out, accounts,

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of 'such a controversial play' was considered 'bad taste and [...] an insult to our Catholic nation', the letter reads, showing that as late as 1968, Synge continued to offend conservative Ireland.

<sup>43</sup> Gus Smith, *Sunday Independent*, 01 October 1972.

<sup>44</sup> Hunt, p. 215.

<sup>45</sup> Robert O'Driscoll, *Theatre and Nationalism in Twentieth-century Ireland*, (London: Oxford University Press 1971), p. 12.



including Lady Gregory's *Our Irish Theatre*, give disproportionate attention to the protests, portraying the tour as 'a series of skirmishes with narrow-minded audiences'.<sup>46</sup> In doing so, Lady Gregory was placing the Abbey once more in a public role of provocative political force, as it had been broadly viewed after the initial riots in Dublin. In July of 1910 the *Irish Times* criticised the Abbey Theatre for being too 'abstruse and mystical', and for failing to entertain. This US tour, therefore, was not just a showcase of the theatre's new writing, but an opportunity to rejuvenate the brand. As Lucy McDiarmid argues, controversies, like theatre itself, 'transform the belligerent into the ludic'.<sup>47</sup> The theatrics of controversy, McDiarmid posits, served to create a self-referential system that referred more to the theatricality of politics than the play texts. Balanced between the absurd and the momentous, the Abbey, and in particular Lady Gregory, were able to use the events surrounding the first tour and public-relations strategies, to achieve the upper hand and to attain influential cultural capital for the Abbey, which began to enjoy a more positive reception thereafter. A certain degree of trust was granted to the Abbey by critics and audience members. However by the 1930s the company's repertoire at home was becoming increasingly conservative, as a result of financial pressure, management problems and ongoing political pressure. When the Abbey toured to the US and Canada with this less ambitious portfolio of plays, that same cultural status caused the reinforcing of a reputation at odds with the company's initial aesthetic ambition.

In the 1930s, when the theatre in Dublin was poorly attended, pragmatic decisions led to some 41 plays, only eight of which had been produced on earlier tours (including the now-popular *The Playboy*, *Riders to the Sea* and *Cathleen ni Houlihan*), being staged.<sup>48</sup> Dalsimer sees the decision to tour light-hearted comedies as a response to three important developments: the civil war in Ireland, the global economic upheaval following WWI and the changed theatrical situation in the US, which saw the emergence of home-grown realism (in the

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<sup>46</sup> Reynolds, p. 81.

<sup>47</sup> Lucy MacDiarmuid, 'The Abbey and the Theatrics of Controversy', in *A Century of Irish Drama: Widening the Stage*, ed. By Stephen Watt, Eileen Morgan, Shakir Mustafa, (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 2000), p. 57.

<sup>48</sup> Dalsimer, p. 76.



work of Clifford Odets and Eugene O'Neill, among others), that created something of a flooded market. However the most important reason was the simple fact that these plays were also being staged with some regularity in Dublin, and were representative of the theatre's current repertoire. Among the plays toured were Lennox Robinson's *The White-Headed Boy* (1916), the playwright's first full-length comedy, and *The Far-Off Hills* (1925), and George Shiels's *Professor Tim* (1925). The company were very well received in the tour, which visited smaller towns and avoided New York and Chicago.<sup>49</sup>

As Dalsimer points out, the company was heralded for representing the 'real Irishman' on stage. She argues that legitimate successes developed into 'generous, but often mistaken, praise.'<sup>50</sup> I would argue that this praise was first generated by Lady Gregory's presentation of the Abbey Theatre upon its first tour, and that thereafter a misconstrued Ireland was unchallenged and in fact celebrated by US audiences accustomed to trusting the product brought by the Abbey itself. Dalsimer argues that the 'real' Ireland of the early plays was reconstructed by the later ones, hence establishing a precedent for future tours, and future reconstructions.

### **Our Irish Theatre**

Under the aegis of 'National', from the very beginning the Abbey Theatre has been not just a company representing the nation to other nations, but has also performed the nation for the considerable Irish diaspora in each country visited. Susan Bennett argues that the audience shares a common bond through their collectivisation in the performance arena, a collective experience which influences the audience's response to the event, and Nicholas Grene maintains that Abbey audiences, 'looked to find in their national theatre comfortable images of their own Irishness of a recognisable sort.'<sup>51</sup> This is also true of the Abbey audience abroad: dependent as the emigrant is upon memory to form a

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<sup>49</sup> Ibid, p. 87.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid, p. 77.

<sup>51</sup> Nicholas Grene, *The Politics of Irish Drama: Plays in Context from Bouicault to Friel* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), p. 138.

desirable and coherent identity. In an Abbey Theatre performance, the audience, inasmuch as it could be characterised, was, and has since been comprised of spectators many of whom share proprietary views on the correct, authentic representation of the Irish nation: either as emigrants anxious to witness the reification of nostalgic constructs, or as cultural nationalists anxious to preserve the ideology of a movement. Beyond that is the 'disconnected' audience member, whose views of correct representations of Ireland stem from an expectation of a continued practice by the theatre that was generated and perpetuated by the theatre itself. The theatre has, as such, always suffered from the anxiety of its own influence. However while 'cultural assumptions affect performances', Bennett writes, 'performances rewrite cultural assumptions.'<sup>52</sup> In the case of the Abbey, it was those initial riots, first in 1907 then again on tour in the US in 1911, and the response of the directors to the hostility that defined and shaped the Abbey's overseas audiences' interpretive strategies and communal imaginings for years to come. The founding myth of the theatre became its authenticating past through these events and the way they were managed at the time. As strong an influence as that past is, the subsequent international reputation of the Abbey Theatre, and in particular from 1975 to 2005, reflects a company undertaking a series of 'departures'. In each tour lies the opportunity to succumb to or rewrite cultural assumptions, and efforts to subvert expectations have met with surprising and unpredictable results. Often it is the very extra-literary events into which the performance takes place that dictates the reorientation of the Abbey's reputation on global stages. This dissertation offers a discussion of those events to contextualise representative tours and show how the Abbey represented Ireland on stage in the latter years of the twentieth century. In many ways the Abbey's international tours constituted a 'departure' for the theatre, in cultural, artistic or political terms, and that the interpretation of Ireland on stage by international audiences and critics reorients the theatre's position back in Ireland.

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<sup>52</sup> Susan Bennett, *Theatre Audiences: A Theory of Production and Reception* (London and New York: Routledge, 1997), p. 2.

## CHAPTER ONE

### Spreading the New?: Tours 1975-1984

Tours and transfers during this period:

*The Plough and the Stars* (US, 1976); *In My Father's Time*, (US, 1976); *Talbot's Box* (UK, 1977), *You Never Can Tell* (UK, 1978), *A Life* (UK, 1980); *Joycemen* (US, 1981); *The Shadow of a Gunman* (US, 1981).

By the 1970s touring had ceased to be reliably profitable for the theatre. While cinema diminished the role of theatre as popular entertainment in the twentieth century, the migration of well-known Abbey Theatre actors to Hollywood film also diminished the Abbey's capacity as the major showcase for the most famous – and authentic – Irish acting, while reinforcing unhelpful stereotypes of Ireland. Furthermore the Abbey no longer mounted lengthy tours in which a repertoire of up to 40 plays would be available for production: by the 1970s one representative play was the convention, and practical concerns dictated a conservative selection of well-known plays, most frequently the Dublin trilogy of Seán O'Casey and Synge's *The Playboy of the Western World*.

The other side to this dual international Abbey was the company who toured to the UK. While also tied up with the ideology of cultural nationalism, in the UK tours the Abbey enjoyed a freedom to experiment as a result of collaborations with modern theatre companies, both by the Abbey and other Irish theatre practitioners.

To examine in detail these concerns, specific tours will be considered. By the beginning of the period 1975-2005, the Abbey found itself representing an outdated, generic Ireland in the US, with two tours in particular, the 1976 specially-mounted Golden Jubilee tour of *The Plough and the Stars* (1926) and the 1981 transfer of *The Shadow of a Gunman* (1923), representing this problem.



The Abbey's attempts to update the tours through the use of programmes, press releases and interviews, and a subtle modernisation of the text to invite a reading of contemporary political problems, did not successfully overcome the preordained reception caused by the theatre's reputation. An examination of the events of the plays show the overwhelming domination of the critics and audience's deep-seated interpretive response to an Abbey performance.

At this same time the political and social contexts of the nation had altered significantly: sectarian violence in Northern Ireland dominated the media, and Ireland – having joined the EEC – was a country undergoing a process of economic rejuvenation. The National Theatre, therefore, needed now to establish itself in Europe as representative of the theatrical aesthetic of a nation, not merely cultural nationalism. This was achieved in the choices made by the company in 1978. Choosing the experimental *Talbot's Box* (1977) by Thomas Kilroy, the company, in association with the left-wing avant-garde British Royal Court Theatre and the Dublin Theatre Festival, presented a modern, challenging play that represented a paradigm of contemporary European theatrical innovation in its multifaceted genesis.

In transferring Hugh Leonard's *A Life* (1979), also having its origins in the Dublin Theatre Festival, to another festival, the Abbey were able to perform in a depoliticised context. The associated programmes show that in this production, there was no need to brand the play as 'Irish'. Unlike *Talbot's Box*, in which Thomas Kilroy attempted to 'declutter' the window of Irish theatre through an experimental form that reached back to the stylised theatrical sensibilities of Yeats and an idiomatic language that recalled O'Casey, Leonard instead took as his starting point a very noticeably un-Irish suburban context, largely avoiding Hiberno-English syntax and rejecting his theatrical heritage unambiguously in the accompanying programme. I will discuss the motivations behind the Abbey's decision to mount this transfer as it did.

### **State of Play**

By 1975 touring had become prohibitively expensive, and from 1938 to the 1970s the Abbey did not visit the US. The new building, opened in 1966, required

expensive refurbishment. In 1973 and 1974 no change was made to ticket prices at the Abbey despite inflation averaging at 20%. The theatre was not generating significant income from ticket sales. In addition, there was an overdraft of £117,000 by May 1974, and the company began making cutbacks which were to include the suspension of international tours, among other restrictions. In 1975 the government subsidy was increased, with a large percentage of this money designated for the overdraft. In December the Minister for Finance announced that the government was transferring responsibility for the Abbey Theatre, the Gate Theatre, the Irish Theatre Company, the Irish Ballet Company and the Dublin Theatre Festival to the Arts Council. The transfer took effect from the beginning of 1976.<sup>53</sup> The 1976 report states that, of a total expenditure of £680,308 spent on 'Drama', the Abbey and Peacock Theatre were granted £400,000, while the Gate received £100,000, the Dublin Theatre Festival received £35,000. Druid (established the previous year) received £1,500. The Abbey Theatre's box office attendance was 75% capacity, while the Peacock achieved a 94% capacity, and so financially things had improved.

The Abbey were also offered funding towards mounting a tour in America, and so the company embarked on a six-week tour with *The Plough and the Stars*.<sup>54</sup> This tour, and to a lesser extent the accompanying production of Eamon Kelly's *In My Father's Time* (1976), demonstrate the predicament in which the Abbey Theatre found itself in the 1970s. The tour also reflects the unsuccessful endeavour of the company to reconcile the duality created in the initial tours. The Abbey attempted to do so first of all by presenting O'Casey's famous demythologising play of the Easter Rising as a European, modern text.

The director's notes in the accompanying programme, the interviews given in advance of the tour and the players' interpretation of the text which presented Ireland's contemporary political circumstances through the prism of the 1916 revolution all contributed to the Abbey's attempt to gain control over the audience's interpretation of the tour. These attempts were unsuccessful because

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<sup>53</sup> Arts Council of Ireland, *Annual Report*, 1975.

<sup>54</sup> Brooklyn Academy of Music, 16-28 November; Shubert Theatre, Boston 29 November – 4 December; Zellerbach Theatre, Annenberg Centre, Philadelphia 07-19 December; Hartke Theatre, Catholic University, Washington D.C., 21 December– 2 January 1977.



of the overwhelming association of the Abbey with traditional Irish motifs, and because the reinterpretation of the play text was far too subtle to register with an audience, star-struck by actors such as Cyril Cusack, who struggled to discern meaning from the Irish accents they found too strong. Moreover, Richard Cave makes the point that while, early in the century, the Abbey Theatre toured with several plays, by the 1970s it was no longer operating as a repertory theatre, and 'the focus [...] tended to be on one play as a vehicle through which to demonstrate what was representative of a company's particular initiative, expertise, skill and originality'.<sup>55</sup> A tour would therefore showcase the company's aesthetic or political imperative with one iconic play.

For the staging of *The Plough* directed by Tomás Mac Anna, the 1976 tour included Brooklyn Academy of Music (during which the company stayed at the Irish American Historical Society in Manhattan), the Shubert Theater, Boston, Pennsylvania's Zellerbach Theater and Washington DC's Hartke Theater at the Catholic University. It was the company's first official visit to the US in thirty-eight years (there was a Broadway co-production of *Borstal Boy* in 1970 that was glossed over, perhaps, for the benefit of a more emphatic absence in the narrative), coinciding with the sixtieth anniversary of the Easter Rising in Ireland, the 'Golden Jubilee' of O'Casey's play and the United States Bicentennial, a time when the significance of an Irish heritage was to the fore in many people's minds. Considerable publicity, public lectures and discussions were arranged, while civic functions were planned to coincide with the visit.

In an historical echo, David Liddy, the then general manager of the Abbey Theatre, said in an interview that once more the American promoters wanted the Abbey to bring JM Synge's *The Playboy of the Western World*, but 'this suggestion was found to be impractical',<sup>56</sup> and so *The Plough and the Stars* was accepted instead. The difference between 1976 and the early tours was that Synge and O'Casey had been vindicated by time and their status in the canon of Irish theatre. By now *The Playboy* in its role as much-loved Abbey standard would

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<sup>55</sup> Richard Cave, 'The Abbey Tours in England', in *Irish Theatre on Tour*, ed. By Nicholas Grene and Christopher Morash, (Dublin: Carysfort Press, 2005), p. 22.

<sup>56</sup> Gus Smith, 'Big Irish Support for Abbey', *Sunday Independent*, 07 November 1976.



almost assure respectable box office returns and was a practical suggestion, but one riot-provoking play was apparently deemed as good as another.

Speaking to Des Hickey in the *Sunday Independent* on 24 October 1976, Tomás Mac Anna discussed the Abbey's £400,000 budget, a relatively large sum with which to mount the tour. John Kavanagh, who played the Young Covey, spoke in the American press about the company's 38-year absence from the US, citing financial difficulties. This tour, he pointed out, was the first time an invitation had been accompanied by funding.<sup>57</sup> The funding was largely due to Brooklyn Academy director Harvey Lichtenstein, who made arrangements with the Irish government to bring the company during the US Bicentennial.

Johannes Fabian makes a distinction between 'performative' and 'informative' texts. The first involves performing part of one's culture in order to convey knowledge, the other is controlled knowledge based on gathered information to maintain distance and control.<sup>58</sup> Abbey Theatre tours have largely always been 'informative', usually the result of controlled, pragmatic decision-making by the company. In the case of the 1976 tour, the knowledge was controlled by the organisers, press and the audience. The role into which the Abbey was cast was designated before the company arrived. For instance, it was understood that certain guarantees had been agreed to cover the Abbey's costs for this tour, which did not include a performance in Boston. Upon learning that the Abbey would bypass Boston, journalists made an appeal:

The saints preserve us! The Abbey Theater of Dublin, one of the world's most darlin' stage clans, will make a six-week jaunting cart tour of the United States – and as of now, by Juno, they're not going to pay their respects to Boston.

[...] It is unthinkable that the Dubliners won't visit this most Irish of American cities, but unless some local leprechauns come up with pots of gold, that's the sad tale.

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<sup>57</sup> Leo Seligsohn 'The Irish Are Back: An Irish Legend' in *Part II*, 24 November 1976.

<sup>58</sup> Johannes Fabian, 'Performance Processes' in *Performance Studies* ed. by Henry Bial, p. 263.

'Tis a sad day when the Bostonians can't afford to buy a pint or two for the Abbey.<sup>59</sup>

This language and the imagery of rural clichés, leprechauns and casual alcoholism ironically derive from the very stereotype rejected by the Abbey's founders. Furthermore, it depends upon a knowledge of those stereotypes and, in its commonplace occurrence in the press at the time, reflects a widely-held viewpoint. Crucially it also derives from an inherent affection and belief in the authenticity of this notion of Ireland. For instance, Louise Tate, the executive director of the Massachusetts Council on the Arts and Humanities, flew in at short notice to attend an ad hoc meeting on the subject, arguing that a visit from the Abbey Theatre would be part of Boston's 'cultural heritage.'<sup>60</sup> Eventually the funding was raised and the Abbey included a visit to the Shubert Theater, Boston that November.

The utilisation of epitexts, in this case theatre programmes, press interviews and posters is one way in which a theatre company derives a conceivable advantage in regaining control of the meaning they wish to convey. The Abbey attempted to do so in the 1976 tour in two ways. First, Siobhán McKenna, already famous in the US as a well-established Abbey actor (and for her performance as Pegeen Mike in the film adaptation of *The Playboy of the Western World* in 1962), in an interview with the *Philadelphia Enquirer* tried to provide a serious political context by discussing the UDA and the IRA; the journalist, however, insisted on changing the subject to persuade the actor to talk about her dog.<sup>61</sup> The journalist, intimidated by McKenna and likening her to a character in a Pinter play, treated the discussion with humour, and it never developed beyond superficial conversation.

Secondly, and more substantially, in an attempt at rejuvenating the Abbey Theatre brand, the play's director Tomás Mac Anna tried to align O'Casey with a European reputation, in keeping with the Abbey's more recent touring policies as part of the Europe Economic Community:

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<sup>59</sup> George McKinnon, *Boston Globe*, 30 July 1976.

<sup>60</sup> *The Boston Herald*, 28 November 1976.

<sup>61</sup> 'Siobhan McKenna has her Irish Up', *Philadelphia Sunday Inquirer*, 5 December 1976.

Always a socialist, always in controversy, always quick to respond with an extravagant eloquence to critics, both lay and clerical, perhaps the best image of the man himself is the almost El Greco portrait of him by Augustus John, in which, sitting elongated and distant he looks askance at the world, more than a little disdainful of what he discerns, but wryly amused as well.<sup>62</sup>

Mac Anna can be seen to be trying to present O'Casey as an international artist. His efforts were undermined, however, on the next page where Rego Irish Records and Tapes had taken a full page advertisement for *Stories from Ireland with Eamon Kelly*, in which Kelly is seated, with his hands on a walking stick, wearing a grandfather shirt, hat, and holding a pair of glasses, surrounded by a frame and two shamrock icons (see Fig. 1.1, below). Already there was a tension between the Abbey's positioning of itself as an important international theatre, and the receiving audience's interest in the folklore kitsch they attached to the Abbey.

In addition, the accompanying Peacock show *In My Father's Time* (1975) written and performed by Eamon Kelly in a set resembling a cottage with flagstones and a real open fire in the theatre, was to prove a showcase for emigrant nostalgia and ample opportunity for further comparisons to leprechauns. In any case, the show found 'unanimous critical favour' on tour in the US, playing approximately the same towns as *The Plough* but in smaller venues.<sup>63</sup> *The Boston Phoenix* commended the show for offering the audience 'tales the Seanachie (traditional storyteller) would weave before modern communication and electricity stole his place away,'<sup>64</sup> while Sylviane Gold wrote in the *New York Post* that the show, a 'Leprechaun Tellathon', had no 'literary pretensions, no literary intentions. Its only thought is to amuse, and that it does'.<sup>65</sup> It was less a recommendation to the audience for a theatrical event than a call to participate in a rare commemoration of a diminishing culture. Mel Gussow would go further to say that having the performance in a theatre is to devalue its effect, as opposed to experiencing it

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<sup>62</sup> Tomás Mac Anna, director's note, Abbey Theatre US *Plough and the Stars* programme, 1976.

<sup>63</sup> *Irish Independent*, 09 December 1976.

<sup>64</sup> Babette McKee, *Boston Phoenix*, 12 September 1976.

<sup>65</sup> *New York Post*, 02 December 1976.



'around a fire or in a pub', before going on to describe Kelly as 'an ageing leprechaun.'<sup>66</sup> Described by *Newsday* as 'nostalgic for those who remember hearing of the old days in Ireland and [...] informative [...]for the rest of us,' *In My Father's Time* consistently earned more affectionate reviews than *The Plough and the Stars*:

In contrast to the fierce fighting and carousing of Dubliners depicted by O'Casey, Kelly is telling of a more gentle people in rural Ireland and their less belligerent pleasures.<sup>67</sup>

The other significant gesture by the Abbey was the decision for Siobhán McKenna, in her role as Bessie Burgess, to play the working-class Loyalist mother from Dublin with a Northern Irish accent, which connected the play's 1916 setting to the contemporaneous political violence in Northern Ireland. This was done perhaps in order to effect some commentary on contemporary Irish politics, or perhaps, as Nicholas Grene has observed, simply because the concept of a working-class Loyalist mother in Dublin was inconceivable by 1976, and it was in fact an anachronistic remedy to the problem.<sup>68</sup> In either case, it was a conscious decision and so represented an engagement with politics and served to advance a comment, however conservative. This gesture, however, was too slight, and instead contributed to some confused reviews criticising McKenna's intelligibility, failing to distinguish this accent from any other onstage ('heavy brogues', 'as thick as peat itself').<sup>69</sup> Gordon Wickstrom of Franklin and Marshall College was merely baffled by the accent and failed to read it as a cultural signifier.<sup>70</sup> One exception was William J Clew in *The Hartford Courant* who criticised the difficulty with which many audience members followed the accents onstage, and identified McKenna's use of a northern accent 'instead of that of a woman from Moore Street in Dublin, [which] the part called for.' His observation was that 'if accuracy of character suffered for those in the know, Miss McKenna's

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<sup>66</sup> Mel Gussow, 'Eamon Kelly Tells Father's Tales at Brooklyn Academy' *New York Times*, 02 December 1976.

<sup>67</sup> Amei Wallach, 'A Night Back Home', *Newsday*, 02 December 1976.

<sup>68</sup> Nicholas Grene, in personal correspondence, April 2009.

<sup>69</sup> *Long Island Press*, 18 November 1976.

<sup>70</sup> Gordon Wickstrom, 'The Plough and the Stars', *Educational Theatre Journal*, December 1976.

speech came through loud and clear and unwasted,' for those struggling to follow a Dublin accent.<sup>71</sup>

The difficulty with the accents also brought anxiety that the 'Irish poetry' would be lost to the audience. This was attributed to an acoustic problem in the Brooklyn Academy, but as the company travelled, so did the problem. It is notable, however, that in many reviews, the suggestion is that, in failing to understand the actors' accents, the fault lay with the audience. Indeed there is a suggestion that this is a preferable scenario, because the authentic product, it was asserted, should necessarily be difficult to understand, just as an audience should not feel entitled to criticise difficult syntax in Shakespeare. The audience, therefore, failed to notice the production's contemporary nuances, preoccupied as they were with a desire for historical re-enactment:

The Abbey stirred no riots, not even a protest. There were a few titters on opening night when the orator took over with his claim that 'bloodshed is a cleansing and sanctifying thing'. But they faded away. An exile, 50 years out of Dublin, objected mildly to Micheál Ó hAodha about the costuming: he thought Fluther and his mates should be wearing vests and bowler hats.<sup>72</sup>

Other critics were more affirmative: writing in the *Baltimore Sun*, RH Gardner complimented the production, the success of which seems to have been something of a genetic inevitability:

The play has always been a staple at the Abbey, which, through presentation of the works of O'Casey, Synge, Yeats and other native playwrights, has earned it a reputation comparable to Russia's Moscow Arts Theater. Its treatment of Irish plays, with their distinctive Irish speech, are [*sic*] considered second to none, and of all the plays in its

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<sup>71</sup> William J Clew, 'Plough, Stars, Dublin Hit', *Hartford Courant*, October 1976.

<sup>72</sup> Sean Cronin, 'The Abbey in Brooklyn', *Irish Times*, 14 December 1976.

repertory, perhaps none is more representative of both the Irish character and the Irish speech than *The Plough and the Stars*.<sup>73</sup>

Clive Barnes of the *New York Times* wrote a review that captured the disparity between production intentions and audience expectations: that is, while he was nominally positive in his writing, he complimented the company for achievements that had little to do with the performance:

The great thing about the Irish theatre is all those Irish actors – and you can walk into any Dublin bar and you will find the lovely place full of them. Ireland is a company of character actors disguised as a nation. I love Irish actors.<sup>74</sup>

The assertion here that Ireland as a country is in fact a collection of actors suggests not only a reinforcement of the stage Irish stereotype, but also that if all Irish are actors, then all touring actors are Ireland. Any tour, therefore is the definitive representation of the nation on a stage, such as it is. Despite what seems from more academic reviews to have been an accomplished production,<sup>75</sup> generally the reception was a comment on an idea of Ireland already a century out of date, if it ever existed at all.

The next Abbey Theatre tour to the US was in 1981, when the company brought another Seán O'Casey play. This time *The Shadow of a Gunman* (1923) was revived from the previous year's O'Casey centenary celebrations for participation in the Baltimore International Theatre Festival. The significance of this tour is that it represented an international theatrical context for the Abbey, as distinct from the previous tour in which the company were guests of the Irish-American Historical Society. The outcome of the 1981 tour, however, was largely the same as the 1976 tour, and I will argue that this was the result of contemporary social and political circumstances and epitextual influence.

### **A Spurious Harmony: Bringing the Abbey Back to Earth**

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<sup>73</sup> R H Gardner, 'Abbey's Plough and the Stars is Excellent', *The Baltimore Sun*, 24 December 1976.

<sup>74</sup> Clive Barnes, *New York Times*, 08 December 1976.

<sup>75</sup> Elliot Norton, drama critic of the *Boston Herald American*, and Professor of Dramatic Literature at Boston University wrote of 'a performance that is both tough and tender for what it is: a classic of English language drama'. (Norton, *Boston Herald American*, 30 November 1976).



In 'Playwriting and Globalization: Towards a Site-Unspecific Theatre', Dan Rebellato relates the form of theatre based on the production of a play with 'the deterritorialising tendency of global capitalism', that is, large-scale musicals that do not depend upon regional specificity.<sup>76</sup> On the other hand, then, is site-specific theatre, which depends on its location in production. While the Abbey Theatre are not in the business of producing the type of commercial musicals that Rebellato is concerned with, it is the case that, as with most theatre companies, the local context has historically not been considered when mounting a tour. An important exception to this is the over-arching theme of an international festival that encourages consideration of certain themes ('A Sense of Ireland, 'Next Wave', and so on), and, in the case of the following, the events in the immediate locality that guides an audience's reception of a play.

In the 1981 tour of *The Shadow of a Gunman*, despite the Abbey's attempt at producing what amounted to a 'site-unspecific' Abbey tour of Seán O'Casey's play, the events of the opening night in Baltimore represented the localisation of international politics at the Mechanic Theatre. This is because, by having first established the Abbey brand in the US as politically-relevant and provocative, while thereafter participating in the showcasing of an increasingly generic theatrical product, the Abbey became subordinate to the expectations brought by the audience.

The Abbey Theatre's decision to revive the 1980 production of *The Shadow of a Gunman* for participation in the Baltimore International Theatre Festival was not a controversial one: the company were performing a well-known, popular play during the centenary of O'Casey's birth which included productions of *Red Roses for Me* and Tomás Mac Anna's *Glittering Spears* (billed as a 'ballad' documentary on *The Silver Tassie* argument). Moreover, it was one among many productions of O'Casey at the time. In the 1970s and early 1980s there was a dearth of plays on the national stage that engaged with the political violence in Northern Ireland,

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<sup>76</sup> Dan Rebellato, 'Playwriting and Globalisation: Towards a Site-Unspecific Theatre', *Contemporary Theatre Review*, 16:1, (February 2006), 97-113.

and revivals of Seán O'Casey's plays served to stop the gap.<sup>77</sup> Revisionist readings of older plays, Christopher Morash has observed 'were a part of a growing restlessness in Irish theatre culture in the early 1980s.'<sup>78</sup>

O'Casey was one of the most performed playwrights during the seventies; according to Morash he was produced by Abbey and the Lyric some eighteen times in that decade.<sup>79</sup> Dealing as the plays do with conflict and the suffering of the poor, O'Casey's plays were useful prisms through which to acknowledge the present without putting forward a provocative view in an extremely tense political atmosphere. For instance, along with the many productions of O'Casey plays, there were also O'Casey-themed productions, one of which was Tomás MacAnna's *A State of Chassis* in 1970 at the Abbey's smaller Peacock theatre. The satire provoked a protest by the Derry Labour Party for its irreverent treatment of politician Bernadette Devlin. The ensuing disruption halted the play while leader Eamonn McCann was ejected from the Peacock.<sup>80</sup>

*The Shadow of a Gunman* was, therefore, a useful dramatic model to apply to the Troubles: it allows for violence on stage, demythologises Republican rhetoric, but does not directly comment on any current affairs like *A State of Chassis*. The choice to tour *The Shadow of a Gunman* can be read as inherently passive. There is a tension between the choice to stage a play about violence in Ireland during a time when more than 2,500 people had already died, or merely showcasing that which the theatre values from its canon, when that play happens to coincide with an anniversary.<sup>81</sup> Furthermore, no reinterpretation of the text was presented, it was as though the play existed in a vacuum. This is conspicuous, given the Abbey's highly topical and controversial staging in Dublin of Friel's *Freedom of the City* in 1973 (set in contemporary Northern Ireland, Friel's play turns around three civilians who are killed as a direct result of the Troubles), or Mac Anna's

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<sup>77</sup> Notable exceptions are Brian Friel's *The Freedom of the City* and *Volunteers*, both staged at the Abbey Theatre.

<sup>78</sup> Christopher Morash, *A History of Irish Theatre 1601-2000*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002). p. 257.

<sup>79</sup> Morash, p. 245.

<sup>80</sup> Hunt, *The Abbey*, p. 211.

<sup>81</sup> Malcolm Sutton, *An Index Of Deaths From The Conflict In Ireland 1969-1993*, (Belfast: Beyond The Pale Publications, 1994). Revised and updated in The Cain Project, <http://cain.ulst.ac.uk/sutton/>



decision in 1976 to play the character of Bessie Burgess to locate the play's politics in a contemporary setting. Moreover the famous players included the well-known Donal McCann as Seumas Shields (see Fig. 1.2, below), and Máire O'Neill (described in a review as 'renowned') as Mrs Grigson, so the tour was not a showcase of new Irish writing, directing or acting, but rather a conservative 'best-of'. The play was a reliable production to tour during a time when budget and box office were a real concern.

The Abbey mounted its tour of *The Shadow of a Gunman*, in a production directed by Tomás Mac Anna. The company toured the Mechanic Theatre, Baltimore from June 22-27 (Baltimore International Theatre Festival); the John Houseman Theatre, Saratoga Springs, New York from June 29 to July 2; Civic Centre, Syracuse, New York from July 6 to 7; Summerfare '81, Purchase, New York from July 9 to 12; and Purchase, New York from 16-19 July. The tour was accompanied by Eamon Morrissey's one-man show *Joycemen* (it was still the case that tours of major productions were accompanied by smaller scale one-man shows such as Kelly's in 1976). Performed in smaller theatres to pre-booked festival audiences,<sup>82</sup> the show attracted those interested in Joyce. Morrissey's recollection was that:

Whatever [the audience's] familiarity with *Ulysses*, they were happy to listen to the wonderful language. Perhaps there was an attitude that because it was Joyce they didn't expect to understand it, and were surprised when they did.<sup>83</sup>

As the language was not so alienating as might have been anticipated, notices for the show were extremely positive.

It is useful to focus upon the opening night of *The Shadow of a Gunman* in the Mechanic Theatre, Baltimore, as the events of this performance disclose the synthesis of political events, local and international, that were imposed by the

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<sup>82</sup> One such pre-booked performance included a matinee to an audience largely attending a 'Senior Citizens Save the Whales' seminar. Morrissey recalls that, in the 'searing humid heat the air-conditioning broke down' and that 'the entire audience was asleep in 15 minutes.' Interview with Eamon Morrissey, September 2009.

<sup>83</sup> Interview with Eamon Morrissey, September 2009.



audience onto a production that, because of its non-local particularity, non-committal, 'site-unspecific' nature, invited a rewriting. This was caused by the convergence of events on opening night: the recent death of 27-year-old Bobby Sands, whose hunger strike in the Maze prison brought about a newfound Republican sympathy to dominate news reports just one month before the Abbey tour, and the highly-politicised events of the opening night itself.

*The Shadow of a Gunman* was written in 1923. It was the first of O'Casey's plays to be staged by the Abbey. The play was first produced in 1923 not long after the War of Independence in Ireland, when political tension ran high and the theatre was under armed guard.<sup>84</sup> *The Shadow of a Gunman* concerns itself with the deflation of the heroic myth. Seumas Shields, in his inconsistent application of his beliefs, sums it up in the now famous line 'I draw the line when I hear the gunmen blowin' about dyin' for the people, when it's the people that are dyin' for the gunmen!'<sup>85</sup> O'Casey's play rejects violent politics and many of the characters, such as Tommy Owens and Mr Gallogher, are ridiculed for their mindless recitation of republican slogans and songs. It is actually Tommy Owens's bragging in a nearby pub that brings the fatal raid upon the tenement, resulting in the death of Minnie Powell. Almost less sympathetic than the murderous Auxiliaries are the tenement lodgers who misappropriate language for self-glorification. While ostensibly a play about conflict, O'Casey's text undermines the rhetoric of war, *The Shadow of a Gunman* was often chosen as a topical war play, relevant to contemporary contentious political circumstances.<sup>86</sup>

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<sup>84</sup> Welch, p. 83.

<sup>85</sup> Séan O'Casey, *The Shadow of a Gunman in Three Dublin Plays*, ed. by Christopher Murray, (London: Faber & Faber, 1998), p. 40.

<sup>86</sup> For instance, six years prior to the tour, *The Shadow of a Gunman* was staged in Portugal in acknowledgement of the Carnation Revolution, a left-leaning military coup in Lisbon that effectively changed the Portuguese regime from a dictatorship to a democracy in 1974. Adapted by a left-wing theatre group in 1975, *The Shadow of a Gunman* was shown in the working class suburbs of Lisbon before touring the country. This production was accompanied by an exhibition on the establishment of the Irish national theatre, which was arranged by the Abbey and the Irish Department of Foreign Affairs. In January 1980 *Shadow of a Gunman* was translated into Farsi and staged by the Tehran City Theatre. The director of the theatre, Parviz Behnam, claimed the scenario of the play was relevant to Iran since the Islamic revolution in 1979. The 1980 Iranian production was accompanied by a photographic exhibition of the Irish War of Independence, arranged by the Irish Embassy in Tehran.

In May 1981 one month prior to the Abbey's tour, Republican hunger striker Bobby Sands died in the Maze prison after 66 days, protesting for recognition as a political prisoner. There had been previous strikes, blanket protests and dirty protests, to which the British government did not yield. During the strike the British government's perceived hard-headed stance only aided burgeoning republican sympathy in the south. For instance a Downing Street official was quoted as saying the British government would not give in 'even if they start dropping like flies'.<sup>87</sup> Ten hunger strikers died before the protest was called off. In *Time* magazine Bobby Sands's funeral was reported under the headline 'Northern Ireland: Shadow Of a Gunman.'<sup>88</sup> The romanticised obituary by the American magazine draws upon phrases like 'a uniquely Irish tragedy' and 'a dangerous tragedy', phrases not unlike those used to review certain theatrical events.

The article went on to point out that the state legislatures of New Jersey and Massachusetts passed resolutions condemning Sands's death and that the (110,000-member) International Longshoremen's Association announced a one-day boycott of ships flying the Union Jack. Concerns were raised over 'the high probability that Republican sympathizers in the US were once again passing the hat for the IRA, renewing the flow of arms-buying money estimated as high as \$3 million annually.' In this context, when the Abbey Theatre arrived in Baltimore with *The Shadow of a Gunman* only a month later, the audiences were already affected by the ongoing discourse of unusually high Republican sympathy. Eamon Morrissey's recollection of these events was that there was tension regarding the hunger strikes in general and also within the company itself. While the players dealt with that internally, the difficulty:

was getting outsiders to see that there was more than one simple view of the whole tragic history. But O'Casey would not allow us to be so simple.<sup>89</sup>

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<sup>87</sup>George Russell, Bonnie Angela, 'Northern Ireland: Shadow Of a Gunman', *Time Magazine*, 18 May 1981.

<sup>88</sup> Russell, *Time Magazine*, 18 May 1981.

<sup>89</sup> Interview with Eamon Morrissey, September 2009.



The audience at this point already attended the Abbey production with expectations of an authentic Irish play, and reviews reflect a vague association of O'Casey with anti-imperial sentiment. One critic described *The Shadow of a Gunman* as: 'a vivid, vital universe' characterised by 'Two seedy boyos as they try to live unscathed through a day in 1920 shaped by the random violence of the Irish War of Independence'. The violence is intended to be meaningless to a point, but it is more than a *Godot* with guns and Donal and Seumas are more complex than two comically scruffy tenement occupants enduring the conflict outside.

Upon reaching Baltimore International Theatre Festival the Abbey company encountered a protest outside the theatre. At a time when there was strong opposition to the South African government's *apartheid* policy, a scheduled visit by the Baxter Theatre from Capetown intending to perform Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* was prevented by the International Socialist Organisation, the Coalition of Support for Liberation Struggles in South Africa and the Black Workers' Organising Committee. While not directed at the Abbey Theatre, the protest disrupted the opening night. The festival organizers, meanwhile, had engaged the 'Celtic Thunder Band' to play Irish folk music at the theatre entrance, and as reported in *The Irish Times*, the picketing crowd and band fell into a shared rhythm after some twenty minutes, creating what *The Irish Times* called a 'spurious harmony'. This fusion involved the crowd chanting 'Same struggle, same fight, Ireland and Soweto.' Moving into the auditorium, that first night audience were provoked to a state of excitement and unintentionally directed to read the text in a certain way by this series of events.

First night reviews again cite difficulties with the Dublin accents, but most interestingly they report that many audience members chose to read the play as anti-British propaganda. When Donal McCann as Seumas Shields delivered the line 'I'm a Nationalist myself. I believe in the freedom of Ireland, England has no right to be here,'<sup>90</sup> the spontaneous applause was so loud as to overwhelm the following, far more important line about the people who are dying for the

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<sup>90</sup> O'Casey, *The Shadow of a Gunman*, p. 40.



gunmen. And so while the company welcomed a positive audience response and naturally appreciated the robust ticket sales, there was a disharmony in what they performed and what the audience applauded.

The Abbey Theatre's tour of *The Shadow of a Gunman* in 1981 was not intended to stoke nationalist feelings to the degree that it did. On this occasion the Abbey did not politicise the play; indeed their choice to tour it was less because it was a semaphore of Republican themes, but because it was an O'Casey centenary and O'Casey plays are a reasonable conservative choice to tour during a financially challenging period. However it was not possible to stage a classic from the canon and tour it during this politically-fraught period without the play text acquiring new layers of significance for the audience. It had become a citational narrative; that is, at this point the audience knew what it is to be shot because of nationalist views, and staging *Shadow* in 1981 meant something different than staging it in 1926 or even 1956. Perhaps had Bobby Sands not recently died, Republican sympathy would not have been so publicly validated. Similarly, when other theatre makers took on the play to comment on their individual causes, the ignominious career of Donal Davoren somehow becomes a parable of disinheritance for the attendant audience. It is through this event that international politics, locally focussed, were imposed over the palimpsest of Irish theatre.

### **Spreading the New: *Talbot's Box*, 1977; *A Life*, 1980**

If the Abbey Theatre's American tours could be described as a struggle against definition as commodity theatre, the UK tours of the 1970s embody the successful fusion of the local and the international, and a synthesis of the Abbey's heritage with contemporary theatre practice. Two productions during the period show this: the 1977 transfer of Thomas Kilroy's *Talbot's Box*, and the 1980 transfer of Hugh Leonard's *A Life*. These plays represent a departure from the American reputation of the Abbey Theatre. What follows is an investigation of the different ways in which the two transfers present the work of the contemporary national theatre, looking at context, play and reception to show how in these transfers the Abbey achieved a recuperation of authority.

Firstly, both plays originated in a festival context. The Kilroy play, directed by Patrick Mason, transferred to London's Royal Court theatre, which lent the play the framework of contemporary, avant-garde theatre. Frames are particularly important in Kilroy's play, engaging as it does with constructed selves and self-imposed limits. The choice of this play for the Abbey was important, as it is a play that both engages with Irish theatre heritage but that is not bound to naturalistic representation of Ireland. It enters into conversation with contemporary international theatre practice, while maintaining a local, Dublin idiom. In terms of the reception of the transfer, that idiomatic quality in the text did not exclude an international audience with a reliance upon localised knowledge, and the play was instead differently interpreted by audiences.

The transfer of Hugh Leonard's *A Life* to the 'Sense of Ireland' festival in 1980 brought about another break from tradition. Hugh Leonard had had many of his plays staged at the Dublin Theatre Festival by this time, and had earned international fame for the award-winning play *Da*. Leonard was not generally associated with the Abbey Theatre. Furthermore *A Life* was mounted by the Abbey during the Theatre Festival, a transient context, I would argue, as the onus on the company during the Theatre Festival is to represent what is new and contemporary, not necessarily what represents the best of the company's canon (unless it is a notable revival). There is, therefore, less pressure to reproduce a predictable product for an audience usually more open to modern and experimental texts.

By transferring to the 'Sense of Ireland' festival in London (which was also sponsored by the Irish Arts Council), the Abbey was continuing in another festival, one that styled itself 'Irish'. However, by dint of the very Irishness of the festival itself, the Abbey therefore did not need to assert the nationalism of the production. As such, the programmes and posters disclose a play rendered almost generic in its denial of stereotypical Irish signifiers. The play text, like Kilroy's, includes referents to Ireland that do not depend upon an audience's knowledge of Ireland, but largely represents a bourgeois suburbia and the appropriation of another national theatrical stereotype.



Thomas Kilroy made his name as a playwright in the Dublin Theatre Festival. *The Death and Resurrection of Mr. Roche* was rejected by the Abbey, but produced at the Dublin Theatre Festival in 1968 to a positive reception. In October 1977 Kilroy's *Talbot's Box* premiered at the Dublin Theatre Festival. It was one of the first plays directed at the Peacock by Patrick Mason, before he went on to take several productions on tour, particularly in the late 1980s and early 1990s. The Abbey Theatre announced on 27 October that *Talbot's Box* was to transfer to the Royal Court in London (considered the home of the British boom in experimental drama in the 1950s), from 23 November for a four-week run. The invitation was issued to the Abbey after a visit from the Royal Court's Artistic Director, Stuart Burge. At this point, the *Irish Times* reports that the last Abbey tour to London had been *Richard's Cork Leg* by Behan in 1972, which similarly transferred from the Peacock to the Royal Court.

*Talbot's Box* is a mosaic of several texts. In the 1960s Kilroy had attended a dance-based production of *La Tentation de St Antoine* at the Odéon, Paris, by the choreographer, Maurice Béjart with the then well-known director Jean-Louis Barrault.<sup>91</sup> The production was an adaptation of Gustave Flaubert's dramatic poem in prose, itself a reworking of the life of St Anthony (251-356), the founder of Christian monasticism. The chief source of information on Anthony is attributed to Athanasius of Alexandria and was instrumental in spreading the ideology of monasticism. Béjart had made use of a catwalk-type construct to parade the figures of the demons which beset the ascetic in the desert, and it was this use of stage space that inspired Kilroy. *Talbot's Box* was, therefore a coming together of Irish, Greek and French hagiography, dance and narrative theatre.

The Royal Court theatre in London was known for contemporary and experimental theatre, and the Kilroy transfer occurred during a season that included *Trembling Giant* by John McGrath (about the 'tangled history of the Scottish economy by means of fairytale'); *Playpen* by Heathcote Williams (a satire on parenting told with puppets, masks and shadow play); and Tolstoy's *The Kreutzer Sonata*, in an adaptation by Peter Farago, billed as 'the radical

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<sup>91</sup> Thomas Kilroy, interviewed in *Playwrights in Profile*, RTÉ Radio, 04 March 2007.



feminist thesis of the 1970s written by Tolstoy in the Russia of the 1890s'.<sup>92</sup> It need hardly be stated that plays such as these appealed to a particular type of left-wing spectator, and that the attendant audience at the Royal Court in 1977 were significantly different from an Irish-American diasporic one.

In *Talbot's Box* Kilroy deals with the Irish Catholic and supposed mystic Matt Talbot, a real figure whose life achieved mythical distinction because of his extreme religious practice. Talbot was born in Dublin in 1856, and at the age of 28 turned to religion with unusual zeal. Attending church services several times a day until his death outside a church in 1925, Talbot was found to have secretly bound his body with chains and slept on planks in a gesture of self-mortification. By the time Thomas Kilroy came to write about Talbot, his name was a signifier of humility and eccentric piety, and, as Kilroy's preface to the play and programme notes highlight, by the 1970s groups had begun to lobby for his canonisation.

In collaboration with director Patrick Mason and designer Wendy Shea, Kilroy offered a more European theatrical sensibility, despite his inclusion of evident signifiers of Ireland and Irishness. Kilroy achieved this by employing Brechtian epic theatre as a device to readjust the naturalist topography of Irish theatre, seeking to identify a universal human dilemma that was inclusive of other communities while still making use of a Dublin setting and Dublin idiom.

The 'cluttered window of Irish theatre' was something Kilroy frequently engaged with as a critic. In an interview with Anthony Roche, Kilroy relates that as a student he spent every summer working in canning factories and railway stations in England. He spent a good deal of time and money at the theatre in London or Stratford, and so became familiar with George Devine's Royal Court and the early work of John Arden and John Osborne:

It seemed to me at that stage that what was happening in a theatre like the Royal Court or with Joan Littlewood at Stratford East or indeed in the early productions of Peter Brook at Stratford or the Aldwych, was work of

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<sup>92</sup> *Talbot's Box* programme, Royal Court Theatre, London, 1977.

a very considerable quality, above what was happening in Ireland. It seemed to me that we were in great need of some new movement in Ireland, which could draw from the example of the English stage and what it was doing.

In the fifties and sixties we were still living with the Abbey of the thirties and it was, despite individual successes and successes in acting and the like, a theatre that by and large had run down in energy and certainly that was not saying very much to people of my generation. So it was inevitable that I would look outside.<sup>93</sup>

As well as reaching beyond the typical, Kilroy strives toward the collaborative in his approach to rehearsal, depending on the responses of others:

The true, the physical nature of that play only emerged for me in rehearsal. It was Patrick [Mason] who 'discovered' the strong, almost frontal physicality and imagery in the play. I like to think all of that was there in the text but Patrick was wonderful in bringing it out and showing the possibilities.<sup>94</sup>

Patrick Mason joined the Abbey in 1972.<sup>95</sup> He had studied in the Central School in London in voice training and movement, before lecturing at Manchester University. Joining the Abbey, Mason frequently answered questions from the press on the fact that he was English in an Irish national theatre, a point that somewhat distracted from Mason's views on theatre.

Mason chose to direct *Talbot's Box* because he considered it 'one of the first serious enquiries about the whole force of the Catholic Church in Ireland, in Irish society, in Irish history, its psychological force, all the topics that it raised about the sort of archetypal mother fixation of Catholicism to this extraordinary

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<sup>93</sup> 'An Interview with Thomas Kilroy' in *Irish University Review*, 32:1, (Spring/Summer 2002), 152.

<sup>94</sup> Thomas Kilroy in Conversation with Gerry Dukes', *Theatre Talk: Voices of Irish Theatre Practitioners*, ed. by Lilian Chambers and Eamonn Jordan, (Dublin: Carysfort Press, 2001), p. 244.

<sup>95</sup> As told to Charles Hunter, *Irish Times*, 15 November 1986.

confusion of gender and sexuality in Irish life.<sup>96</sup> Anticipating hostility, Mason says the choice to do *Talbot's Box* in the smaller theatre was for economic and artistic reasons, but also practical concerns:

There is always a larger risk involved in a new play at the box office. It is one way of safeguarding the risk for the theatre, but also for the playwright. The play was potentially troublesome, politically and culturally. It was not an obviously popular play, therefore there is a certain protection for it in a smaller theatre than in a larger one.<sup>97</sup>

The play, set in a large wooden frame structure, involves a doubling of actors in often contradictory roles, with a Brechtian emphasis on the artifice of the performance. The exception, as Christopher Morash has pointed out, is John Molloy as Talbot, played with 'seamless realism'.<sup>98</sup> Talbot is not merely bound with chains, Morash argues, but his character's inability to shake off a self and take on a new one, as the others do, shows something of the restrictions of the self he has constructed. Talbot is presented largely through public perception and even through the prism of an O'Caseyan family scene that concludes in unsettling violence, as Nicholas Grene puts it, 'an implicit correction to O'Casey's comic handling of the wastrel Captain'.<sup>99</sup> In this Kilroy engages with his theatrical heritage, but is not in thrall to it. Kilroy, Christopher Murray argues, 'had to put O'Casey in his place before he could liberate himself to deal either with [...] the background to Matt Talbot'.<sup>100</sup>

Furthermore, the scene does not depend on an audience's knowledge of O'Casey: and so a performance in Dublin will provoke a reading of O'Casey, whereas in transfer the audience does not need a familiarity with the landscape of Irish theatre since 1904, experiencing instead a play about 'the eccentric or

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<sup>96</sup> Thierry Dubost, *The Plays of Thomas Kilroy: A Critical Study* (Jefferson, North Carolina, London: McFarland & Company, 2007), p. 166.

<sup>97</sup> Dubost, p. 168.

<sup>98</sup> Morash, p. 250.

<sup>99</sup> Nicholas Grene, 'Staging the Self: Person and Persona in Kilroy's Plays', *Irish University Review*, 32:1, (Spring/Summer 2002), 70-83.

<sup>100</sup> Christopher Murray, 'Thomas Kilroy: The Artist and the Critic', in *Irish University Review*, 32:1, (Spring/Summer 2002), 83-95.



exceptional or unusual kind of individual who is a mystic'.<sup>101</sup> The play succeeds therefore in achieving universality without rejecting entirely the achievements of the Irish theatre movement.

Kilroy assimilates the towering figure of O'Casey, because Kilroy was aware that a play set in a working-class Dublin tenement at the beginning of the twentieth-century cannot escape comparison:

To write a play about this figure [...] you had to find the idiom of the Dublin streets, and when I came to do that [...] I came up against the huge figure of O'Casey, [...] a playwright that I don't have a great deal of personal feeling for. [...] I found myself parodying O'Casey in my play. There is a good deal of parody in it, almost mock O'Casey, which fitted into the seriocomic tone of the work itself.<sup>102</sup>

Furthermore, Grene sees a resistance to the tradition of the articulate peasant in the play, as Talbot struggles to express himself at moments in which a Synge or O'Casey character might be expected to deliver a perfectly-timed and strikingly eloquent speech.<sup>103</sup>

In its treatment of Talbot and of Irish theatre, *Talbot's Box* represented several layers of irreverence. Interestingly, the issue of blasphemy in the text was not as fraught as might have been expected: Mason recalls that there was 'an element of outrage' at the blasphemy presented onstage, in some part, he surmises, because he [i.e. Mason] was not authentically Irish and criticisms of a society are taken with greater offense from the outside than the inside (which partly explains the abundance of critical writing that debates the authenticity of Martin McDonagh as an Irishman).<sup>104</sup> Largely, however, expected riots and protests failed to make a mark; the Abbey team behind this production chose not to emphasise skirmishes involving outraged conservatives, and the play was a success, commercially and

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<sup>101</sup> Anthony, Roche, 'An Interview with Thomas Kilroy'. *Irish University Review*, 32:1 (2002), 150-158. [156].

<sup>102</sup> Dubost, p. 137.

<sup>103</sup> Grene, p. 73.

<sup>104</sup> Dubost, p. 166.

critically. Moreover the positive reception in the UK, when transmitted back to Dublin, served to enhance popular opinion of the play.

In the Royal Court on opening night (attended by the Irish ambassador Paul Keating) the theatre was decorated with pictures of the Dublin areas where Matt Talbot spent his life, and there were also historical photographs of the time. The front of the programme for the 1977 tour of *Talbot's Box*, (which did not differ a great deal from the Dublin programme) designated that this was an 'Abbey Theatre Dublin Production'.<sup>105</sup> Over the title there is an image of Talbot kneeling (back to the spectator) in cruciform pose with conspicuous workman's boots, soles up, and, in far larger typeface, 'Royal Court' (see Figs. 1.3 and 1.4, below). Here the production was clearly not branded as Irish-as-distinct-from-British theatre, but there is in the presentation of Peacock and Royal Court production information, an effect that suggests confluence and collaboration. Along with the historical photographs exhibited, the most notable emphasis of an Irish context in the *Talbot's Box* programme was not an assertion of Irish cultural imperatives or an invitation to nostalgia, but an article to help make sense of the peculiarly Dublin character of Matt Talbot and what he meant to Irish people by the 1970s.

Kilroy recalls that while the modernism of the play and production earned positive responses, it seemed that the English audiences 'found the whole situation bizarre':

I remember the actor T.P. McKenna warning Brian Friel and myself (sometime in early seventies) that any mention of religion would kill an Irish play stone dead in London. Remember that when we started Irish plays (including Friel's) were not really accepted in London. Field Day made the first significant break through in this regard.<sup>106</sup>

This resistance latent in UK audiences was something Kilroy anticipated and tried to work against, and more touring was the answer, as far as he was concerned; in November 1977 Kilroy told the *Guardian* that 'oddly, there is more resistance to Irish theatre in England than to Irish poetry and a resistance which

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<sup>105</sup> Royal Court Theatre archive.

<sup>106</sup> Personal correspondence, August 2009.

might best be worn down [...] by a regular exchange of productions between Dublin and (preferably) the Royal Court.<sup>107</sup>

The burden of history did prevail, of course, though not with the same influence as the later tour of *The Shadow of a Gunman*. *Talbot's Box* was reviewed in *The Times* by Ned Chaillet in terms of 'people' who were 'hoping that the Abbey might reclaim its fame for rioting audiences' (passions were expected to run high, and there had been threats of demonstrations before the play opened at the Peacock in Dublin), but after this opening paragraph the play is then evaluated in more universal terms and escapes essentialist appraisal.<sup>108</sup> In *The Guardian* interview with Kilroy, Lesley Adamson argued that the play, coming to London from Dublin, would 'not be the same play. The audience will see to that.' Noting the multiplicity of meaning in the character of Matt Talbot in Kilroy's text, Adamson contended that 'in Dublin it was the story of a local would-be saint set to words and more words'. In London on the other hand, 'nobody's sure.' Certainly the audience's reading of the play was not overwhelmed with literal religious interpretation, as Kilroy stated to Adamson in the interview, it was his hope that a more secular audience would 'latch on to the human dilemma.'

In a review in *The Sunday Times*, Bernard Levin facetiously applauded the play for discussing 'something of more significance [...] than the inequitable pattern of wealth distribution in capitalist countries, the heroic struggle of the IRA freedom-fighters against imperialist oppression, and the urgent necessity of legalising cannabis...', while going on to detail the facts of Talbot's life in his review.<sup>109</sup> A number of reviews approached the play in this manner.<sup>110</sup> The emphasis thereafter is on the religious theme put forth by *Talbot's Box*, with disputations on the possible allegory of religion and power, drawing conspicuously little reference to the role of religion in the extant conflict in Ireland.

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<sup>107</sup> Lesley Adamson, Interview with Thomas Kilroy, *Guardian* 22 November 1977.

<sup>108</sup> Ned Chaillet, *The Times*, 24 November 1977.

<sup>109</sup> *The Sunday Times*, 27 November 1977.

<sup>110</sup> Including the *Financial Times*, 24 November 1977, Michael Coveney and Eric Shorter in *The Daily Telegraph*, 24 November 1977, *The British Telegraph*, and Tom Sutcliffe in *The Guardian*, 24 November 1977.



Tom Sutcliffe in *The Guardian* called the play a worthy successor to Joyce.<sup>111</sup> Crucially however, Sutcliffe argued that the play was not especially Irish, but 'about the individual who discovers an inner vision that was never intended to impinge on others.' *The Daily Telegraph* in fact criticised the coding of Catholicism in the play, arguing this would alienate a non-Catholic audience who might fail to grasp the ambivalence to religion in the text.

*Talbot's Box* is a fusion of the local and the international: the Irish-centric audience see a shared code of locality, while the international audience see relevant modern drama. An ideal project for the Abbey at this point, the play represented a new theatrical aesthetic, but it was also culturally challenging and engaged most assertively with recent Irish culture without 'slavish fidelity of mere naturalism'.<sup>112</sup> As a production to take abroad, this was the high point of the Abbey's international engagement in the UK at this time.

The radical disjunction of Matt Talbot's piety and the playwright's apparent irreverence towards it was, at this point, a departure for the national theatre in that it was bringing a play that openly pushed the audience on the by now very fraught topic of religion. This decision functioned in two ways. Firstly, it was an opportunity for the Abbey to present itself in a context that defied historical expectations for texts that engaged with politics to do so in a safe, opaque manner. *The Plough in the Stars* may be subject to interpretation in relation to contemporary violence, but it does not directly engage with contemporary politics. It would be fair to expect the Abbey to avoid controversial subjects, both for reasons of diplomacy as a national theatre, and also because of box office considerations. Secondly, in this production which was staged in conjunction with the Royal Court, the Abbey was implicitly showing both a co-operative project with an English theatre (showing that now, in European mode, the theatre no longer had to be defined *against* the British theatre), but, more importantly, the company was being aligned with what was considered a left-wing, avant-garde, new and relevant company.

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<sup>111</sup> Tom Sutcliffe, 'Talbot's Box', *The Guardian*, 24 November 1977.

<sup>112</sup> Kilroy, cited in 'Thomas Kilroy, 'A Generation of Playwrights' in Eamonn Jordan (ed.), *Theatre Stuff: Critical Essays On Contemporary Irish Theatre*, (Dublin: Carysfort Press, 2000), p. 3.

Christopher Morash argues that Tom Murphy's *The Sanctuary Lamp* (1976) and Kilroy's *Talbot's Box* 'could easily be read as the theatrical products of a modernising urban society pulling away from a more traditional rural hinterland.'<sup>113</sup> At the same time, Hugh Leonard was writing plays set in contemporary, suburban Dublin that turned perceptibly away from the lonesome west.

### **Hugh Leonard: 'My Father Alive And Myself An Orphan'**

In February, 1980, the Abbey transferred Hugh Leonard's *A Life* to the Old Vic in London as part of the 'Sense of Ireland' Festival of Irish Arts. The play included Cyril Cusack, Garrett Keogh, Ingrid Craigie, Dearbhla Molloy and Maureen Toal, and was directed by Joe Dowling. As with Kilroy's play, *A Life* had been first produced by the Abbey Theatre for the Dublin Theatre Festival the previous October.

Hugh Leonard was Literary Editor for the Abbey from 1976-77, and in 1978 became programme director for the Dublin Theatre Festival. He cites an early visit to the Abbey Theatre, where he saw *The Plough and the Stars* with Cyril Cusack as the Young Covey, as the impetus behind his decision to write for the theatre. Leonard was a well-known figure at the time, as *Da*, Leonard's award-winning, semi-autobiographical play, had run for two years on Broadway in a production produced by Lester Osterman. Despite his association with the Abbey, Leonard was outspoken about the theatre's having rejected plays of his, which tended to be more popular than critically acclaimed. As such, I would argue, Leonard did not bear the same legitimising stamp of the Abbey Theatre, and was inclined to set himself apart:

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<sup>113</sup> Morash, p. 251.

The Abbey was the one you shot for, really. All you did was try to please Ernest Blythe and if you pleased Ernest, you were in. He liked political plays and he liked plays dealing with the Troubles and things like that.<sup>114</sup>

Nevertheless, Christopher Morash argues that *A Life*, along with *Da* (1973) and *Time Was* (1976):

emerge not only as hugely entertaining pieces of theatre [...] but also as important social commentaries on a society that, in spite of a slowing of the economic growth of the 1960s, was continuing to become more dominated by the values of an urban middle-class.<sup>115</sup>

Christopher Fitz-Simon describes Hugh Leonard as 'the most prolific and the most technically assured of modern playwrights'.<sup>116</sup> *A Life*, Leonard's twenty-first play and his nineteenth for the Dublin Theatre Festival, is set in the contemporary Dublin of the 1970s. Leonard was known for his preference for self-conscious representations of suburban life in lieu of what he criticised as the trappings of cliché and insularity in Irish drama:

My belief is that our attitude towards Irish writing is as parochial as the communal tap-water and the horse-trough at the end of the village street. Poets, novelists, and playwrights – unless the name happens to be Yeats or Joyce or Beckett – write about Irishmen first, as a separate species that is, and mankind a very distant and unimportant second.<sup>117</sup>

As with Kilroy's play, this was another festival-origin text that migrated from one non-political context to another, and the choice of this play for production shows the decision-making of the Abbey Theatre personnel behind it; while Leonard was popular and marketable, *A Life* is contemporary, irreverent, engages with Irish theatrical history as well as contemporary dramaturgy in trying to forge a new image for the national theatre. The decision to stage it reflects a departure from the type of heritage theatre the company were obliged to present

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<sup>114</sup> Hugh Leonard, cited in Chambers, FitzGibbon and Jordan, p. 253.

<sup>115</sup> Morash, p. 249.

<sup>116</sup> Christopher Fitz-Simon, *The Irish Theatre* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1983) p. 191.

<sup>117</sup> Hugh Leonard, 'Irishness in a Changing Society' in *Selected Plays*, (Gerrards Cross: Colin Smythe, 1988) pp. 19-20.



elsewhere. The evidence of this decision is further evinced in the programme material associated with the play.

The programme and flyer for the Abbey at The Old Vic displayed 'The Old Vic' and 'Abbey Theatre Company' with similar impact in terms of font size and position. The flyer depicts Cyril Cusack with no other embellishments (see Fig. 1.5, below), while the main programme is based on a reproduction from a portrait of Hugh Leonard by the Irish painter Robert Ballagh (Fig. 1.6). What is noteworthy in this portrait, as distinct for instance from the advertisement of Eamon Kelly's audio recordings in the 1976 US tour programme, is that Leonard is in an unambiguously modern setting, smoking a cigarette, sitting beside an electric typewriter with two books (one bearing a title that includes the word 'movies', to reflect Leonard's interest in film and television), in front of a sea view framed not by curtains but blinds favoured in the later half of the twentieth century (and arguably signifiers of a middle-class setting as opposed to rural domestic). The *mise-en-scène* of the portrait is more evocative of any generic office in a stereotypical civil service than an Irish setting. However this programme was framed in the larger context of the 'Sense of Ireland' festival, at the time one of the largest festivals of Irish arts staged in Britain. There is a tension, therefore, in the choice the Abbey made not to promote the peculiar Irishness of the text and the inevitable overhanging proviso that all participating events are Irish anyway, and innately specialist and therefore subject to being read as such.

The 'Sense of Ireland' London festival of the Irish arts ran from 1 February to 15 March 1980, and was sponsored by the Arts Council but also the Irish company Kerrygold, and the British B+I Line. The stated aims were to present 'the best of the Irish Arts, North and South in a major international context; to demonstrate the depth and strength of Ireland's heritage and contemporary culture, to make a significant contribution to improving understanding and relations between the people of these islands.'<sup>118</sup> As well as theatre, the festival also included art performances, poetry readings, concerts, painting exhibitions, while sociologists

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<sup>118</sup> *A Life* theatre programme 1980, from the Abbey Theatre archive.

from Trinity College were invited to give an exhibition on contemporary Ireland at the Institute of Contemporary Arts in London ('No Country for Old Men': which used texts, photographs, graphs and cartoons to 'represent and celebrate the demographic, economic, social, and cultural transformations of Ireland in the 1970s').<sup>119</sup>

The stated aim of the festival reflects how, in an increasingly globalised context, the Abbey was modifying its position as national theatre. Rather than asserting Irish theatre as distinct from British theatre, here the Abbey has a role as one of a number of co-operating cultural ambassadors, with the reference to 'improving understanding and relations'. The festival context of the play is significant; whereas in the US tours discussed the Abbey toured a single play and was obliged to select a well-known popular classic, in a festival the setting is innately depoliticised. The Abbey was not showcasing the Irish National Theatre, rather, free of the necessity to represent authentic or historical Ireland onstage, the company simply presented new Irish writing.

The programme includes extracts from Leonard's autobiographical *Home Before Night*, detailing aspects of a Dublin childhood that, despite its mention of mountains and the sea, is located in a landscape of suburbia, with a sky and sea 'the colour of slates on a roof', and which evokes the cosmopolitan George Bernard Shaw and British novelist Nat Gould. Elements of nature such as grass and earth are, in Leonard's Dublin, a wasteland of rusty cans and broken glass, as though presenting the pastoral Ireland characteristic of the Irish literary revival – and its incumbent burden to the Irish writer – as a palimpsest, marked by recent industrial and economic change. The narrator's recollection of a fearsome old woman who bullied the children into performing a play while aggravating their friends into paying to watch it, is easy to read as the spectre of Cathleen Ni Houlihan, and the incident a consequence of what Thomas Kilroy identified as his contemporaries' need to address the tradition that had gone before. The child narrator responds by improvising a bomb, which scares everyone away. The bomb is at once a modern symbol, as globally popular culture was preoccupied

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<sup>119</sup> Hilary Tovey and Peter Share, *A Sociology Of Ireland*, (Dublin: Gill & Macmillan, 2000), p. 33.

with the possibility of atomic annihilation, and locally the Troubles connected the Irish with sectarian violence on news reports. It is a small gesture towards the Troubles, which the writer avoids in the play text. Later, the young narrator/Leonard is inspired by a production at the Abbey of *The Plough and the Stars*, this time with Cyril Cusack, a recurring figure in most of the plays discussed here, playing the role of The Young Covey, and of course the actor who played the lead in *A Life*.

*A Life* shares with *Da*, and many of Leonard's texts, a preoccupation with mortality. The text is a cross-section of a small community and characterised by ironic metaphor. It is divided into three playing areas: one a modern living room in the present; the other a kitchen in the past; and an old bandstand situated in 'all that remains of what was called the commons of Dalkey', 'before the country became one vast builder's yard.'<sup>120</sup> This set, and the physical comedy it occasions, shares more with Alan Ayckbourn's *How the Other Half Loves* originally staged in Britain in 1971 but performed at the Peacock the year before the production of *A Life*, than any Synge or O'Casey (see Fig. 1.7, below, for an example of the bandstand part of the set).

Drumm, a minor character from *Da*, now a dying bureaucrat, recalls the circumstances that led to his current situation and prepares for death by attempting to resolve old grudges. Confronting mistakes in the past and antagonising his wife, former love interest and her husband, he positions himself as 'accountant' at the end of his life:

Drumm: [...] I need to know what I amount to. Debit or credit, that much I am owed. If the account is to be closed, so be it: I demand an audit. [...] I seem to have access to everyone's file but my own.<sup>121</sup>

Nostalgia, such as it exists in the play, is reserved for a bitter character who appears to have failed by the play's end in coming to a point of self-actualisation.

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<sup>120</sup> Hugh Leonard, *A Life in Selected Plays* ed. by SF Gallagher, (Gerrards Cross: Colin Smythe, 1992), p. 358.

<sup>121</sup> *Ibid*, p. 335.



In his opening speech, which is to be his conclusion, Drumm evokes George Bernard Shaw:

... Bernard Shaw's observation that whereas Ireland's men are temporal, her hills are eternal. Any child familiar with the rudiments of geology could have told him otherwise, but then even Shaw was not immune to his countrymen's passion for inexactitude.<sup>122</sup>

What Leonard does in this opening text by proxy is to put Shaw in the unlikely position of wistful and loquacious Irishman, the stereotype Shaw satirised in *John Bull's Other Island*. In distancing himself from overzealous, parochial Irish cliché, Drumm goes so far as to show up Shaw to effect his point.

The setting, while still in the familiar territory of an Irish domestic sphere, is also a palimpsest. In Mary's modernised Edwardian house, Drumm's attention is drawn to the redecoration:

Mary: It was too dark. The old people, that's them dead and gone, they went in for that: no sunlight, everything morose and dusty. I thought we'd get into the fashion.<sup>123</sup>

Tellingly, Mary has changed the furniture and no longer reserves a reception room for the patrician figure of the priest, but has failed to get 'the smell of beeswax and the lavender' out, an acknowledgement of the difficulty in shedding stereotypes.<sup>124</sup> However, for the almost anonymous suburban banality of Leonard's text, it is conspicuously a text about people talking in a kitchen.

*A Life* is also a play about disappointment and disillusion, especially the past which imposes upon the characters' attempts to move on. Drumm is irretrievably bitter and socially abrasive because of his school-teacher father's abusive insistence on education. Mibs is put in the position of being obliged to marry Lar when her father opens a letter intended for her, and consults with the priest, who, like Friel's Canon Mick O'Byrne is an arid community leader, failing

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<sup>122</sup> Ibid, p. 305.

<sup>123</sup> Ibid, p. 314.

<sup>124</sup> Ibid, p. 314.

as spiritual interpreter. Later, the younger Drumm makes reference in his speech to de Valera, the irreverence of which he is informed, will draw more boos than appreciative laughs, as Ireland is apparently still passively deferential to the old conservative government. Drumm's rejection of the past is ambivalent: 'I wanted my father alive and myself an orphan'.<sup>125</sup>

Drumm uses memory to remake himself: he relays to Mary the success of his speech subtly: 'It was too crowded', 'I clowned, so they laughed a lot'; 'the history professor from Trinity, he got a rough time of it'.<sup>126</sup> The audience learns from the older Drumm that he was in fact heckled and very little of his speech was heard.

The critical and popular reception of the play was extremely positive. In October 1979, before the play transferred to London, it was heavily subscribed at the Abbey Theatre. Upon reaching London reviews were largely positive and ticket sales were high. It was reported in the mainstream media that the show might begin a West End transfer. Cyril Cusack's commitments to a forthcoming film project was one of the principal obstacles to the transfer, which did not eventually take place.

The audience at this point display a concern for 'Irishness' as a potential pitfall for the playwright. In *The Daily Mail*, *A Life* is celebrated as 'universal', warning that 'the fact that it introduces London's Festival, 'A Sense of Ireland', should not delude anyone that Mr Leonard is primarily concerned with Irishness.' The review however, goes on to compliment the company's use of 'wonderful language, and in *The Guardian* Michael Billington criticises a 'rickety plot' clothed by 'lovely language', displaying the ambivalence in the play towards inherited tradition.

### **Reinventing Ireland**

Seán O'Casey's *The Plough and the Stars* is consistently revived at moments of national tension. First premiered by the national theatre at a time of revolutionary change, later it became a popular repertory piece, then a canonical

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<sup>125</sup> Ibid, p. 319.

<sup>126</sup> Ibid, p. 354.

Chapter 1 Images:

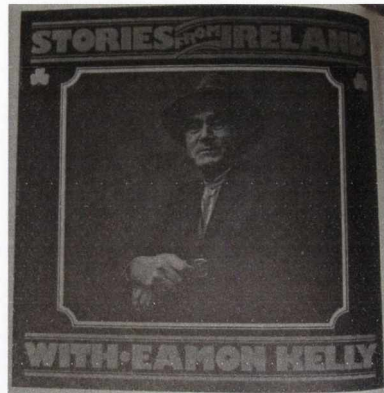


Fig. 1.1 Eamon Kelly Advertisement, Abbey Theatre US programme for *The Plough and the Stars*, 1976.



Fig. 1.2 Donal McCann as Seumas Shields and Máire O'Neill as Mrs Grigson in *The Shadow of a Gunman* on the Abbey stage, 1980.



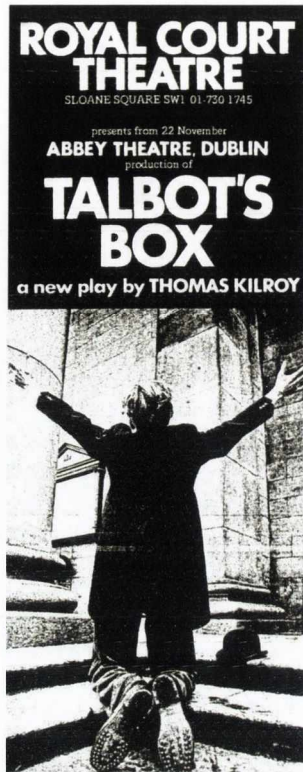


Fig. 1.3 Flyer for *Talbot's Box* at the Royal Court, 1977.

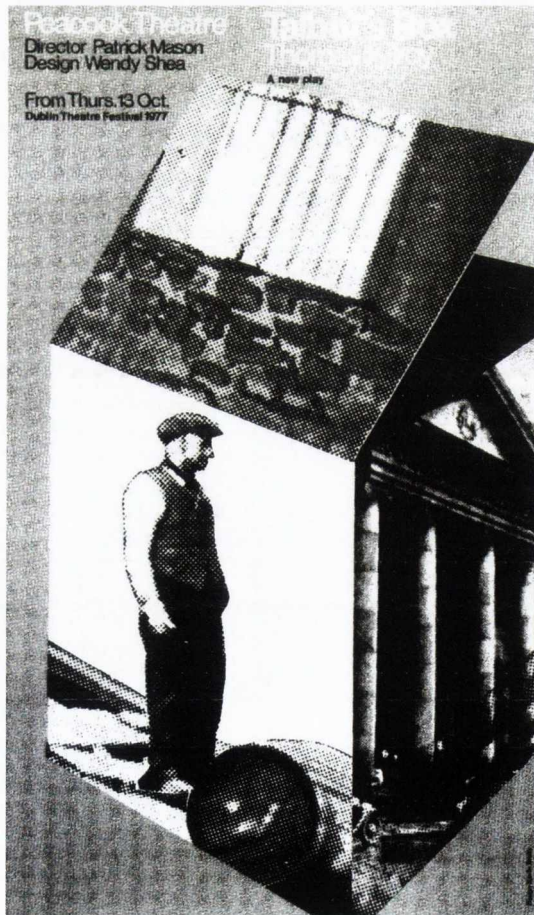


Fig. 1.4 Abbey Theatre poster for *Talbot's Box*, 1977.



THE ABBEY THEATRE, DUBLIN  
presents their Dublin Theatre Festival hit

# A LIFE

a new play by the author of "Da"  
Hugh Leonard



at **THE OLD VIC**

TWO WEEKS ONLY 4-16 February 1980

with  
CYRIL CUSACK, STEPHEN BRENNAN, DAPHNE CARROLL,  
INGRID CRAIGIE, GARRETT KEOGH, DEARBHLA MOLLOY,  
PHILIP O'FLYNN, MAURREEN TOAL.  
Directed by JOE DOWLING and designed by WENDY SHEA.

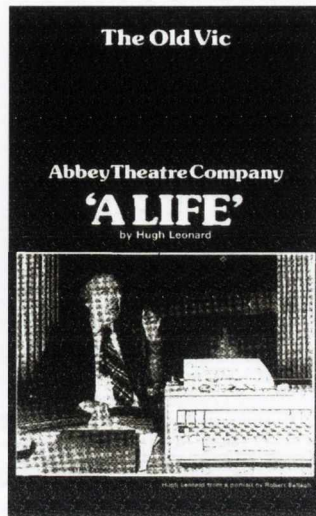


Fig. 1.5 Cyril Cusack in Abbey Theatre flyer for *A Life*, 1980.

Fig. 1.6 Robert Ballagh painting of Hugh Leonard for the cover of *A Life* programme, Abbey Theatre/The Old Vic, 1980.



Fig. 1.7 Scene from *A Life* on the Abbey stage, 1979. From left: Stephen Brennan, Daphne Carroll, Garrett Keogh and Dearbhla Molloy.

play through which to understand the Troubles of the late twentieth century and later still it would become a hallmark theatre event against which to measure the success of Ireland in the new millennium, as I will argue in Chapter Five.

Fortuitous events aside, the reason that the UK transfers represented a recuperation of meaning and authority for the Abbey was that the transfers were smaller-scale, they were the participation in an event. The US tours on the other hand were designated performances, as such, specifically-mounted events with all the focus on the Abbey. There were no other companies present to participate in a discourse and to allow for texture in the production. The original Abbey tours were a showcase of the repertoire, while later they involved just one major classic upon which the tour depended. In a festival, I would argue, the Abbey joined in a globalised repertoire, sharing in contemporary theatrical practice and with less of a burden of representation, and a freedom to say something new, and so the Abbey company had the potential, in these later UK transfers, to be makers of, not just bearers of, meaning.



## Chapter Two:

### Long Night's Journey into Day: 1985-1993

Tours and transfers during this period:

*Endgame/Rockaby* (Greece, 1985); *The Great Hunger* (UK, France, 1986, USSR, US 1998); *Mother of all the Behans* (UK, 1987); *The Field* (USSR, US, 1988); *Playboy of the Western World* (UK, US, 1988; China, 1989; US, Canada, 1990); *Exit/Entrance* (UK, 1988); *A Whistle in the Dark* (UK, 1989); *I Am Of Ireland* (UK, Italy, US 1989); *Joyicity* (France, 1989; UK 1990; US, Canada, 1991); *Ghosts* (US, 1990); *The Shadow of a Gunman* (New Zealand, Australia, UK, 1990); *Moon for the Misbegotten* (US, 1990); *Dancing at Lughnasa* (UK, US, Australia, 1990-1992); Hedda Gabler (UK, 1991); *The Patriot Game* (UK, 1991); *Faith Healer* (UK, 1992); *Wonderful Tennessee* (US, 1993)

#### Introduction: A Static Horde of Riches

Rather than seeing itself as the interior of a static horde of riches, the Abbey seeks to be at the cutting edge of a new world, and to be led by the imaginations of writers for whom the relationship they have to the Irish past may well be troubled, uncertain or even, in some cases, non-existent.

Patrick Mason, *Dancing at Lughnasa* programme note, 1991.

The Abbey Theatre's international tours and transfers from 1985 to 1993 begin with a Beckett play and end with a Beckettian one. The tours reveal a use of performance networks, local, international and global, which contributed to the

profound repositioning and recoding of Ireland's national theatre within global theatre discourse. During this time, the evolving symbol of the national theatre underwent its most profound change since its establishment.

This chapter will explore the dialectical tension between a variety of representations of Ireland on international stages by the Abbey Theatre and the circumstances in which they were performed (the flow of politics, new writing, international theatre networks and so on), to show how the Abbey's international tours during this period increased its cultural mobility and contributed to changing the international face of the Abbey, as well as Irish theatre in general, through, occasionally, providential confluences of events. As Patrick Mason describes this period, it is a demonstration of 'The Art of What Happens'.

Mark Ravenhill has stated that theatre is 'a continuum through which cultures both assert and question themselves.'<sup>127</sup> In the period under consideration, Ireland underwent profound change; and the political climate left its mark on theatre culture. It is particularly discernable in the touring undertaken by the Abbey Theatre at the time, and the reception and interpretation of this changing Ireland profoundly repositioned the Abbey as an international brand. This happened through the mediation of culture that took place as a result of the plays staged by the Abbey through local, national and global networks.

*The Playboy of the Western World* and *The Shadow of a Gunman* are two examples of the commonplace productions coming out of the Abbey at that time: predictable, old-fashioned versions of classic plays that made little critical impact, despite their stagings in New Zealand and China representing new touring ground for the Abbey. In a sense these plays characterise the worst of globalised culture: generic and with too broad an appeal to be truly meaningful. A smaller, initially unassuming project, Tom Mac Intyre's Peacock-based *The Great Hunger* (1983) effected a more profound change in the Abbey Theatre's performance of Irish culture on international stages. A series of mounting successes led to the major international tour of the play. Such was the unusual

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<sup>127</sup> Cited in Dan Rebellato, *Theatre and Globalization*, (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009) p. vii.

nature of this play to represent the national theatre that the Abbey itself unknowingly sabotaged the Russian and US tour by adding to the bill a play that would satisfy conservative expectations of the Abbey, but that would ultimately undermine the subversive gesture of *The Great Hunger*. Nonetheless the tour was an important element in the emergence of a new Abbey Theatre.

Another act of subversion occurred in the tour of Tom Murphy's *A Whistle in the Dark*, directed by Druid Theatre's Garry Hynes for the Abbey Theatre. The Royal Court transfer in the 1980s is an example of an Abbey Theatre international tour being taken on by a director who drew upon her own distinctive approach and her own company resources to circumvent the Abbey's monolithic reputation, thereby simultaneously reviving both the Abbey's reputation and the Murphy play for a British audience.

As the heavily guarded borders of the old Abbey were reluctantly abandoned, Brian Friel's *Dancing at Lughnasa* was to become the most significant touring event in the latter half of the twentieth century for the Abbey Theatre and probably Irish theatre in general. The play was an unexpected box office and critical coup for the Abbey, and its subsequent commercial success lifted the company in to a new period of cultural mobility. The success of the play and its far-reaching tour offered international audiences a new set of expectations of the national theatre and a renewed interaction with Irish theatre. *Lughnasa* offered a new mode of Irish play, one that quite aptly challenged shared memory but that did not disrupt preconceptions of autochthony, nostalgia and pastoralism in the Irish play. These events show the importance of the Abbey's international tours and how representing the nation on international stages was a force in the reorientation of Irish identity in a global context during this time.

### **Stalemate: *Endgame/Rockaby***

To understand the implications of the extra-literary events in which the Abbey's tours from 1985-1993 were embedded, it is necessary to consider briefly the financial and political circumstances in the Abbey at the time. Ireland in the 1980s was undermined by high national debt. The country's growing indebtedness, high unemployment, emigration, and high tax rates all



discouraged foreign investment. It was a politically unstable period, with ongoing sectarian violence in Northern Ireland, and governments in the Republic in some cases lasting less than a year (with, at one point, three elections in 18 months).<sup>128</sup>

Ireland in the 1980s and especially in the early 1990s underwent a dramatic change economically and politically. In 1982, the centenary of the birth of James Joyce, the Gate theatre co-founder Hilton Edwards died, signalling an end of an era for that major Irish theatre. Meanwhile that year the Arts Council grant to the Abbey reached £1 million for the first time.<sup>129</sup> Though a symbolic figure, this was neither enough to cover the cost of capital spending, nor the wages of the increasingly large resident company, and the high VAT rate of 23% on theatre box office receipts imposed additional pressure. In the same year, the then Artistic Director, Joe Dowling, announced in the press that the inadequate subsidy the theatre received from the Arts Council was 'forcing the repertoire of a commercial theatre on the Abbey,' and, by 1984, the main stage auditorium presented only revivals of established plays.<sup>130</sup>

In theatre terms, there was a shift in most Irish companies, with Field Day (established in 1980) and Charabanc (1983) encouraging more politically-aware theatre (while later the 1985 Anglo-Irish agreement indicated the possibility of the Northern Irish Troubles being brought peacefully to an end). Writers like Stewart Parker and Frank McGuinness were beginning to find mainstream audiences.

The Abbey Theatre lurched from problem to problem with internal politics. In January 1986 Christopher Fitz-Simon was appointed artistic director of the Abbey, but resigned in July, giving lack of finance as one reason among others. However the Abbey showed a respectable surplus of £25,000 that summer, after months of financial crisis. In December Vincent Dowling became AD.

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<sup>128</sup> Rae Penniman, Howard and Brian Farrell, *Ireland at the Polls, 1981, 1982, and 1987: A Study Of Four General Elections*, American Enterprise Institute for Public Policy Research.

<sup>129</sup> Arts Council of Ireland *Annual Report*, 1982.

<sup>130</sup> Ray Comiskey, 'How Stands the Abbey?', *The Irish Times*, 25 October 1984.

That same year saw the launch of the National Lottery in Ireland, with the promise of support to sport, tourism, welfare, national heritage and the arts. However at the same time the Arts Council was forced to suspend grant aid to a number of festivals, including the Dublin Theatre Festival and the native theatre touring scheme. The DTF survived by raising funds in the private sector, and its Arts Council funding was restored the following year.

It was a busy touring period despite financial constraints. In 1988 for its 60th Anniversary the Gate Theatre brought *I'll Go On* and *Juno and the Paycock* to New York where they played simultaneously at the Lincoln Centre and on Broadway during the New York International Festival of the Arts to enormous success. Meanwhile Druid brought *The Playboy of the Western World* to Sydney, and this was to be the important spark in the origin of O'Punksky's Theatre Company, discussed in Chapter Five.

The Abbey was able to inexpensively represent the national theatre with one-actor shows such as *Mother of All the Behans*, with Rosaleen Linehan, which toured to Edinburgh in 1989, and thereafter North America, to great acclaim; and *I am of Ireland* with Bosco Hogan enjoyed positive notices in Rome. Meanwhile the period saw the Abbey take *The Shadow of a Gunman* on the company's first Australia tour. By 1991 Dublin was nominated 'City of Culture' and Garry Hynes became AD of the Abbey, the same year as the publication of the controversial three-volume *Field Day Anthology of Irish Writing*.

The Abbey Theatre in the early eighties drew frequent criticism in the press, particularly for the dearth of new Irish writing on the stage and for the perception that it represented neither a desirable nor relevant forum for the country's major playwrights. Brian Friel, already one of Ireland's most successful living playwrights, was now generally associated with Field Day Theatre Company in Derry, which he had established with actor Stephen Rea in 1980. Hugh Leonard had publicly declared he had lost interest in writing for the Abbey, as it had 'too many green patriots on the board' (a characteristic exaggeration, as



his *Patrick Pearse Motel* would play in the Abbey the following year).<sup>131</sup> While the Abbey produced the plays of Tom Murphy with some regularity, the reluctance of the board to stage his 1983 *The Gigli Concert* (overcome by Joe Dowling) was publicised in the Irish press.<sup>132</sup> Murphy's having then joined Druid Theatre Company in Galway as Writer-in-Association drew attention to Hynes's company as a more collaborative, modern one.

It was generally accepted that too much debate and energy was being diverted into demoralising money problems, and that the discourse engendered by the national theatre was inappropriately focussed on those problems. Such was the financial pressure, the media reported, that as well as very restrictive budgeting for productions, 'actors accustomed to time-honoured free cups of tea and coffee during breaks in rehearsal found they now had to pay, which caused some ribald rumblings in the company.'<sup>133</sup> In 1985 a production of Sheridan's *School for Scandal* was cancelled due to increasing financial problems and no replacement production was arranged. The play had already been postponed for a production of Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice*, which, though costly, was well attended. Moreover some expensive productions failed to bring in expected revenue. Eugene O'Neill's *Long Day's Journey into Night* (1956) showed a seat capacity of just 20%, and in November the Abbey cut short the run of its revival of Tom Murphy's *The Sanctuary Lamp* (showing 30% of capacity).<sup>134</sup>

The Abbey Board met in May 1985 to discuss the deficit. A programme of cost-cutting was implemented, which involved staff reductions and a limitation on the hiring of freelance personnel – widely speculated to be a major cause of the deficit; the Board also appointed consultants to examine the operations of the company and to prepare a report. It was thought that these new restrictions on the hiring of outside personnel, in a company struggling to overcome its own

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<sup>131</sup> Ray Comiskey, 'How Stands the Abbey?', *The Irish Times*, 25 October 1984.

<sup>132</sup> 'I am reliably informed from within the Abbey that neither *The Great Hunger* nor *The Gigli Concert* would have been staged had their scripts been subject to inspection by the board.' David Nowlan, 'The Abbey: A Suitable Case for Concern', *Irish Times*, 26 September, 1985. This

<sup>133</sup> Comiskey, 25 October 1984.

<sup>134</sup> The Abbey confirmed to *The Irish Times* that its policy was that any play had to succeed in attaining at least 65% to justify its continuance in the main auditorium. It was replaced with *The Tailor and Antsy*, PJ O'Connor's adaptation of the book by Eric Cross.



insularity, was the source of contention between Joe Dowling and the Board, before his unexpected resignation a year before his contract was due to expire.<sup>135</sup> It was also speculated that Dowling had resigned over artistic decisions, including his supposed rejection of a play by board member Ulick O'Connor. Tomás Mac Anna denied this at the time, but the Abbey Board would garner a reputation for heavy-handed involvement. Dowling's sudden resignation just eighteen months into his second contract with the Abbey caused controversy, and speculation as to the cause of the departure of the respected young director would not reflect well upon the theatre.<sup>136</sup>

The Abbey announced it was back in black by the following August, and Tomás Mac Anna became interim Artistic Director.<sup>137</sup> Meanwhile Frank McGuinness's *Observe the Sons of Ulster Marching Towards the Somme* (1985), directed by Patrick Mason, was playing at the Peacock, and after a slow start began to receive positive word-of-mouth and good attendance. Soon identified as an important event in Irish theatre, the play was taken on a national tour, before returning at the end of 1985 to the main stage.

The publicly played out financial crisis of the Abbey shows an institution struggling on the one hand to compete as a relevant international company while attempting to cover expenses on the other. The Abbey itself was developing a reputation as out-dated, particularly when, in October, programme notes for Graham Reid's *Callers*, (a play about the Troubles in Northern Ireland), were censored by the manager and Artistic Director.<sup>138</sup>

After the resignation of Joe Dowling, the interim Artistic Director Tomás Mac Anna was succeeded by then script editor Christopher Fitz-Simon, who took over

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<sup>135</sup> Carol Coulter, 'Abbey Aims to Reduce Deficit', *Irish Times*, 06 May 1985.

<sup>136</sup> In an interview Dowling told Anthony Roche that his departure was provoked not by a personality clash, which he would have been confident of persevering under, but rather because the Abbey board had made structural changes that undermined Dowling's authority as AD. This is discussed further in Anthony Roche, 'The Not-So-Artistic Abbey Theatre', *The Irish Literary Supplement*, Fall, 1985, p. 6.

<sup>137</sup> *Irish Times*, 31 August 1985.

<sup>138</sup> 'Abbey censors programme notes' *The Irish Times*, 4 October 1985. Reid refused to discuss the matter in the press. He would not divulge what the notes contained, except to say that they had included material from an earlier play written for television. The reason the management gave for their turning down the programme notes was that they 'might offend audiences in the Peacock Theatre'.

as AD on 16 January 1986 (but he in turn was to resign after only six months, leading to a 'revolving door' of ADs for the theatre).<sup>139</sup>

The Abbey in the mid 1980s, therefore, was forced into a generally conservative programme of events as a result of crisis management. While 1980s theatre saw the gradual increase in international festivals, which offered many more funding opportunities, there were prohibitive funding-related problems in Dublin and the more expensive enterprise of touring inevitably suffered. As Patrick Mason recalls, at that time funding to tour was still extremely limited.<sup>140</sup> There was an onus on the theatre to take productions on national tour (and national touring was unaffected, generally speaking), but it was considered prohibitively expensive to go abroad as the company had once done in the beginning of the century.

As tours were so infrequent for the Abbey, the company usually travelled with a press corps.<sup>141</sup> Gus Smith from the *Sunday Independent* was one such accompanying journalist on the 'prestigious' and 'all too rare' tour to Greece in 1985. Smith reported that the Abbey had not toured in years, despite its tradition of doing so, but that he had been informed that a plan of touring was in place.

[Martin Fahy, general manager] tells me there is a distinct possibility that the company will visit the Singapore Festival next June and from there may go on to Japan. [The Abbey] have formal invitations for the visits and are anxious to accept them [...] The scheduled tour of Australia will probably go on in 1987.<sup>142</sup>

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<sup>139</sup> Fitz-Simon announced his intention to resign the post. Citing financial limitations and a role that was largely 'desk-bound' and administrative, Fitz-Simon criticised the lack of control afforded the Artistic Director while avoiding reference to internal politics. Later Fergus Linehan archly commented that 'Joe Dowling, after his controversial exit, might be called the Ghost of Abbey Past, Patrick Mason the Ghost of Abbey Present and likely to fade more and more into the background as his international career blossoms, Garry Hynes the Ghost of Abbey Yet to Come [...]', Linehan, Fergus, 'The Real Problems of the Abbey', *Irish Times*, 22 December, 1986.

<sup>140</sup> Interview with Patrick Mason, August 2010.

<sup>141</sup> Interview with Patrick Mason, August 2010.

<sup>142</sup> Gus Smith, 'Abbey's *Endgame* in Greece', *Sunday Independent*, 10 November 1985.



These were just some tours cited in the press that did not come to fruition due to scheduling conflicts but mostly financial restrictions.<sup>143</sup> Additional limitations were also as much artistic as monetary: internationally the reputation of the company was extremely limiting too.

One opportunity arose in August 1985 when the EEC Ministers of Culture nominated Athens as the 'cultural city' of the European Community that year. Not a festival in the more typical sense, member communities were encouraged to bring works of art to the Greek capital and funding was made available. Ireland's Minister, Ted Nealon, proposed the Abbey Theatre take a production to Greece. The Greek Ministry of Culture, however, requested 'either a classic Irish drama or a work that would be known in Greece'.<sup>144</sup> What this request suggests is that during an event to celebrate culture in an international context, Ireland's national theatre was invited on the stipulation they *not* perform contemporary Irish drama. The condition that a recognisable play be performed is understandable in the context of a struggling local theatre that needs to be commercially viable, but the limitation as imposed by the Greek Minister reflects a lack of faith in the relevance and proficiency of the Irish National Theatre performing in an international context. As such, the ironic decision taken by the Abbey was to bring a revival of the recent double bill of Samuel Beckett's *Endgame* (1957) with Godfrey Quigley and Barry McGovern, and *Rockaby* (1980) with Marie Kean directed by Ben Barnes (see Figs. 2.1 and 2.2). While the work of Samuel Beckett hardly represents mainstream theatre, on this occasion it was the safer option: Beckett's work was internationally known and *Endgame* is generally considered one of his more accessible plays. Though a short tour with a (relatively) conservative billing, the Abbey was still dependent on a grant from the Cultural Relations Committee of the Department of Foreign Affairs and sponsorship by the manufacturers of Baileys.<sup>145</sup> Despite taking the safer route of

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<sup>143</sup> The Abbey visited Hong Kong in 1989, New Zealand and Australia in 1990, but did not get to Singapore until 2000.

<sup>144</sup> David Nowlan, 'Abbey To Perform Two Beckett Plays In Greece' *The Irish Times*, 31 August 1985.

<sup>145</sup> Negotiations were still under way for a proposed tour of Australia the following year, when Baileys might also be the major sponsor. Fitz-Simon was said to be in Australia having discussions with the Elizabethan Trust, the Australian Organisation that invited the Abbey to tour.



touring with a recently successful revival rather than taking a risk with a new play, the tour was still financially demanding for the Abbey.

The double bill, first produced the previous year, returned to the Peacock on 30 October, before beginning its tour of Greece, playing in the National Theatre in Athens on 12-13 November and the Municipal in Agrinion on 15 November 1985.<sup>146</sup> Reaching Athens, the Abbey double bill played to a full house in the National Theatre, and the response was such that the Abbey was said to have been invited back, and hoped to bring Brendan Kennelly's *Antigone*.<sup>147</sup> As well as enthusiastic audiences, the production had good critical feedback, albeit little of it.<sup>148</sup>

The postwar phenomenon of international arts festivals, such as those in Avignon, Dublin, Edinburgh, Venice, is an important process of globalisation and shows, as Dan Rebellato argues, 'the ever-greater interconnectedness of theatre cultures'.<sup>149</sup> International festivals are an opportunity for dialogue between theatre communities. In a festival context, a company like the Abbey may bring the most avant garde work they wish to showcase, while coming away with the experience of the best of contemporary theatre.

International art festivals are regarded as a byword for ethnic diversity; Nicholas Ridout writes about them as an opportunity to generate 'engagements that ordinary discourse and everyday encounters do not permit.'<sup>150</sup> Festivals like the Edinburgh International Festival and Fringe and Dublin Theatre Festival offer productions from different cultures the opportunity to gain international recognition. Offering a less political context on one hand, festivals are also a site in which cultural specificity can risk being interpreted as avant-garde. As such a theatre enjoys greater autonomy to present new writing in a festival.

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<sup>146</sup> 'Double Bill of Beckett', *Evening Herald*, 26 October 1978. Peter Thompson, 'Peacock Revives Beckett Plays', *Irish Press*, 31 October 1985.

<sup>147</sup> Though they have yet to do so in 2011. 'Full House for Abbey Tour', *Irish Times*, 13 November 1985 and John Finegan, 'Abbey Get Invite Back to Greece', *Evening Herald*, 16 November 1985.

<sup>148</sup> Smith reported that one critic praised the 'clarity of voices'. Gus Smith, 'Beckett Triumph', *Sunday Independent*, 17 November 1985

<sup>149</sup> Rebellato, p. 8.

<sup>150</sup> Nicholas Ridout, 'Eat, Drink, LIFT: Re-ections Is this correct? on the Festival', *Theater Forum*, 22 (2003), 45-47, [109]. What does this last figure in square brackets refer to?

The tour to Greece, therefore, was not a typical festival situation: the Abbey brought theatre while other countries brought different art forms, and most importantly, there was a stipulation in place accompanying the funding that limited the scope of the Abbey's touring possibilities. As such the Greek tour did not offer the most important benefit of an international festival: a depoliticised context and a liberal audience open to the best of new work from the theatre.

*Endgame* offers its audience a meditation on despair and stagnation. The characters Hamm and Clov are co-dependent, bickering daily in what appears to be an endless cycle of repetitive behaviour, staving off death on the one hand and decrying life on the other, without satisfactory resolution as neither can break out of their habits, a reflection of the Abbey's status at the time, to say nothing of W's fate in *Rockaby*.

One significant instance at this time of the Abbey's presentation of new writing in a festival context was Tom Mac Intyre's *The Great Hunger*, a play that came about as part of an experimental project. Because of support the play had from the Abbey Theatre, *The Great Hunger* was invited to the Fringe of the Edinburgh International Festival; then out of the transfer to the Fringe it won critical acclaim on its own terms. The departure from Abbey normalcy was challenged in a later revival, when the play reached the US. By that time *The Great Hunger* had transferred to several cities. However in the decision to include another apparently complementary play (John B Keane's *The Field*) on the high-profile Russian tour, the Abbey undermined the very play that was reshaping its international reputation.

### **Subversion Subverted: *The Great Hunger* and *The Field***

The interpretive strategies of the theatre-going public are redefined and reshaped by exposure to new drama, but finding an opportunity to present new drama was exceptionally difficult for the Abbey Theatre. One such endeavour was the production, revival and tour of *The Great Hunger* from 1983 to 1988 (see

Figs. 2.3, 2.4, 2.5). In an attempt to redress the problems facing the theatre and to rescue the company from the repertoire of a commercial theatre, the decisions of the Abbey Theatre in the 1980s and early 1990s show attempts at intervening in its audience's perceptions by disturbing the conventions in place. Patrick Mason was chosen as one agent of that disturbance. As discussed in the previous chapter, Mason's first tour on behalf of the Abbey was the groundbreaking and controversial 1979 transfer of *Talbot's Box* by Thomas Kilroy to London.

In the lead-up to *The Great Hunger* tour, in Mason's experience, there were few Abbey Theatre tours mostly because funding was limited:

At that time, there was an absolutely strict ruling that none of the public money given to the Abbey could be spent outside the jurisdiction. So this meant that if you were invited to the Royal Court, for example, you had to make a deal. The Cultural Relations Committee might give you money toward air fares, freight or to get settled, but there was no way they'd put money toward say, guaranteeing the booking or against box office loss or towards accommodation. Therefore you had to get a guarantee of the deal with the receiving body, i.e. the Royal Court [in the case of *Talbot's Box*], and they could apply to various bodies, not government. So this put a natural limitation on how much international touring you could do.<sup>151</sup>

If there was little funding for high-profile productions, it was even less likely that a production like *The Great Hunger* would end up representing the Abbey Theatre on its first official USSR tour, but that was what eventually happened.

During the end of the 1970s and into the 1980s, under Joe Dowling's artistic directorship, Mason, in an experimental workshop operating out of the Peacock (credited in the programme as 'Peacock Workshop Productions'), collaborated with poet and playwright Tom Mac Intyre, and actor Tom Hickey, to produce a series of movement-led performances such as *Find the Lady* (1977), *The Bearded Lady* (1984), *Rise up Lovely Sweeney* (1985), and *The Great Hunger* (1983), adapted from the poem by Patrick Kavanagh (1942). Many of Mac Intyre's plays

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<sup>151</sup>Interview with Patrick Mason, August 2010.



draw upon well-known stories or poems for their starting point. *Find the Lady* is based on the Salomé/John the Baptist story, *The Bearded Lady* derives from Jonathan Swift's life, and *Sweeney* refers to 'Buile Shuibhne', the medieval Irish poem. In most cases the lyrical or narrative quality associated with the text yields to a strong visual narrative. The projects undertaken by the group were driven by a participation in an international theatre discourse that synthesised local experience.

Tom Mac Intyre's early experience of theatre was of the Anew MacMaster fit-ups that visited Cavan where he grew up, as well as amateur productions staged locally. A play, in Mac Intyre's experience, 'was people standing on a stage, talking non stop for an hour and a half', and so by way of reaction he became interested in exploring gesture, movement and the visual in theatre. He also cites as his 'introduction' to choreographical possibilities the fair in Bailieborough in the 1940s. Witnessing the ritual and gesture of the cattle mart as a child, was, Mac Intyre has said, 'a quite extraordinary theatre', and that rural pageantry would most be revisited in *The Great Hunger*.<sup>152</sup> That resolutely local quality that interested Mac Intyre was combined with avant-garde and experimental theatre practice. Mac Intyre travelled to London, Poland and New York in the 1970s, which brought him in contact with the avant-garde in cinema, theatre and dance.<sup>153</sup> In his approach to adapting *The Great Hunger* for the stage, Mac Intyre also drew on an experience he had of visiting the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum in Boston in the 1980s, during which he saw an image of men and women making hay. This he took as a jumping-off point, developing an 'incantatory language': a verbal score to match the visual impact.<sup>154</sup>

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<sup>152</sup> Sean Rocks, ed., *Playwrights in Profile: Tom Mac Intyre*, RTÉ Radio podcast <<http://www.rte.ie/radio1/playwrights/1160140.html>> [accessed 10 December 2007].

<sup>153</sup> He studied, among others, the dance theatre of Merce Cunningham and Meredith Monk, Russian director, actor and producer Vsevolod Meyerhold, Adolphe Appia, the Swiss theorist of stage lighting (whose theories were concerned with light, space and the human body as equally important elements in a *mise-en-scène* – crucial to Mac Intyre's conception of Kavanagh's poem onstage), Edward Gordon Craig, the British modernist theatre actor, director and designer, Polish theatre maker and innovator Jerzy Grotowski, Russian filmmaker Andrei Tarkovsky, and British theatre director and theorist Peter Brook. *Playwrights in Profile*, RTÉ Radio 1, February-April 2007.

<sup>154</sup> *Playwrights in Profile*, 2007.

Mason refers to the Peacock Workshop group as a 'confluence of talents' that developed over time, (and they referred to themselves as 'The Lunatics in the Basement').<sup>155</sup> The same influences that were significant to Mac Intyre were familiar to the members of the Workshop.<sup>156</sup> Vincent O'Neill, who played the Priest, studied with the well-known French mime artist Marcel Marceau and drew upon the influence of the 'total theatre' of British writer and director Steven Berkoff (who similarly blended the local and global in his approach to performance, running a Fringe theatre venue in London, but also acting in television and big budget Hollywood films).

Of the many plays undertaken by the Peacock Workshop, *The Great Hunger* most substantially demonstrates cross-pollination in recent theatre. It reflects the study of various influences, the coming together of performers bringing their own experiences to bear on the production, the audience feedback that contributed to the modification and revision of the play over five years and the eventual tour which brought the play to international audiences with varying success. As an Abbey production, it was certainly unconventional, but came at a time when the mainstage production choices tended toward the conservative.

*The Great Hunger* is based on the long poem of the same title by Patrick Kavanagh, frequently cited as his best, which first appeared in the London-based *Horizon* in 1942 and which was issued in Dublin as a *Cuala Press* pamphlet by George Yeats.<sup>157</sup> The poem concerns the spiritual hunger, sexual frustration and loneliness of an archetypal Irish peasant character, Patrick Maguire, and is a reaction against the Revivalist pastoral idyll. This cult of what Edward Hirsch terms 'The Imaginary Irish Peasant', originating in the nineteenth century, 'deeply intensified during the early years of the Irish literary revival' when the Irish peasant was characterised for 'posterity', as a venerated emblem of independent Ireland and the lyrical possibilities that should be harnessed to justify its de-Anglicisation.<sup>158</sup> The noble peasant is a useful literary device on the

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<sup>155</sup> Interview with Patrick Mason, August 2010.

<sup>156</sup> Interview with Dermot Moore, August 2007.

<sup>157</sup> Patrick Kavanagh, *The Great Hunger, Selected Poems*, ed. by Antoinette Quinn, (London: Penguin, 1996), pp. 18-44.

<sup>158</sup> Edward Hirsch, 'The Imaginary Irish Peasant', *PMLA*, 106: 5, (1991), 1116-1133, [1116].



one hand, but also, as Hirsch points out, one that many Irish writers have since felt compelled to demythologise. Hirsch challenges the view of the Irish peasant as homologous in every incarnation; nonetheless it is a figure that has cast a long shadow on Irish literature since the Victorian period. Although the Abbey has almost always been reviewed internationally in terms of being an authentic source for the representation of the Irish peasant, because of the work of revivalists like Yeats, it has also overlapped as a site of subversion in the work of colleagues like Synge. One such demythologising endeavour is the character of Christy and those of the Mayo villagers in *The Playboy of the Western World*. In this regard, *The Great Hunger* was historically a congruent choice for a production. The most controversial and subversive element was not the subject matter as such, rather the nature of the performance by the Peacock Workshop.

Before *The Great Hunger* opened, it was announced in the press from the beginning that there would be open discussions with the director and writer after each preview.<sup>159</sup> Already this was an uncommon move for the Abbey, but there was no difficulty in drawing a response from the audience.<sup>160</sup> Tom Hickey remembers discussions being very tense. Mason and Mac Intyre faced considerable criticism and frustration, but persisted nonetheless.<sup>161</sup> The point of the discussion was to empower the Peacock audience in a way to which they were probably unaccustomed, given the central importance of the writer in most of the Abbey's major works from the repertoire. Secondly it was an exercise to gain and eventually incorporate feedback from the audience, so that the resultant revisions of the play would be recognisable, if unfamiliar in form. In another move unusual for a general Abbey audience, it was understood that the production was constantly a work in progress. As such, for instance, the first production of the play was advertised as a new play by Tom Mac Intyre 'from the poem by Patrick Kavanagh,'<sup>162</sup> and also as 'a dramatic improvisation on themes

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<sup>159</sup> 'Next Week in the Arts', *Irish Times*, 30 April 1983.

<sup>160</sup> Tom Mac Intyre, interviewed by Sean Rocks, *Playwrights in Profile*, 11 February 2007.

<sup>161</sup> On one occasion journalist Con Houlihan declared loudly 'I know you Mac Intyre, you're up to your old tricks!' in the auditorium. The response to aggressive audience feedback was often 'Yes, but do you recognise it?'. *Playwrights in Profile*, 2007.

<sup>162</sup> Display ad, *Irish Times* ad, 30 April 1983.



and motifs in the celebrated poem by Patrick Kavanagh',<sup>163</sup> then, in 1986, it was 'suggested by the poem by Patrick Kavanagh,' as the play evolved and took on its own life.<sup>164</sup>

The set was minimal but familiar. By design 'loosely defined, fluid as possible' it was laden with identifiable meaning.<sup>165</sup> Just as the rural Irish pub in *The Field* is as reliable a signifier of Ireland as a kitchen in a cottage mise-en-scène, *The Great Hunger* set comprised three metonyms: a wooden gate signifying the land/farm, a tabernacle to indicate the church, and, along with a black kettle and bucket, the 'Mother' prop: a large wooden carving of a crude human figure (Fig. 2.5). Part chair, part statue, it denoted both 'Mother' and the well-known Christian image of the statue of the Virgin. It also was placed at the head of a pagan procession after 'Mother's death and was used to store items used throughout the play (the wire brush Maguire uses to clean it, for instance). Maguire, played by Tom Hickey, is caught between the triumvirate of church, land and Mother.

The play requires six players, three male and three female, and the Mother effigy. The dialogue, such as it is, includes fragments from the original poem. The play comprises scenes of atypically functioning speech: the characters recite fragments of lines from Kavanagh's original poem in incantatory manner; for instance, in scene five, during a mass sequence the 'prayers' of the congregation were made up of mundane small talk, including the line 'Hop back there, Polly, hoy back, woa, wae', (in the poem it evokes a typical exclamation in dealing with a horse), which here becomes a reiterated substitute for 'Amen'.<sup>166</sup> These and other phatic phrases served to evoke the dull routine in the lives of the 1940s rural Irish characters, as well as their failure to articulate sincere feeling. The actors mainly used physical gestures to recreate familiar events: from animalistic mime to gestures recognisable as typical of Irish church-going.

The rest of the action concerns re-enactments of certain events from the poem: Maguire sitting on the gate, Maguire watching young women, Maguire attending

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<sup>163</sup> 'Next Week in the Arts', *Irish Times*, 7 May 1983.

<sup>164</sup> 'Next Week in the Arts', *Irish Times*, 5 July 1986.

<sup>165</sup> *Playwrights in Profile*, 11 February 2007.

<sup>166</sup> Tom Mac Intyre, *The Great Hunger*, (Dublin: Lilliput Press, 2002), p. 33.

to his inanimate mother. As well as church scenes there is a pagan-style procession with the Mother effigy (after the death of Maguire's mother) and various domestic rituals dully enacted. However it was in the method of performance that those scenes were made strange to the Peacock audience. For instance Maguire dies in a striking scene that Tom Hickey enacted like a dying animal: 'His foot paws the ground searchingly [...] Soon enough he's satisfied.'<sup>167</sup> And the most notorious scene was the one in which Tom Hickey as Maguire mimes using a bellows on the fire and that gesture gradually morphs into masturbation. This was not a deviation from the poem, but was, according to Mason, the tipping point at which most audience members would leave the auditorium, if they had already become sufficiently outraged.<sup>168</sup>

But despite occasional hostility from audience members, *The Great Hunger* was well received by critics:

Full justice has not been done to its uniqueness as total theatre. [...] This is one of the best things the Abbey has done in recent years: the sort of play Synge might have written.<sup>169</sup>

Tom Mac Intyre's marvellously mute transposition of Patrick Kavanagh's *The Great Hunger*, which turned out to be one of the richest (and in some ways the saddest) comic plays of last year with yet another highly original character study by Tom Hickey in a fine production by Patrick Mason.<sup>170</sup>

Tom Mac Intyre's *The Great Hunger* [can] advance the whole world of theatre and so create the new ideas on which the commercial theatre, as much as the subsidised theatre, must ultimately depend for survival.<sup>171</sup>

In December 1984 *The Great Hunger* was nominated for 'Best New Play' in the Harvey's Irish Theatre Awards, with Patrick Mason winning the award for best director for *The Great Hunger*.

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<sup>167</sup> Mac Intyre, *The Great Hunger*, (Dublin: Lilliput, 2002), p. 52.

<sup>168</sup> Patrick Mason interview, 5 August 2010.

<sup>169</sup> Augustine Martin, 'Great Hunger', *Irish Times*, Elsewhere you seem to be going for the inclusion of the article: *The Irish Times*. 30 May 1983.

<sup>170</sup> David Nowlan, 'Gaiety Ideal Venue For Awards TV Show', *Irish Times*, 26 April 1984.

<sup>171</sup> David Nowlan, 'Subsidised and Commercial', *Irish Times*, 24 May 1984.

That same year Tom Mac Intyre also garnered more cultural capital when he was appointed to the Trinity College, Dublin Writer's Fellowship, (which was supported by the Trinity Trust as well as the Arts Council) after being made a member of Aosdána. During 'the last gasp of the old Abbey' *The Great Hunger* happened at a crucial point where there was an openness to the play – there was an appetite for something new and adventurous, and those involved were simultaneously being publicly venerated as important artists.<sup>172</sup> Perhaps without the confluence of those events, and had the Abbey finances not picked up, *The Great Hunger* would not have had such a sustained life at the Peacock. As it did, it was shown long enough to be attended by representatives of the Edinburgh Fringe festival, at which point the international career of *The Great Hunger* really took off.

As the newly appointed Abbey AD, in January 1986 Christopher Fitz-Simon announced a revival of *The Great Hunger* that would also play at the Opera House in Cork. By June the Abbey was invited by the lessee of Edinburgh's Assembly Rooms, William Burdett-Coutts, to perform *The Great Hunger* at the Edinburgh Fringe. From July to August, a revised production of *The Great Hunger* was staged at the Peacock, before the Edinburgh festival.<sup>173</sup> Opening in the Music Hall of the Assembly Rooms on 8 August for nine performances, *The Great Hunger* won the *Scotsman* Fringe First Award for best play early in the run, while generating debate over the number of walkouts by audience members after the interval.<sup>174</sup> Mason recalled the clash between official culture and those who responded well to the play:

On a couple of occasions people would stand up during the mass scene and say 'this is blasphemous' or 'I will not sit here!' or that sort of stuff and walk out. This was at the Assembly rooms for the Fringe [a small venue], but, because it was the Abbey, there was a huge invited official

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<sup>172</sup> Interview with Patrick Mason, August 2010.

<sup>173</sup> Funds were secured from the Cultural Relations Committee of the Department of Foreign Affairs, the British Overseas Unit and Irish Life for the Edinburgh transfer. Fergus Linehan, 'Backdrop', *Irish Times*, 7 June 1986.

<sup>174</sup> Owen Dudley Edwards, 'Abbey Theatre wins award at Edinburgh Festival', *Irish Times*, 15 August 1986.



audience, who basically all walked out. There were some very noisy seats [in the Assembly Rooms], and every time a seat went there was a loud 'clack' as it crashed up. It started after the first five minutes and then it got to the mass scene and more left, then it got to the masturbation scene, it was 'clack-clack-clack'. And it got to the point where I said to myself, 'If another seat goes, that's it, it's over'. And miraculously it stopped and the remaining audience stayed. And then I remember, when all the official guests had gone, we left and there was a *Time Out* sticker already on the poster outside saying 'Recommended'. Then the reviews came in, and then we packed [the house]. But every official opening night there was the same thing.<sup>175</sup>

The controversial 'walk-outs' which would follow the production on each tour generally always took place on opening night, when official representatives were invited. Arguably, attendant functionaries make up a more conservative than usual audience, and the reporting of those opening night walk-outs skewed the overall reception of the play, which was extremely favourable.

As positive notices came in from the Edinburgh reviewers, ticket sales were boosted further after the production won the *Scotsman* Fringe First award, (see Fig. 2.6). In light of the play's success in Edinburgh, it was announced in the Irish press that *The Great Hunger* would be performed as a finale for the Arts Festival in Monaghan upon returning from Scotland: a coup, given that there was no funding for the desired national tour following Edinburgh.<sup>176</sup> The play returned to Dublin and played at the Peacock as part of the Dublin Theatre Festival before transferring to the Belfast Festival, booking 'heavily' some weeks in advance.

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<sup>175</sup> Interview with Patrick Mason, August 2010.

<sup>176</sup> Frank McDonald, 'Abbey play for Monaghan festival', *Irish Times*, 18 August 1986.

The invitation came at relatively short notice: the arts festival was already underway for two days when it was announced. *The Great Hunger* was staged at the Tyrone Guthrie Centre in Annamakerrig, Monaghan for audiences of both the metropolitan artistic community, and the local residents of Annamakerrig. The recollection of cast member Dermot Moore is that while the artistic community appeared sceptical, the local residents' response was far more enthusiastic. (Interview with Dermot Moore, September 2009).

Then *The Great Hunger* returned to the Peacock in October for a four-week run, finding a new acceptance in its Irish audiences.<sup>177</sup>

The critical reputation of *The Great Hunger* was established: in January 1987 Patrick Mason told the Irish media that there were invitations to take *Rise Up Lovely Sweeney* to Edinburgh and London, and to take *The Great Hunger* to 'a festival of new wave theatre in New York.'<sup>178</sup> However *Rise Up Lovely Sweeney* did not transfer, and when *The Great Hunger* got to New York, it was not to participate in a festival. Instead, *The Great Hunger* was staged in Paris at the Théâtre de l'Alliance for three weeks in September, 1987.

This success was, then, at odds with the official narrative of the Abbey as a failure in the media at the time, as opinion pieces like this by Declan Kiberd show:

If the papers tell it true, the Abbey has seemed to lurch from one crisis to the next – poor houses for expensive flops, bored audiences at pious revivals, internal anguish about forced redundancies and so on. [...] It was reported that there was dissatisfaction in government circles with both the performance and public perception of the Abbey.<sup>179</sup>

However Kiberd qualifies this dissatisfaction:

What, in fact, is the current public opinion of the Abbey? In the past year, the company dominated the Dublin Theatre Festival with *A Whistle in the Dark* while *The Great Hunger* and *Observe the Sons of Ulster Marching Towards the Somme* won major accolades in Edinburgh and London. You don't read much about these victories in the papers, but you do read of the critics' understandable anger at the theatre's play-safe programming in many other areas.<sup>180</sup>

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<sup>177</sup>'Backdrop' *Irish Times*, 18 October 1986, David Nowlan, 'Theatre Festival Takings Above Target', *Irish Times*, 8 October 1986.

<sup>178</sup> 'What they will be doing this year', *Irish Times*, 5 January 1987.

<sup>179</sup> Declan Kiberd, 'National problems at the Abbey', *Irish Times*, 16 December 1986.

<sup>180</sup> *Ibid.*

What Kiberd observed, and many other commentators on the Abbey did not at the time, was that while the official narrative was extremely negative, in many practical terms the Abbey was on an upward trajectory with plays like *The Great Hunger*. But only three years after its premiere, *The Great Hunger* was considered by Kiberd, and by Fergus Linehan, to have been the success of better times.<sup>181</sup>

The Abbey's real problem, as Kiberd's article posits, was that:

Over the years, [the Abbey] has failed fully to identify with the community all around it, the urban community which supplies the bulk of its nightly audience. Instead, it is expected to represent 'the nation'; and the designation 'national theatre' hangs like an albatross around its neck. Its highly political board expects it to perform i) classic Irish drama; ii) new Irish plays and iii) major foreign works from the Greeks to Brecht. On a curtailed budget, with a permanent company of 22, this is an impossible mission. Small wonder that it seems at times not to know where it's going, or that its directors have no very clear idea as to the nature of their audience.<sup>182</sup>

Pointing out this lack of clarity as Kiberd does goes some way toward explaining what happened next on *The Great Hunger* tour. The combination of the paralysing conservative impulse extant in the company board and indeed among Irish audiences, the lack of funding and the pressure from the media contributed to the Abbey's own apparent sabotage of *The Great Hunger*'s international tours. The accusations of conservatism levelled against the theatre would be a self-fulfilling prophecy.

In Paris *The Great Hunger* ran from mid September into October at Le Théâtre de l'Alliance. The play was well-received in the French press, particularly in *Le Monde* and *Figaro*. *Le Monde* thought it astonishing and savage, and was as

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<sup>181</sup> Fergus Linehan, 'The Real Problems of the Abbey', *Irish Times*, 22 December 1986.

<sup>182</sup> Declan Kiberd, 'National problems at the Abbey', *Irish Times*, 16 December 1986.



positive on Hickey's performance as *Le Figaro*.<sup>183</sup> Attending the first night in Paris, Anne Sington wrote in the *Irish Times* that: 'The audience was rapturous but also somewhat baffled.'<sup>184</sup> While the Abbey Theatre struggled to win kudos among Dublin critics, it still maintained a positive reputation internationally, and so the increase in its profile as a result of *The Great Hunger* served to rekindle international links and, most importantly, helped in the necessary raising of funds for international touring. A prestigious invitation came for the Abbey to visit Russia.

In February 1988 the Abbey mounted a tour to the USSR with *The Great Hunger*, and it was decided that this tour should be accompanied by a revival of the recently staged *The Field*, directed by Ben Barnes. The cast included Niall Tóibín, Maire O'Neill, Eamon Kelly and Maire O'Sullivan. The Abbey plays had two performances each at the Moscow Arts Theatre and the Gorky Bolshoi Drama Theatre in Leningrad.

Under normal circumstances, the decision to bring a John B Keane play on the Abbey's first Russian tour might have generated debate as to its suitability – as Keane, although produced at the Abbey occasionally, had not been embraced by the national theatre despite his popularity among amateur drama groups. However the play's recent run at the Abbey had been well received and in this instance the Keane play fitted in the role of traditional Abbey play more than *The Great Hunger*.<sup>185</sup> *The Great Hunger* opened at the Bolshoi Theatre in Leningrad 10 February 1988, and then the Arts Theatre, Moscow on 17 February.<sup>186</sup> *The Field*, which had never been previously performed abroad by the Abbey, opened in Leningrad on 13 February and in Moscow on 20 February (see Fig. 2.8).

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<sup>183</sup> As reported in Anne Sington, 'Paris receives Abbey's MacIntyre play with rapture', *Irish Times*, 18 September, 1987.

<sup>184</sup> Ibid. Sington made a point in this article of writing that the first night audience had not been shocked by the blasphemous mass scene, though such an outcome was fairly unlikely in secular, metropolitan Paris.

<sup>185</sup> David Nowlan initially wrote a negative review of the production, but softened his stance as the play's run continued and the production proved popular with audiences: 'Excellence On Tap', *Irish Times*, 19 March 1987, Fergus Linehan, 'Happy Days at the Abbey', *Irish Times*, 7 March 1987

<sup>186</sup> David Nowlan, 'Abbey takes two plays to the Soviet Union', *Irish Times*, 6 February, 1988.

There is arguably a corrective behaviour discernable from the decision to include the Keane revival on the tour, especially as it happened during a time when *The Great Hunger* was generating debate in the Irish press over the 'suitability' of an atypical, avant garde performance representing the nation in the Abbey's first official trip to Russia. Abbey Theatre tours had until now generally been made up of a classic or well-known play performed by the best-known Abbey actors accompanied by (usually) a one-performer play such as *In My Father's Time* by Eamon Kelly which accompanied *The Plough and the Stars* in 1976. *The Great Hunger* was accompanied not by a smaller, Peacock equivalent (since it was the Peacock show), but a fairly conventional play. *The Field*, a drama set in rural Ireland, bore such similarities to *The Great Hunger* in terms of setting and anti-pastoral themes, that it functioned on the tour as the alternative, normative Irish peasant play: *The Great Hunger* was the new, challenging product of a convergence of experiences, and *The Field* was very much a safe bet: three acts, standard dialogue, and an easily recognisable theme of rural insularity.

*The Field* in the context of the USSR tour functioned as a response to changing economic and cultural processes in content rather than in form. Under the circumstances, the many similarities between the two plays compelled an unfavourable comparison between them. This and other extra-literary events combined to disrupt the critical success of *The Great Hunger*, an undermining of the subversive role of *The Great Hunger* as an Abbey Theatre play on international stages.

*The Field* (1965) is set in 1965.<sup>187</sup> While over 20 years old by the time it was toured, *The Field* was couched in a contemporary context. In Brendan Foreman's 1987 poster for the Abbey, Niall Tóibín's face is imposed over a landscape marked by telephone poles, indicating the contemporary setting but also the advent of modernity on the village in the play.<sup>188</sup> (See Fig. 2.7 below). It also

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<sup>187</sup> The version staged at the Abbey in 1987 and subsequently toured was an edited version; I will refer to that text. John B. Keane, *The Field and Other Irish plays*, (Dublin: Roberts Rinehart Publishers, 1994).

<sup>188</sup> *Playboys, Paycocks and Playbills: Abbey Theatre Poster Design from the 1970s and 1980s*, (Dublin: National Print Museum 2008).



functioned, according to director Ben Barnes, to 'remind us that these dark deeds belong not to some blood soaked medieval past, but to the middle decades of the century' in which the play was written.<sup>189</sup> Ironically Barnes's point was that contemporary, modern Ireland was still a site of brutality and violence, but the telegraph poles were a signifier to locate the play in the present, because the dated conventions within risk consigning it to irrelevance. The crux of the play is the tension between the village's domineering quasi-leader, Bull McCabe, and William Dee, an emigrant returned from England who wishes to buy the same disputed field as Bull. Dee is an outsider to the residents of Carraighthomand: one who deserted in a sense because he is originally from Galway, has lived in England for 12 years (and instantly offers his preference for living there), and only returns reluctantly, for the sake of his wife. Moreover his interest in the field is even less romantic than Bull's; he announces his intention to use it as a site for developing building materials which is shocking to the residents, as Bull articulates: 'Tis a sin to cover grass and clover with concrete.'<sup>190</sup> As such Dee can easily be seen as a signifier of the imposition of industry on rural Ireland. The relentlessness of modernisation and the power of money to undermine the most stubbornly-held local influence generate a potent sense of panic in the play, and Dee's murder by Bull is as understandable as it is savage. Keane's success in the play is to create a wholly unlikeable protagonist whose behaviour is somehow justified within the terms of the play. Bull is no Christy Mahon, but his character also offers persuasive eloquence and suggests to audiences that his commitment to the land could easily give way to violence.

The text is a treatment of economic globalisation and the permeability of culture as threatening processes: the Bull is a villain, but by evoking those fears Keane successfully makes him if not sympathetic, a figure to whom an audience could relate. The creeping influence of industrialisation and economic modernisation is felt throughout. For example, while waiting to confront and eventually kill William Dee, Bull and Tadhg hear an airplane overhead.<sup>191</sup> The representation

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<sup>189</sup> Barnes, in *Playboys, Paycocks and Playbills*, p. 72.

<sup>190</sup> John B. Keane, *The Field and Other Irish plays*, (Dublin: Roberts Rinehart Publishers, 1994), p. 130.

<sup>191</sup> Keane, p. 142.



of the anxiety of modernity and a desire to cling to notional traditional Irish past in some way reflects the anxiety felt by conservative commentators of the Abbey Theatre. In staging Synge's *Playboy* despite riots and controversy, the Abbey backed an anti-pastoral play that pushed against stereotypical representations of Ireland on stage and set the tone for the directors' vision. Ironically, as we have seen, the company nonetheless remained tarred with the brush of protecting a legacy of an ideal Ireland on stage, as the 1976 New York reviews of *Plough and the Stars* illustrate.

By the 1980s the Abbey, under financial duress, found itself compelled to curate a nostalgic staged Ireland that never really existed. After the backlash of irate audiences unused to Mac Intyre's approach to enactment, the Abbey's inclusion of *The Field* shows an attempt to placate a particular expectation of the theatre.

Both plays deal with hunger: *The Great Hunger* dealt not with famine as the title might suggest, but rather with the spiritual hunger of the peasant characters under the authority of church and state. In *The Field*, in an attempt to destabilize the villagers' loyalty to Bull so that someone will give evidence to help solve Dee's murder, the bishop gives a sermon on the 'hunger for land'.<sup>192</sup> Arguably both hungers derive from a deformed post-colonial conscience and the misapprehension that a rural culture is self-sufficient and undamaged by insularity. *The Great Hunger* when it transferred and toured, walked a line between local and global: ostensibly traditionally Irish on the one hand, adapting one of the country's best known poets after Yeats (and drawing criticism for being too local, too specific in its idiosyncratic mass-going scenes), and on the other hand representing contemporary theatre adapting and responding to recent theatre practice. *The Field* however, represented these concerns in a formally conventional manner.<sup>193</sup>

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<sup>192</sup> Keane, p. 149.

<sup>193</sup> To make comparisons between *The Great Hunger* and *The Field* it is necessary to consult the two available published texts, both of which were edited after initial productions and which are closest to the productions toured. This is more difficult with the fluid Mac Intyre piece, which tended to evolve as it was revived. As such I will refer where possible to occurrences specific to the play as it was toured, making use of descriptions in the press, interviews with those involved and available recordings from the Abbey Theatre archive.

*The Great Hunger* and *The Field* are both responses to a globalising world: *The Great Hunger* in form and *The Field* in content. *The Great Hunger* noticeably moved away from naturalistic playwriting, and offered both a different theatrical format (different that is, for an Abbey production), and something collaborative, between playwright, director and audience. This collaborative project goes some way toward internalising the fluidity of national boundaries and the greater exchange of ideas and culture brought about by an increasingly mediated culture. While *The Great Hunger* is ostensibly a localised play, scenes such as the collection of money in the church during mass are deliberately cast to suggest human mutuality. The collection boxes, which are positioned at the end of staffs, are used threateningly, particularly against one of the few female characters and a potential sexual interest of Maguire's, Agnes, in a manner that suggests shotguns. Mac Intyre, talking about the Moscow performance, argued that this scene had a resonance for the audience, and that he was asserting the universal image of the fascist in the gesture:

We discovered playing *The Great Hunger* in a variety of venues from Glasgow to Moscow to Manhattan that audiences, depending on the culture, will go voraciously for particular images. In Moscow and Leningrad the audiences unhesitatingly opened themselves to an image in the second half [...] involving the manipulation of church collection boxes as standards-cum-weapons, an image of the fascist in every human heart.<sup>194</sup>

While Mac Intyre made frequent use of the press to situate events surrounding the production in a positive light, here he articulates the intention behind what were perceived as too-specific nuances in the play.<sup>195</sup> Mac Intyre was not attempting to render a very local, specific text, as suggested by critics in 1988, but rather attempted to create universals in events such as that, to evoke familiarity in humanity but not at the expense of the local and Irish. As in Thomas Kilroy's *Talbot's Box*, here a very peculiarly Irish character – Patrick

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<sup>194</sup> Sheila Sullivan, 'Snow White, a Dwarf and a Mother Struggle', *The Irish Times*, 23 June 1988.

<sup>195</sup> Sullivan, 1988.



Maguire — was used to attempt to render a universal comment on shared human traits of loneliness and spirituality.

As we have seen, *The Great Hunger* was the result of the collaboration of several participants who brought their multiform influences to bear on the project before then incorporating audience responses. In this regard it is a play that embraces the fluidity of national identity and culture and draws upon the inevitability of cross-pollination to make a relevant contribution to the theatrical discourse. While this was the aspiration of the Peacock Workshop, it was not necessarily that of the Abbey Theatre as a whole. The inclusion of *The Field* represented a cautious correction of the overwhelmingly nonconformist *The Great Hunger*, which contributed in part to the changing reception of the play that was symptomatic of the very fear of the loss of cultural identity that drives the story of *The Field*. Formally very conventional, *The Field* explores many salient fears: the loss of tradition through inexorable modernity and the potential for commercialism to literally pave over Ireland's rural heritage: William Dee proposes locating a cement works in the field in question. The unseen 'tinker' characters to which the others refer are fluid and mobile. The most disturbing thing about them, it would seem, is not just the social status they represent but also the fact that they are not tied to the land and bear no loyalty to it. And while William Dee's character represents capital expansion, the Bull represents the power of money to corrupt the morality of ordinary people: it is Bull who places the land above human life, and his actions, though designated as immoral by the play, are crucially rendered understandable, almost forgivable, particularly in his last speech. The form, time and setting of the play might have been old-fashioned, but the fears expressed were congruent with changes in contemporary Irish society.

Vladimir Chernyaev, deputy director of the Soviet Ministry of Culture's theatre department told *The Irish Times* that the 1988 tour of the Abbey Theatre to the USSR tour, the result of year-long visits and negotiation, was organised with a view to enabling Soviet audiences 'to get acquainted with the traditions of Irish



acting and directing and creative trends in the Irish theatre'.<sup>196</sup> Chernyaev also commented that *The Field* would 'show the life of the common people in Ireland, their traditions, the main character traits of the rural population, their hard life and their humour'. Referring to the play as a documentary of the 'ordinary Irishman', he was unchallenged in the press.<sup>197</sup> Going on to commend the realism of Keane's play, Chernyaev also revealed that he had not in fact seen *The Great Hunger*. This was not necessarily problematic, as Chernyaev endorsed the play which he believed to be relevant as a poetic work 'which touched on the general human problems'. However this contributed to the anxiety in the Irish press when it was debated that the play, thought of as dramaturgically challenging but critically lauded, might not in fact have been legitimately endorsed if it had been seen.<sup>198</sup>

The Soviet Ministry of Culture had also considered the unlikely *Dialann Ocráis /Diary of a Hunger Striker* (1982) by Peter Sheridan, a play about the 1981 hunger strikes in Northern Ireland.<sup>199</sup> Unlike the Greek Ministry who limited the Abbey to a brief of 'classic or well-known', the serious consideration of *Dialinn Ocráis* by the Soviet Ministry discloses an attempt to host an Abbey play that was not just 'authentic' in its representation of issues of contemporary Irish nationalism, but one that was considerably provocative. This is significant in the context of the debates surrounding the Abbey's bringing *The Great Hunger* to Russia: as it was assumed that the representatives from Russia had not even seen the full play, and, it was implied, might not have chosen it otherwise. Without the comfort of a fuller endorsement, the press argued, the Abbey should

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<sup>196</sup> Conor O'Clery, 'Soviet Official welcomes Abbey's rural Ireland', *Irish Times*, 9 February, 1988.

<sup>197</sup> O'Clery, 1988.

<sup>198</sup> The MAT was founded in 1898 by Konstantin Stanislavsky and Vladimir Nemirovich-Danchenko, following a similar framework to the INTS of producing new, important writers and encouraging theatrical innovation and a rejection of melodrama. It was the company's international touring in the 1960s and 1970s that revived its status in world theatre.

<sup>199</sup> First performed in Hull, in a production directed by Pam Brighton, who later became AD of Dubbeljoint Theatre Company, one of the leading independent theatre producers in Belfast, Sheridan also submitted the play to the Abbey Theatre, but it was rejected. It was translated into Irish by Gearóid Ó Cairealláin, and the Irish-language version with Ciaran Hinds was staged at the Peacock during an Irish language theatre festival organised by Ray Yeates in 1985. The confrontational nature of the play was in this case mitigated by the context of the festival, simply because the theatre needed to attend to its obligation to Irish-language plays (which had waned since the end of Ernest Blythe's tenure), and because there were so few well-known topical Irish-language plays.

have rethought touring this challenging, atypical play. The choices and actions of the Ministry of Culture and the MAT show that it is highly unlikely that *The Great Hunger* would have been an unpleasant surprise when it opened. It was also the case that representatives from the MAT attended a reading of the play at the Abbey.<sup>200</sup>

The Abbey visit to Russia coincided with a growing appreciation in Russian theatre of the traditions of the Abbey: Synge's work had been translated and performed at the Moscow Arts Theatre, the MAT were sending people to Ireland to see what the Abbey was doing, in order to bring the Irish national theatre to its own audience. 1985 saw the publication of the first substantial Soviet monograph on Yeats by Valentina Riapolova: *WB Yeats and Irish Artistic Culture*, in which Riapolova showed how Yeats's theatrical devices had made a lasting impression on theatrical consciousness in Russia. It was followed by several more books and doctoral dissertations.<sup>201</sup>

Interviewed by *The Irish Times*, Valentina Riapolova pointed out that Yeats's *The Hourglass* (1905) in a January 1911 production at the Abbey Theatre made use of screens designed by the British modernist theatre director and scene designer Edward Gordon Craig. Craig then used similar scene design for his production of *Hamlet* at the MAT the following December.<sup>202</sup> Craig's scene design, using moveable set pieces, was soon widely used, but Riapolova identified Craig's development of the technique in the context of the genesis of the Abbey Theatre and MAT. In the 1988 tour of *The Great Hunger* Mac Intyre's reading of and use of the work of Edward Gordon Craig reasserted those theatrical filiations.

While the 1988 tour was the Abbey's first official visit to Russia, it was not the only theatrical dialogue between Russia and Ireland in the 1980s. In May 1988, the Dublin Youth Theatre visited as guests of the Soviet Centre of International Amateur Theatre Association to take part in the Footlights of Friendship Festival at Grodno, Belorussia. They brought an interpretation of *Gulliver's Travels* to the

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<sup>200</sup> Interview with Patrick Mason, August 2010.

<sup>201</sup> For details see Klaus Peter Jochum, *The Reception of WB Yeats in Europe*, (London; New York: Continuum, 2006), p. 147.

<sup>202</sup> Conor O'Clery, 'Soviet Official welcomes Abbey's rural Ireland', *Irish Times*, 9 February 1988.



festival, joining Hungarian, Czech and Polish theatre groups after the directors had attended their production of *Charades* by Lee Dunne on a visit to Ireland in 1985.<sup>203</sup> In 1989 the MAT brought Chekhov's *The Seagull* (1896) to the Dublin Theatre Festival in a production directed by Oleg Yefremov.

The inclusion of *The Field* by John B Keane was both a legitimisation for Keane by the national theatre, and a correction or balancing of the Mac Intyre play. If *The Great Hunger* was avant-garde and challenging, *The Field*, also set in a rural Ireland of the past, was a very conventional play with a more traditional story arc. The Abbey presented a dual identity in order to sanction such an unexpected disruption of convention.

The success of *The Great Hunger* at the Edinburgh Fringe increased the company's cultural capital at home and created an opportunity to participate in the intercontinental tour. It was toward the end of the play's trajectory that its success began to expire, for a number of reasons leading to support falling away. Most significantly, Niall Tóibín, well-known as a popular stand-up performer and the lead in *The Field*, dismissed *The Great Hunger* as unsuitable in a press conference in Russia. At a dinner for the cast, crew and accompanying press in Russia, Tóibín entertained with a performance of his well-known comedy repertoire, mostly jokes about regional differences and, most notoriously, jokes about people from Cavan. As Tóibín had been very critical of *The Great Hunger*, and the play's writer was originally from Cavan, the Peacock cast were unreceptive to Tóibín's speech. Dermot Moore, one of the cast of *The Great Hunger* recalls that their reluctance to laugh at the speech resulted in their being criticised as mirthless and conceited in front of the attendant press corps.<sup>204</sup> *The Great Hunger* had been accepted as dramaturgically challenging, but was now being publicly dismissed as pretentious by an actor representing the Abbey main stage, but more importantly representing middle Ireland.

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<sup>203</sup> Eilis Mullan, 'Ireland Invades Russia: The Dublin Youth Theatre Abroad', *Theatre Ireland*, 17, (1988-1989), p. 46.

<sup>204</sup> Interview with Dermot Moore, August 2001.



The Russian tour, despite the controversy in the media, was considered a success and the play now the Abbey's 'great leap' from literary to visual theatre.<sup>205</sup> This would contrast with the reaction of the American audience, who, unfazed by contemporary European theatre practice, objected instead on the grounds that the play was not Irish.

In March *The Great Hunger* continued to Philadelphia and New York, where it would play Philadelphia's Zellerbach theatre at the Annenberg centre and the Triplex Theatre in Manhattan.<sup>206</sup> The Triplex, run by the Borough of Manhattan Community College, is a 900-seat venue not characteristically used for mainstream theatre, and a considerably bigger stage than the play's original: more than five times the seat capacity of Dublin's Peacock, although *The Great Hunger* reportedly sold 60% of seats before opening on 15 March.<sup>207</sup> This and the availability of funding was a result of the prestige now associated with *The Great Hunger*.

John Harrington sees the Abbey's touring as a 'mutually enlightening transaction', albeit a problematic one, as he notes that nearly a century of touring had created a 'specific American notion of the Abbey'.<sup>208</sup> It is 'very well recognised as one singular sensation, an exceptional production company very unlike New York uptown or down, and it is warmly welcomed as an alternative that is at once exotic and reliable'.<sup>209</sup> While the modern theatre idiom of *The Great Hunger* was new for the Abbey, it was not new to its American audience. For Mel Gussow writing in the *New York Times*, the problem with *The Great Hunger* was 'its dearth of poetry'. Accepting that the play deliberately substituted 'gestures and visual and aural effects for text,' the critic continued to focus on what words did remain in the play, finding them 'insistently and boringly

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<sup>205</sup> David Nowlan, 'The Action Goes West', *Irish Times*, 3 March 1988 and 'Rural Ireland Comes to Red Square', *Irish Times*, 27 February 1988.

<sup>206</sup> The show was reported to cost \$148,000 to produce in New York, William Reilly, executive director of the Triplex told the *New York Times*. The Allied Irish Bank was said to have made a grant of \$38,000 toward the tour. Jeremy Gerard, 'Ireland's Abbey Theater To Appear in Manhattan', *New York Times*, 01 December 1987.

<sup>207</sup> David Nowlan, 'Abbey selling well in New York', *Irish Times*, 14 March 1988.

<sup>208</sup> John P. Harrington, 'The Abbey in America: The Real Thing', *Irish Theatre on Tour*, ed. by Nicholas Grene and Christopher Morash (Dublin: Carysfort Press, 2005), p.36.

<sup>209</sup> Harrington, p. 36.

repetitive.<sup>210</sup> As Harrington argues, the instinct on the part of the critic to react with such antagonism to a company was the result of an atypical scenario wherein a modern dance or mime performance was a relatively banal offering in New York (amid many similar productions concomitantly on offer) and a canonical Irish play was the desired exotic. The tour ended not with a bang but a whimper, but the critical success of *The Great Hunger* had made vital inroads into the reorientation of the Abbey's reputation in Europe and, importantly, at home in Dublin.

The choice of including *The Field*, demonstrably a resistantly local play, to join the USSR tour was in a sense a corrective measure. But while the play itself avoids contemporary theatre practice Keane discloses a relevant engagement with the complexities of changing Ireland at the time. *The Great Hunger's* tour, on the other hand, represents cultural cross-pollination and the use of a global performance network, with varying success. At the same time, the Abbey made use of local performance networks in another international transfer: Garry Hynes's production at the Abbey and the revival and transfer in 1989 of Tom Murphy's *A Whistle in the Dark*.

### **Old Brutalism: *A Whistle in the Dark***

If *The Great Hunger* was an attempt to internationalise the Abbey Theatre's style and to engage with a broader theatrical discourse outside of Ireland and traditional Irish theatre practice, then the 1986 staging which led to the 1989 transfer to the Royal Court of Tom Murphy's *A Whistle in the Dark* (1961) directed by Garry Hynes of Druid Theatre Company, can be read as an attempt to re-invigorate the theatre by engaging with a local performance network.

Established in 1975 in Galway by graduates of University College, Galway, Garry Hynes, Mick Lally and Marie Mullen, Druid was the first professional theatre company in Ireland to be based outside Dublin. By the 1980s Druid were well-known around Ireland for their revivals of Synge's plays, an assertive touring

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<sup>210</sup> Mel Gussow, 'Great Hunger: A Dearth of Words', *New York Times*, 18 March 1988.

policy (they began international touring within five years of the company's founding) and very positive London productions. They quickly established a reputation nationally as a vibrant, young company, not unlike the INTS in 1904.

Tuam playwright Tom Murphy's working relationship with Druid began when he became Writer-in-Association with them in 1984, and the partnership proved to be artistically very fruitful. *Conversations of a Homecoming* was premiered by Druid in 1985, as was *Bailegangaire* (1985), one of Murphy's most critically lauded plays, with the internationally-known actor Siobhán McKenna in the main role.

*A Whistle in the Dark*, Murphy's first full-length play – and his most successful internationally – was premiered in the Theatre Royal, Stratford East, London in 1961, having been roundly rejected by the Abbey Theatre (Ernest Blythe famously wrote to the playwright to criticise the play on the grounds that no such people existed in Ireland).<sup>211</sup> The grim, urban realist setting of the play drew comparisons with John Osborne, whose *Look Back in Anger* premiered in 1956 at the Royal Court, and *A Whistle in the Dark* was positively received amid the growing style of 'brutalist' post-war theatre. Murphy's work was not produced at the Abbey until *Famine* in 1968, which was staged in the Peacock, with his work thereafter being frequently premiered on the main stage.

In 1985 the Abbey produced *A Thief of a Christmas* (1985) directed by Roy Heayberd. The companion play to the highly successful *Bailegangaire* (in Galway), *Thief* compelled unfavourable comparisons. *The Irish Times* argued the play needed more time in rehearsal, and generally notices were poor, as was audience attendance.<sup>212</sup> Months later, the Abbey announced that Druid's artistic director would direct a production of *Whistle in the Dark* on the Abbey main stage with a cast made up of several actors from the Galway group.

The choice of engaging Garry Hynes to direct Murphy's *A Whistle in the Dark* would have been an opportunity to claim for the repertoire one of the most

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<sup>211</sup>Colm Toibin, 'Thomas Murphy's Volcanic Ireland', *Irish University Review*, Vol. 17, No. 1, (Spring, 1987), 24-30.

<sup>212</sup> David Nowlan, 'A Thief Of A Christmas' at the Abbey', *The Irish Times*, 31 December 1985.



successful of Murphy's plays not to be taken up by the Abbey. Moreover the association between Hynes and Murphy was already considered a significant partnership in Irish theatre, and so a Murphy play directed by Hynes carried with it greater cultural capital. Coincidentally, Hynes cast the play with mostly Druid actors (the cast included Sean McGinley and Maeliosa Stafford). The decision was most likely based upon Hynes's pre-existing relationship with people she deemed best for the job, but because she had also had the set designed in a way that resembled Druid's own smaller venue in Galway, the resultant staging of *Whistle* was also a reconstruction of Druid on the national stage (see Fig. 2.9).<sup>213</sup> The inclusion of Druid actors was a logical move, given that it was a co-production with Druid; the smaller set suited the claustrophobic atmosphere of Murphy's play about the family 'blood knot'.<sup>214</sup> Whether Hynes was trying to neutralise and then rewrite the heavily coded national stage she did not say. However it is significant that only a year previously, Joe Dowling, having resigned as AD in controversy, directed a production of Sean O'Casey's *Juno and the Paycock* at the Abbey's main Dublin rival, the Gate Theatre. Ironically the play, a classic Abbey text directed by a former Abbey director, including major Abbey players, such as Donal McCann and John Kavanagh, earned great acclaim in the Gate. It was, according to the press, an example of what a company could do when not hindered by financial limitations or a conservative, controlling board. Alternatively it may simply be that, once removed from the designation of 'national', the production could be viewed in more relaxed terms by its audience, free of the restrictions of that convention and unconcerned with whether or not an appropriate event had taken place. As such, the decision to appoint Garry Hynes to direct a play for the Abbey discloses a further attempt to adjust the company's reputation by aligning it with a company that was young and gaining reputation, and *A Whistle* was an

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<sup>213</sup> This device was noticed by critics: 'There were successes last year of course. But for *A Whistle in the Dark*, Garry Hynes virtually moved her Druid company in for a stay.' Fergus Linehan, 'The Real Problems of the Abbey', *The Irish Times*, 22 December 1986.

<sup>214</sup> *Playwrights in Profile*: Tom Murphy, 18 March 2007.

imaginatively localised project, (even last minute funding came from a Galway-based company).<sup>215</sup>

With the appointment of Vincent Dowling as Artistic Director in 1986 a plan of touring nationally and internationally was announced. Among the projects was Hynes's production of *A Whistle in the Dark*. Hynes's direction of *Whistle* was one of her earliest professional projects outside of Druid theatre, undertaken when she had made a name nationally for her revivals of Synge. Druid's 1982 production of *The Playboy of the Western World* was, as Lionel Pilkington writes, famous for the apparently authentic smell of peat smoke the audience experienced upon entering the auditorium, as well as 'local accents, visibly dirt hands, and mud-encrusted feet'.<sup>216</sup> Reinforced, Pilkington argues, by performances on the Aran Islands and unconventional, usually rural venues, so that the emphasis on authenticity became 'Druid Theatre Company's distinguishing feature', 're-invigorating Irish theatre in the 1980s by demonstrating the seemingly perennial vitality' of Synge's classic, and reclaiming the play from museum status. *A Whistle in the Dark*, despite auspicious beginnings, had not earned museum status.

A month after *Whistle's* 1961 international premiere at the Theatre Royal, London it transferred to the West End, to a mixture of critical enthusiasm and suspicion. In particular it drew the attention of critic Kenneth Tynan who famously described the play as 'arguably the most uninhibited display of brutality that the London theatre has ever witnessed.'<sup>217</sup> Arriving at a time when tragedy was thought to be on the wane in British theatre, Murphy's play was aligned with the writing of Osborne and Pinter, and often credited with providing a model to Pinter's *The Homecoming* (1965).<sup>218</sup> The play, though not as well known in the UK as Pinter's, drew association with the social realism of

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<sup>215</sup> Eileen Battersby, 'Backdrop', *Irish Times*, 14 June 1989.

<sup>216</sup> Lionel Pilkington, 'The Playboy of the Western World as Cultural Event' in *Playboys of the Western world: production histories*, ed. Adrian Fraser, (Dublin: Carysfort Press, 2004) p. 161.

<sup>217</sup> Fintan O'Toole, Introduction, *Tom Murphy, Plays: 4*, (London: Methuen, 1997), p. xii.

<sup>218</sup> Although this is convincingly challenged by Bernard F. Dukore in 'Violent Families: *A Whistle in the Dark* and *Homecoming*', *Twentieth Century Literature*, 36:1, (1990), 23-34. Dukore also makes the point that the role of Michael in *A Whistle* was performed in 1961 by Michael Craig, who then played Teddy in *The Homecoming* in 1967 on Broadway.



1960s British theatre. The play was free of heritage status. This is significant when considering Hynes's direction of the play in 1986, before it was revived for a month in 1987, then transferred to the Royal Court, London in July 1989, as this non-Abbey director was taking a distinctly non-traditional Abbey play (and one that had been rejected) under the aegis of the Abbey. In fact the reputation of the play in the UK was a moot point, as the 1986 represented a rediscovery of the play, as Nicholas Grene has observed, Murphy's breakthrough play was discovered again as though for the first time: 'It was a London revival of *A Whistle in the Dark*, twenty-eight years on, which kickstarted Murphy's reputation again'.<sup>219</sup> The production also went towards reinvigorating the Abbey's reputation in a way that complemented the tour of *The Great Hunger*.

Irish reviews of *Whistle* were positive, and so it was decided to offer the 1989 revival of Hynes's production for the Abbey's participation in the London International Festival of Theatre (LIFT).<sup>220</sup> Initially the Donmar Warehouse seemed the likely venue (as the trio of Jerome Hynes, Garry Hynes and Nica Burns, now under the title 'JGN production company', had all collaborated at the Donmar before), but Max Stafford-Clark's endorsement of the production led to its being staged at the Royal Court, London, from 5-29 July 1989. The London reviews were very positive,<sup>221</sup> especially in high-circulation papers such as *The Times*, *The Guardian*, *The Daily Telegraph* and the *Evening Press*.<sup>222</sup> *The Sunday Times* thought its 'stark social realism' well-judged and, referring to the production at Stratford East in 1961, 'properly faithful to the drab brutalism of the radical theatre of the time'.<sup>223</sup> *The Independent* reported that 'Garry Hynes's production has a knuckle-duster energy that sets the Royal Court shaking'.<sup>224</sup> Sean McGinley won a *Time Out/01* award for his performance.

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<sup>219</sup> Grene, *The Politics of Irish Drama*, p. 197.

<sup>220</sup> Eileen Battersby, 'A Whistle in the Dark at the Royal Court', *The Irish Times*, 10 July 1989.

<sup>221</sup> For example Jane Edwardes, *Time Out*, 12 July 1989.

<sup>222</sup> Tony Patrick, 'Theatre', *The Times*, 17 July 1989, also Jeremy Kingston, 'An Angry Howl of Pain', *The Times*, 8 July 1989; Michael Billington, 'Pacifist in a Punch-up', *The Guardian*, 10 July 1989, Charles Spencer, 'Painful but True', *The Daily Telegraph*, 12 Feb 1989, and 'Taking the Irish Angle', *Evening Press*, 10 July 1989. See also Michael Ratcliffe, 'Bringers of Light', *The Observer*, 16 July 1989 and Eileen Battersby, 'London Critic's Effusive Welcome for Abbey', *The Irish Times*, 13 July 1989.

<sup>223</sup> Robert Hewison, 'Theatre', *The Sunday Times*, 9 July 1989.

<sup>224</sup> Alex Renton, 'Two Acts of Violence', *The Independent*, 10 July 1989.



The reception was not universally welcoming, for it suited the play to repel viewers more than endear itself to them: rather like Kenneth Tynan before him, Milton Shulman for *Evening Standard* was openly appalled. The critic was circumspect, seeing potential in the play for disdain and misrepresentation, causing further damage to 'the reputation of the Irish', already damaged 'enough by the spectre of terrorism and the derision of Irish jokes'.<sup>225</sup> Moreover Shulman worried that the enjoyment of Murphy's brutal play signalled a deteriorating civilisation: 'it is probably a measure of the deterioration in our receptivity of such brutish behaviour that the first-night audience received these lads with almost affectionate acclaim'.<sup>226</sup> This reaction is arguably precisely the point of the play, as the *Financial Times* seemed to grasp:

[*Whistle in the Dark*] is certainly another bad advertisement for the close-knit Irish Catholic family, but it has also acquired a grim metaphoric resonance as a study in the rights of a minority to pursue its customs, however noisily and barbarously, in an alien host culture.<sup>227</sup>

While the play was most commonly discussed in the context of sectarian violence in northern Ireland, it was also frequently referenced for its original London staging, and compared by British critics to Osborne's *Look Back in Anger*,<sup>228</sup> and to Harold Pinter's *The Homecoming*: 'The play significantly anticipates Pinter's *The Homecoming* in its picture of a hollow, bullying patriarch ruling over a dark, male world in which the forces of reason and order are defeated by sheer animalistic rapacity.'<sup>229</sup>

*Whistle* had success internationally at the beginning of the brutalism movement in UK theatre. Its success second time around was, I would argue, because it anticipated the 'new Brutalism' that would develop in UK theatre out of political,

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<sup>225</sup> Milton Shulman, 'Muck of the Irish', *Evening Standard*, 10 July 1989.

<sup>226</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>227</sup> Michael Coveney, 'A Whistle in the Dark', *Financial Times*, 10 July 1989.

<sup>228</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>229</sup> Michael Billington, 'Pacifist in a Punch-up', *The Guardian*, 10 July 1989.

industrial and social strife, in stark contrast with the colourful, expensive large-scale musicals dominating the West End in the 1980s.<sup>230</sup> Most major theatre in the UK in the 1980s was characterised by big-budget musicals. Gradually, though theatre responded to economic globalisation, with productions like David Mamet's *Glengarry Glen Ross* in 1983, Caryl Churchill's *Serious Money* in 1985<sup>231</sup> and David Hare and Howard Brenton's *Pravda* (1985), which ran at the British National Theatre for several years. When 'in yer-face' drama emerged as an identifiable trend in 1990s drama, it tended to engage with and examine the problems of globalised, mediatised culture. Playwrights such as Sarah Kane and Mark Ravenhill drew comparisons to Pinter and Osborne, and so a revival of *A Whistle in the Dark* at the Royal Court, presented by a young, up-and-coming company offered just such an incisive, immediate event. With British theatre on the cusp of new brutalism, arguably *Whistle* found the right timing and audience on this transfer for a positive reception.

The large-scale musical phenomenon of the 1980s might also have inadvertently provided a framework for the success of the transfer in 1990 of Brian Friel's *Dancing at Lughnasa*. *Lughnasa* had music and was a play with a growing reputation when it reached London. It was a break from the generic musicals on the West End, and after playing Broadway for a lengthy run, it returned to the Abbey not as an Abbey play, but commodified, as a large-scale West End/Broadway show that had played to thousands. The audience in Dublin's experience was now the one participating in a far larger theatrical experience. After *Lughnasa* the Abbey invested in *Wonderful Tennessee*, a documentary on it and an engagement to play on Broadway, anticipating a follow-up commercial success. This did not materialise, despite certain elements of continuity between it and the more successful *Lughnasa*.

### **Broadway: Inspired *Lughnasa***

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<sup>230</sup> See Aleks Sierz, *In-Yer-Face Theatre: British Drama Today*, 2001, and Clare Wallace, *Suspect Cultures*, 2006.

<sup>231</sup> This incisive satire of the deregulation of the London trading scene, Dan Rebellato points out, transferred to the West End and was apparently attended by the same city traders it sought to critique.



The most significant example during the period under consideration of an international production that subtly disrupted expectations of Irish theatre was Brian Friel's *Dancing at Lughnasa*, which premiered in the Abbey Theatre in Dublin on 24 April 1990. With relatively modest expectations the play transferred to the British National Theatre, as a result of the professional relationship between Richard Eyre and Patrick Mason. Opening on the Lyttelton stage in October, *Lughnasa* won the *Evening Standard* award for Best Play. There was interest from Broadway producers immediately. A commercial transfer to the Phoenix theatre on the West End followed in March 1991, as did the Olivier award for Best Play of the Year. The Abbey was reluctant to take a full-performance schedule on the West End so soon after a repertory run, but preferred to do that rather than begin a Broadway run prematurely. In 1991 *Lughnasa* returned to the Abbey, at the beginning of the year, and again the following autumn. Then it opened on Broadway in 1991 where it played for a year in a commercial run and won three Tony awards.<sup>232</sup> An Australian tour followed at the end of 1992 and into 1993, with the company visiting Melbourne, Sydney and Adelaide. Meanwhile *Lughnasa* was staged again in Dublin in 1992, and later that year another national tour was undertaken. Given the many Irish revivals and national tours, *Dancing at Lughnasa* quickly became one of the most attended Abbey plays within Ireland, as well as outside of it, finally eclipsing the work of Sean O'Casey as their biggest box-office draw.

*Dancing at Lughnasa* is perhaps the most famous Abbey Theatre play to be produced internationally since *The Playboy of the Western World* or *The Plough and the Stars*. It is a memory play, set in rural Donegal in the 1930s and told through the prism of the narrator Michael's recollection of a particular summer with his mother, four aunts, his uncle the returned missionary priest and his

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<sup>232</sup> The awards won by the play were: Best Play, 1991 *Evening Standard* Award; Best Play of the Year, Olivier awards 1991; Best Play, Tony Awards, 1992; Best Featured Actress in a Play – Brid Brennan, Tony Awards 1992; Best Direction of a Play – Patrick Mason, Tony Awards 1992; Best Director of a Play - Patrick Mason and Best Set Design - Joe Vanek, 1992 Drama Desk Awards; Best Play, 1992 New York Drama Critics' Circle. The Abbey was also nominated for the following: Oliviers: Best Director of a Play – Patrick Mason, Best Theatre Choreography – Terry John Bates, Best Supporting Actress in a Play – Anita Reeves; Tonys: Best Featured Actress in a Play – Rosaleen Linehan, Best Featured Actress in a Play – Dearbhla Molloy, Best Choreography – Christopher Chadman, Best Scenic Design – Joe Vanek, Best Costume Design – Joe Vanek.



absentee father, a travelling salesman. Representing a point in the narrator's memory when last his family, such as it was, were all together and relatively content, the story concerns a point in Irish history when a certain rural self-sustainability gave way to a modernising progress that forced the conclusion of a certain way of life.

The success of the play was, in some regards, unexpected. A metropolitan construction of a rural idyll is not new to Irish theatre; moreover the Abbey Theatre had recently been coming in for sustained criticism for staging old-fashioned plays and 'heavyweight modern classics'.<sup>233</sup> As popular a writer as Brian Friel was, they were nonetheless taking a risk by staging another domestic Irish play set in the past, in a kitchen. In international terms it should not have worked either: since it is a memory play, *Lughnasa* makes use of a narrative to convey Michael's necessarily subjective story. This monologue-style of framing the story by Friel has not historically had easy success with international audiences, in plays such as *Faith Healer* on Broadway in 1979 and again in 1992 by the Abbey, during which reviewers were polite but given to warning audiences of lengthy pauses and a general inaction.<sup>234</sup> Furthermore the play is set in Donegal, and given the bemusement the Abbey 'brogue' has historically caused reviewers and audiences alike, the Donegal accent (albeit a very soft one here) might reasonably have been expected to discourage an international audience. A number of qualities distinguished the play for audiences: the representation of the child character by the grown-up narrator, the elegantly reproduced retrograde household, the harmlessly blasphemous Father Jack and, most famously, the scene in which the sisters spontaneously dance around the kitchen.

The sudden rowdy pagan dance, a moment in which the sisters rose above their literal and social impoverishment, became the most popular scene, later the one to be most frequently depicted on publicity material. This scene, intended as a grotesque, to push past recognisable fun and suggest some kind of latent violence or savagery ('Maggie turns round. Her head is cocked to the beat, to the

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<sup>233</sup> Paddy Woodworth, Backdrop, *Irish Times*, 11 August 1990.

<sup>234</sup> This production is discussed in more detail in Chapter Three.

music. She is breathing deeply, rapidly. Now her features become animated by a look of defiance, of aggression; a crude mask of happiness.’), is usually misinterpreted as joyful and whimsical.<sup>235</sup> Stage productions often play to that expectation, while audiences tend to look ahead to it. The Mundy sisters’ dance scene anticipated an appetite for an uninhibited form of Irish dance that would be properly exploited in 1994 with the first performance of John McCoolgan’s *Riverdance* at the Eurovision Song Contest.

A common thread in Friel’s dramaturgy is the interest in ritual, and in *Lughnasa* it serves to build upon a theme of pre-modernity and a prelapsarian innocence that the Irish audience responded to: Michael is a child; Rose is childlike, and Jack’s apparent loss of faith is in fact a reversion to a pre-Christian style of spirituality. While it would seem to offer a sentimental story, ultimately the play was quite topical in Ireland and addressed very current concerns. The relatively subtle rejection of Catholicism in Jack’s storyline was consistent with the decline of the power of the Catholic Church in Ireland in the 1990s. The play spoke to a desire for the rejection of the church as well as an inevitable conflicting desire for a return to the apparently simple truths of the past.

Terence Brown identifies *Dancing at Lughnasa* as a work of special contemporary relevance for Ireland.<sup>236</sup> He points out that 1990 was also the year in which Ireland held the EU presidency and when barrister and human rights campaigner Mary Robinson was elected Ireland’s first female President. It came at the right moment for a changing Ireland: the play seemed to ‘serve notice that in Ireland’s post-colonial experience the energies of women could not easily be contained in conventional, patriarchal versions of the social order and that Irish society would ignore such force at its peril.’<sup>237</sup> The play, Brown posits, ‘set an agenda for the decade’, making room for Marina Carr or for Sebastian Barry’s *The Steward of Christendom* (1995).

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<sup>235</sup> Brian Friel, *Dancing at Lughnasa* in *Plays 2*, ed. by Christopher Murray, (London: Faber & Faber 1999), pp. 35-36.

<sup>236</sup> Terence Brown, *Ireland: A Social and Cultural History 1922-2002*, (London: Harper Perennial, 2004), p. 355.

<sup>237</sup> Brown, p. 356.

To an Irish audience *Lughnasa* offered a crucible for national pressure points: a modernising economy and culture struggling to shake off its recent conservative past. To an international audience, it would seem the play offered a nostalgic version of Ireland onstage that they embraced. It was then the international reception and acclaim that drove the long life of the play and conferred an entirely different value on the play for Irish audiences: as a large-scale global event, not just the latest Abbey play.

An additional strength of the play is that it inherently invites repeated viewing. Early scenes are enriched with the knowledge that is only revealed later in the play, and so what is comic on first viewing becomes more poignant with the knowledge of the narrator's revelations. In that sense, the actual production experience of the play mimics the content, and the audience share in the sense of a loss of innocence. And many people did: it is a memory that audiences love to revisit, as its extensive production history shows. The play was anomalously able to be all things to all audiences, and so only benefited from international touring. An appraisal of the critical reception of the play's long touring life will show how its success for the Abbey Theatre back in Ireland has as much to do with the reception of its international productions as the appreciation for the text itself.

Irish theatre immediately preceding the success of *Lughnasa* was in relatively good health. Thirty-eight new plays were staged in Ireland during 1990, and new venues opened, as did the renovated Everyman in Cork.<sup>238</sup> Large-scale musicals were a feature of 1990, *Cats* and *42nd Street* played at the Point while *West Side Story* played at the Olympia. These larger venues had no trouble finding audiences, which indicates the level of interest in Dublin audiences for international, mainstream musical theatre. The Royal National Theatre's *Richard III* played in Cork and similarly found interested audiences, most likely as a result of the celebrity status of Ian McKellen in the lead role.

When Brian Friel offered the Abbey Theatre *Dancing at Lughnasa*, the first new play of his to be staged there in twelve years, this was generally considered to have been the beginning of his rift with Field Day. It was rumoured that Noel

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<sup>238</sup> David Nowlan, 'It was a Lively Year in the Theatre', *Irish Times*, 25 December 1990.



Pearson's recently having joined the Abbey was a reason for Friel's submitting the new play there instead.<sup>239</sup> *Lughnasa* premiered at the Abbey Theatre on 24 April 1990 for 57 performances in a production directed by Patrick Mason. Bríd Brennan was cast as Agnes, with Catherine Byrne as Chris, Paul Herzberg as Gerry, Barry McGovern as Jack, Gerard McSorley as Michael, Bríd Ní Neachtain, as Rose, Anita Reeves as Maggie and Frances Tomelty as Kate.<sup>240</sup> (See Figs. 2.10-2.15, below).

Reviews were positive, though some writers had reservations. Paddy Woodworth called it 'brilliant'.<sup>241</sup> David Nowlan of *The Irish Times* was complimentary on the opening night, writing that Friel had 'woven one of the richest dramatic fabrics of his illustrious writing life.'<sup>242</sup> The play was considered 'exquisitely written', the direction sharp and brilliant, but Joe Vanek's set was 'a little too sharp and brilliant', and too clinical. Kevin Myers thought the cast 'magnificent' in a work of great subtlety and cleverness'.<sup>243</sup> In what was otherwise a positive review, Myers criticised the character of Gerry 'whose every word is a Hollywood cliché', and was also critical of some linguistic anachronisms.<sup>244</sup> Fintan O'Toole called it 'magnificently realised', in an extremely positive review. However he went on to criticise the play for failing to realise the connection between Ireland and Africa. O'Toole argued the whimsical exchange of hats was an anti-climax. He also thought Barry McGovern's Jack, played as an 'existential eccentric' was a bad decision, as Jack had the potential to be more shocking. The play, he concluded, was a 'flawed wonder', in what was a review of guarded exaltation.<sup>245</sup>

It was only a month later that talks of touring began when it was reported that a visiting cultural delegation from Russia had seen *Lughnasa* 'to discuss the serious business of another Abbey tour of Russia which, if confirmed, will entail

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<sup>239</sup> Paddy Woodworth, 'Graduate of the School of Hard Knocks', *Irish Times*, 23 March 1990

<sup>240</sup> Lighting design and production management were by Trevor Dawson, with costume and set design by Joe Vanek.

<sup>241</sup> Paddy Woodworth, 'Dublin's Budget is Getting Better', *Irish Times*, 5 May 1990.

<sup>242</sup> David Nowlan, 'First Night of New Friel Play', *Irish Times*, 25 April 1990.

<sup>243</sup> Kevin Myers, 'An Irishman's Diary', *Irish Times*, 2 May 1990.

<sup>244</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>245</sup> Fintan O'Toole, 'Beyond Language', *Irish Times*, 28 April 1990.

Friel's play opening the Moscow Arts Theatre season in Sept and a visit to Kiev and Minsk.<sup>246</sup> Once *Lughnasa* transferred to London and then the West End, the tenor of the Irish reviews changed. Patrick Mason recalls feeling at the time that the Abbey was subject to an agenda in the Irish press, but that international tours very often altered the reception to their benefit:

The great thing about Edinburgh was bringing [a play] back to the Abbey after with the UK reviews, which did manage to change the public's attitude. So [*Well of the Saints*] did better when it came back. Something very similar happened with *Dancing at Lughnasa*. The audience here were underwhelmed. All through the '70s and '80s Friel was given a very rough time. And because of his Derry/Field Day connection and *Translations*, there was a very strong feeling of 'Oh well he's Northern'. So when he came back to the Abbey, there was a kind of 'Oh well, Donegal stuff' attitude.<sup>247</sup>

Richard Eyre was then director of the National Theatre in London, and he was interested in the play:

It was a classic Richard Eyre sort of play. He wanted it at the National, because he loved the play; he loves Brian's work. So we were invited to the National, and that was great and then the rest, as they say, is history. When we brought it back, of course, it was a 'masterpiece'.<sup>248</sup>

The play opened at the Lyttelton stage of the National Theatre from 15 October 1990 to 1 January 1991 for 48 performances. Upon transferring to London, there were some cast changes. Rosaleen Linehan took over from Frances Tomelty to play Kate and Stephen Dillane took over from Paul Herzberg. Barry McGovern was replaced by Alec McCowen as Father Jack. McGovern was unable to travel for personal reasons, and the result was the beginning of the transformation of the character of Jack, ending with Des Cave's portrayal in Australia in 1993.

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<sup>246</sup> Michael Sheridan, 'Russians Can Bank on Irish Hospitality', *Irish Press*, 22 May 1990.

<sup>247</sup> Interview with Patrick Mason, 5 August, 2010.

<sup>248</sup> *Ibid.*



While *Lughnasa* transferred to London, Vincent O'Neill's one-man show *Joyicity* was earning the Abbey positive reviews in Edinburgh. This was shortly after a successful staging of Frank McGuinness's *The Factory Girls* at the London Tricycle, a play written and set in 1982 about another five Irish girls, and female solidarity, though in the context of industrial unrest. This was the receptive critical context into which the Abbey transferred. Nonetheless, *Lughnasa* drew poor houses in the first few days; then, once the Sunday papers gave it rave reviews, there were lengthy queues.<sup>249</sup> The notices from British critics were excellent, with critics complimenting the exploration of pagan and Christian ritual, the well-pitched emotionalism and the evocation of nostalgia. No fewer than seven pointed out the Chekhovian resonances of the play.<sup>250</sup>

It was variously complimented for being: 'steeped in nostalgia for the golden days of the past';<sup>251</sup> 'A poignant and sensitive piece of writing';<sup>252</sup> and 'a wistful play, to be felt as much as heard.'<sup>253</sup> 'The Irish', readers were informed by the *The Financial Times*, 'are of course, masters of this technique. We only have to hear Friel's soft, seductive tale begin and we are overtaken by the warm comforting glow which settles over children beckoned with a bedtime story.'<sup>254</sup> The production, by and large, was deemed 'one of the finest plays of our time'.<sup>255</sup>

The positive reception was relayed throughout the Irish print press as 'one of the warmest critical welcomes accorded to an Irish play abroad for very many

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<sup>249</sup> David Nowlan, 'Lughnasa and Other London Hits', *Irish Times*, 31 October 1990.

<sup>250</sup> Helen Rose, 'Dancing at Lughnasa at the Lyttelton', *Plays and Players*, Dec 1990/Jan 1991; 'Memory of a Golden Summer', *The Times*, 16 October 1990; Michael Billington, 'Irish Times', *The Guardian*, 17 October 1990; Paul Taylor, 'Planting Chekhov Down by the Bogside', *The Independent*, 17 October 1990; John Gross, 'One Last Dance Before the Parting of the Ways', *The Sunday Telegraph*, 21 October 1990; Malcolm Rutherford, 'Dancing at Lughnasa', *Financial Times*, 16 October 1990; Irving Wardle, 'A Great Dance for the Irish', *The Independent on Sunday*, 21 October 1990 and John Peter, 'A Telling Time and Motion Study for Today', *The Sunday Times*, 21 October 1990.

<sup>251</sup> *The Sunday Express*, 21 October 1990.

<sup>252</sup> Christopher Edwards, 'Rich Harvest', *The Spectator*, 20 October 1990

<sup>253</sup> Milton Shulman, 'Yearnings Related', *Evening Standard*, 16 October 1990.

<sup>254</sup> Jack Tinker, 'Haunting Tale of a Family's Final Harvest', *Daily Mail*, 16 October 1990. The only dissenting notes were from *The Mail on Sunday* whose critic objected to some overtly 'whimsical humour' (*The Mail on Sunday*, 21 October 1990), and *The Daily Telegraph*, whose critic thought the play fell 'uncomfortably between novel and play', and, despite comparing the play to Chekhov and O'Casey, wrote it off as a 'dispiriting production' marginally saved from tedium by the eccentric character of Jack (Charles Osborne, 'A Childhood in Donegal', *The Daily Telegraph*, 17 October 1990).

<sup>255</sup> Benedict Nightingale, 'Exit, Pursued by a Quota Counter', *The Times*, 5 February 1991.



years.<sup>256</sup> *The Irish Times* wrote: 'It requires no scintilla of national chauvinism to revel in the triumph of the Abbey Theatre's production of Brian Friel's *Dancing at Lughnasa*, now playing to packed and attentive houses in the Royal National Theatre on London's South Bank. It is, by any objective standards, one of the best directed, best acted, and best written pieces of theatre to be seen in London at the moment.'<sup>257</sup>

The Irish reviews incorporated the cast changes and the inevitable improvements that might have been made in the development of the play for touring. The play's London success was now its most compelling feature: Nowlan reversed his judgement of the play's set as having been 'a little clinical' in the Abbey Theatre, to now making sense in the much larger Lyttelton, for no more tangible a reason than that it 'seemed suffused with the warmth of the sunny memory of 1936 that characterises both play and production.'<sup>258</sup> Stephen Dillane was, he thought, now 'a more persuasive Welsh visitor' than Paul Herzberg, while Rosaleen Linehan had fitted in well. Alec McCowen's Father Jack was 'more anxious, more urgent and more effectively different' than Barry McGovern's. Kevin Myers's interpretation was that, where McGovern's seemed to represent a latent threat, McCowen's was a more humorous interpretation of the role, and that Father Jack became a friendlier and less ominous character throughout the play's long run and several recastings.<sup>259</sup> Nowlan thought the mood remained the same, generally, between the Irish and first London transfer. He recommended Irish tourists in London go see it.<sup>260</sup>

Back in Ireland, *Lughnasa* returned to the Abbey where it played from 17 January 1991 for 45 performances and then again from 12 September 1991. The *Irish Independent* reported more widely on it, once the play was a hit, won

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<sup>256</sup> 'Raves for Friel Play, *Irish Times*, 20 October 1990. See also: Barbara McKeon, 'Friel Dances to *Lughnasa* Success', *Irish Press*, 17 October 1990; Siobhan Crozier, 'The Abbey Storms South Bank', *Sunday Independent*, 21 October 1990; Fergus Linehan, 'London Welcome for Friel Play', *The Irish Times*, 16 October 1990 and Hugo Williams, 'A Family and its Misfortune', *Sunday Correspondent*, 21 October 1990.

<sup>257</sup> David Nowlan, '*Lughnasa*' and Other Irish Hits', *Irish Times*, 31 October 1990.

<sup>258</sup> Ibid.

<sup>259</sup> Kevin Myers, 'An Irishman's Diary', 23 January 1993.

<sup>260</sup> David Nowlan, '*Lughnasa*' and Other Irish Hits', *Irish Times*, 31 October 1990.

awards and was to be taken on international tour.<sup>261</sup> Once it was internationally recognised, some critics even printed retractions or qualifications of earlier views:

*Dancing at Lughnasa* has returned to the Abbey Theatre following a triumphant run in London and preceding a run in New York which could well prove to be equally spectacular as regards critical acclaim and box-office success. [...] This delicately sad, fragile and immensely rich memory play improves with a second viewing. This viewer, at any rate, has found so. Reservations which I entertained when I saw the first performance last April have vanished. Contrary to what I wrote then, this is vintage Friel. *Mea culpa*.<sup>262</sup>

It has a freshness and warm humanity not so apparent in the *Lughnasa* seen earlier this year at the same theatre.<sup>263</sup>

The success at the Lyttelton and the queues for tickets unsurprisingly led to a West End run for the play and so *Dancing at Lughnasa* played the Phoenix Theatre from 25 March. It is worth considering the success of the play at this point, as a West End transfer was unusual for the Abbey, and archival material suggests it was now crucially neither as a result of the Abbey's emphasising its illustrious past nor trading on familiar names and images.

The programme for the Phoenix theatre was dark yellow, with a picture of a red flower in a cornfield. Out of an Irish context, and in a UK theatre, the flower might easily have connoted the remembrance poppy, used to commemorate soldiers killed in action (see Fig. 2.12). Although it is unlikely that anyone attending the West End production of *Lughnasa* did not know to expect an Irish

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<sup>261</sup> For instance Bernard Purcell, 'Friel wins Play of the Year Award', *Irish Independent*, 8 April 1991, Susan Boardman, 'Friel Play Nominated', *Irish Independent*, 5 March 1991.

<sup>262</sup> Desmond Rushe, 'A Triumphant Return for Rare Friel Treasure', *Irish Independent*, 19 January 1991.

<sup>263</sup> Declan Hassett, '*Dancing at Lughnasa* a Warm-Hearted Production', *Cork Examiner*, 2 November 1992.

play, that was certainly not a theme to be forced on the programme, where typical signifiers such as the colour green and certain imagery did not adorn the cover. Moreover the front of the programme did not designate that it was an 'Abbey play' as such. On the inside, that indication is smaller than the billing of the playwright's name and even of the cast and crew. The usual Abbey history followed, with an image of the theatre building in the present day. The essay by Fintan O'Toole was fairly atypical in that there is a note on the importance of linking to the past, but also on newer writers like Sebastian Barry, Tom Murphy, Thomas Kilroy, and Eugene McCabe (newer that is than O'Casey and Synge, who previously dominated the programme notes of major tours). There is a sense of a line being drawn under the past in this manifesto about the need 'for a past, for memories, and our need constantly to revisit and reinvent those memories. Memories in the play are both inescapable and insufficient.' The programme then offers an extract from Maire McNeill's *The Festival of Lughnasa* and another on Lughnasa customs. Ostensibly a guide to understanding a key event in the play, this is also the beginning of the audience's admission into the world Friel creates in the play.<sup>264</sup>

In doing this, the Abbey was pointing to its own past and reputation. Obligated to revisit the past, while presenting the best of new writing, it now argued for a new circumspection: a distrust of memory and an openness to reinvention. Whether the audience attending the play read this intention in the programme, it was certainly implied in the production. Here was a typical Irish play: set in a kitchen, with not one but five Irish mother figures, a priest, emigration and a Cathleen ni Houlihan-like sacrifice from Gerry Evans. What in fact the touring production also showed audiences was a new play that could satisfy appetites for traditional Ireland on stage. Apparently set in the 1930s, as is erroneously noted in the programmes, the play is in fact only a view of that time, as it is told from the point of view of a middle-aged Michael in the present day. So the play sneaks in a contemporary viewpoint, something missing from more typical Abbey productions that proved popular with international audiences. The success of Friel came through his having brought under the radar a play set in

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<sup>264</sup> *Dancing at Lughnasa* programme, Phoenix Theatre, 1991.



contemporary Ireland with a suspicion of memory and nostalgic recollections of ideas of Ireland. International audiences (and particularly wary producers) were once again open to new Irish writing, especially if it was by Friel and a space was thereby made for the reinvention of Irish drama internationally.

All the reviews of the West End production tended to be extremely positive and to cite the massive success of the play so far.<sup>265</sup> Such was the reputation of the play that Princess Margaret attended *Lughnasa*, was impressed and met with the cast.<sup>266</sup> *Dancing at Lughnasa* played the Phoenix theatre for a week before it was nominated for the prestigious Olivier awards, and it was the first Irish play to win.<sup>267</sup> Once the Abbey won the BBC award for Play of the Year at the Oliviers, talk of a US tour was revived (the play had earlier been designated to go to the US, but the Gulf War interfered with those plans).<sup>268</sup>

The play at this point underwent a process of internationalisation. On the West End it was staged in a commercial context, and one that was without informing national politics in terms of official Abbey tours: that is, without a diasporic audience dominating the discourse, but instead those in pursuit of a night at a large-scale theatre event. Moreover the programme did not designate that it was an 'Irish' event in the way previous Abbey touring shows had done, and then it went on to win a very British award. The play therefore did not have to contend with being the new O'Casey: as the reviews show, it was, and is, frequently compared to Chekhov instead. So upon returning to Ireland *Dancing at Lughnasa* was an international play, not just a 'Donegal' play.

By July of 1991 the West End cast at the Phoenix Theatre was replaced, as is standard for commercial transfers, with a view to the play running there until the end of the year; the new cast included Olwen Fouéré, Veronica Quilligan and

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<sup>265</sup> Charles Spencer, 'Memories of Childhood', *The Daily Telegraph*, 27 March 1991 and Jeremy Kingston, 'Dancing at Lughnasa: Phoenix', *The Times*, 27 March 1991.

<sup>266</sup> 'Lughnasa Entranced Princess M.', *Sunday Independent* 14 April 1991.

<sup>267</sup> Fergus Linehan, 'Lughnasa Wins Play of the Year', *Irish Times*, 8 April 1991.

<sup>268</sup> According to this interview with Friel: RTÉ Radio 1 *Gay Byrne Show* 08 April 1991.

Siobhan McCarthy. Meanwhile, the original cast, with some changes, returned to the Abbey for the September run in the lead-up to the Broadway transfer.<sup>269</sup>

Ahead of the opening on Broadway Mel Gussow published a feature on the play arguing that its success was already assured:

Even before it opens at New York's Plymouth Theatre on October 24, *Dancing at Lughnasa* has become Friel's greatest success, the capstone to date of a career that has produced more than 20 plays. In its prior engagements at the Abbey and in London, the play earned critical acclaim and an Olivier award as best play of the season.

Also comparing Friel to Chekhov, the *New York Times* critic proclaimed authoritatively that 'with the death of Samuel Beckett he [Friel] is our finest living playwright.'<sup>270</sup> And so in New York when the play opened at the 1,066-seat Plymouth Theatre, from 24 October, advance bookings were already nearing a million dollars.<sup>271</sup> Nonetheless it was a loss-making show until the Tony award nominations later in the run.<sup>272</sup>

The New York production would have Donal Donnelly playing Jack in an even more comical interpretation of the priest,: Michael was played by Gerard McSorley, Chris by Catherine Byrne, Maggie by Dearbhla Molloy, Agnes by Bríd Brennan, Rose by Bríd Ní Neachtain, Kate by Rosaleen Linehan and Gerry by Robert Gwilym, and with notably softer Donegal accents by all the Irish

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<sup>269</sup> There was a delay in taking the play to Broadway. Initial plans were to take it to the play to the Nederlander's large (1,478-seat) Lunt-Fontanne Theater. The Nederlander theatre management company declined to put up the capitalisation, estimated to be around \$850-900,000. Actually with careful management the play was capitalised for \$690,000 with a sponsorship contribution from Aer Lingus of \$60,000. The postponement meant the play was taken on by the Shubert organisation instead. The Shubert Plymouth Theatre was a smaller 1,077 seat venue. Source: unreferenced article by Greg Evans, Shubert archive, Abbey Theatre file. . The Abbey had been offered the Brooks Atkinson Theater, but *Shadowlands* was playing there and continued to run, so it was not available (*Medea* would later play there). The Shubert put up a substantial portion of the capitalisation, but Noel Pearson and other investors contributed most of the funding. The Abbey, as national theatre, was prohibited from investing in productions outside the Republic. Letters from Shubert Organisation to potential investors, dated 17 January 1991, Shubert archive, Abbey Theatre file.

<sup>270</sup> Mel Gussow, 'Broadway, Here Comes Friel,' *Irish Independent*, 8 October 1991.

<sup>271</sup> The *Irish Press* reported that Pearson himself had been prepared to put up most of the \$850,000 to take the play to Broadway, but American backers proliferated by the end of October.

<sup>272</sup> Source: *Dancing at Lughnasa* files, Shubert theatre archive, New York.



characters.<sup>273</sup> Meanwhile another cast was assembled for the three-week national tour of Ireland of *Lughnasa*, scheduled to tour England and eventually Australia. *Dancing at Lughnasa* was now a major brand name.

The Irish newspapers following the success of the play in New York reported on the play's high profile and showed a hubristic confidence in the inevitability of its Broadway success (the Irish actors were said to be subletting apartments in New York, in anticipation of a long run),<sup>274</sup> despite its having been a difficult season on Broadway for other productions. Most investors were backing large-scale musicals like *Miss Saigon* and *The Phantom of the Opera*.<sup>275</sup> Upon opening, however, the confidence was validated by prolonged applause and many curtain calls.<sup>276</sup> Of course in Broadway terms, advance bookings are a better indicator of success than applause and *Lughnasa* had achieved excellent advance bookings.

The notices too were excellent.<sup>277</sup> Clive Barnes, who was the *New York Times* theatre critic during previous Abbey tours to New York (and he was supportive of *The Plough and the Stars* in 1976), was now at the less influential *New York Post* where he designated *Lughnasa* to be 'Every bit as opalescently dazzling as transatlantic reports suggested.'<sup>278</sup> What this review reveals is that the advance publicity from the West End run was just as influential in New York as it had proved to be in Dublin, and the strength of the play's reputation guided the amount and quality of coverage the play received upon opening.

Most important for the success of the run was the enthusiastic notice from Frank Rich, the *New York Times* critic and 'Butcher of Broadway', whose review, like the

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<sup>273</sup> Source: NY Public Library recording of *Dancing at Lughnasa*.

<sup>274</sup> William Roche, 'Crowds Flock to Broadway *Lughnasa*', *Irish Press*, 26 October 1991.

<sup>275</sup> Barbara McKeon, '*Lughnasa* Cast Live it up in the Big Apple', *Irish Press*, 18 October 1991; William Roche, 'New York Bookings for *Lughnasa* Promise a Big Hit', *Irish Press*, 23 October 1991.

<sup>276</sup> Fergus Linehan, 'Broadway Celebrates Festive '*Lughnasa*', *The Irish Times*, 25 October 1991.

<sup>277</sup> William A. Raidy, 'Irish Ensemble Perform Perfectly Together in Moody, Moving '*Dancing at Lughnasa*', *The Star-Ledger*, 25 October 1991; David Patrick Stearns, '*Lughnasa*' Dances into your Heart', *USA Today*, 25 October 1991; 'Dancing for Joy with an NY Hit', *The Star*, 26 October 1991 and Julie Kavanagh, 'Friel at Last', *Vanity Fair*, October 1991. Dissenting notes came from Howard Kissel, for whom the music was 'more African than Irish' and who also criticised the parallels between Ireland and Jack's Africa as 'too pat'. Howard Kissel, 'Dancing' in the Emerald Aisles', *Daily News*, 25 October 1991.

<sup>278</sup> Clive Barnes, 'Dancing' a Celtic Celebration', *New York Post*, 25 October 1991.



programme for the play's first commercial run, steered the reader away from expectations of a stereotypical Abbey Theatre/Irish play:

Whenever an Irish dramatist writes a great play, or even a not-so-great one, habit demands that non-Irish audiences fall all over themselves praising the writer's poetic command of the English language. Those audiences may be in for a shock at *Dancing at Lughnasa*, Brian Friel's new play at the Plymouth Theater, for its overwhelming power has almost nothing to do with beautiful words.<sup>279</sup>

The show was booked for 20 weeks and was then to be re-cast with American actors, as demanded by Equity rules. Again, this international acclaim was conveyed to Dublin readers.<sup>280</sup> *Dancing at Lughnasa* played at the Plymouth Theatre from 24 October 1991 to 25 October 1992, that is, after just fifteen previews it played for an extensive 421 performances.

*Lughnasa's* transfer to Broadway was an achievement of only four Abbey Theatre productions so far, although not a first for Friel, who had achieved a record-breaking run for an Irish play with *Philadelphia, Here I Come!* in 1964.<sup>281</sup> The Abbey had not been on Broadway since O'Casey's *Plough* at the Hudson in 1937, during which many famous Abbey players like Barry Fitzgerald defected to Hollywood.

In an interview with *Newsday* Patrick Mason pitched the play as quintessentially Irish, drawing a contrast between the 'logical, ordered, concise, almost puritanical' English and the 'playful, perverse' chaos of the Irish.<sup>282</sup> An additional side panel 'A Time to be Irish' in which Noel Pearson was quoted saying 'All of a sudden it's sexy to be Irish' and arguing that 'Paddys and shamrocks' had been supplanted by Bono and Sinéad O'Connor, compounded that view. Being an Irish

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<sup>279</sup> Frank Rich, 'A Drama of Language, Not Necessarily of Words,' *New York Times*, 25 October 1991.

<sup>280</sup> John O'Mahoney, 'American Critics Sing Praises of *Lughnasa*', *Irish Independent*, 26 October 1991; Des Hickey, 'The Broadway Millionaires', *Sunday Independent*, 27 October 1991, Fergus Linehan, 'An Irishman's Diary', *Irish Times*, 31 October 1991.

<sup>281</sup> Grene, p. 197.

<sup>282</sup> Patrick Pacheco, 'The High Priest of Irish Theater', Fanfare Section, *Newsday*, 20 October 1991.

play was *Lughnasa's* selling point in the US, but being an international success was the selling point back in Ireland.

The play offered audiences on Broadway the validation of the Other of the Irish psyche, one they would identify as positive and natural and to which they could relate, unlike Tom Mac Intyre's Patrick Maguire. The play romanticised a subversive pagan quality with its atavistic Irish characters, while in Ireland it was the trappings of metropolitan international theatre success that drew audiences.

*Lughnasa* reopened at the Abbey in July 1992 and sold out its six-week run, it then toured nationally to full houses, before transferring to an 18-week tour in Australia (while Bill Kenwright brought a production around the UK). The production was a well-established brand by the time the Abbey reached Australia. Notices herald it as a massive success with three Tony awards, the Olivier and Irish Arts Board awards.

*Lughnasa* toured to Melbourne the week of 29 November and was presented by the Melbourne Theatre Company at the Victorian Arts Centre from 31 November to 23 December 1992. In the New Year *Lughnasa* went to Sydney where it was staged at the Sydney Opera House Drama Theatre from 2 January to 27 February. At the Sydney Opera House the play opened to a packed house and quickly became 'the most subscribed play in 1993 for the Sydney Theatre Company'.<sup>283</sup> *Lughnasa* continued to the Adelaide Playhouse from 6 March to 3 April 1993. The notices at this point did not summarise the plot as is commonly the case, but rather synopsised the success of the play so far and awards won. The play was not evaluated in reviews, but was pitched as an event in which to participate.<sup>284</sup>

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<sup>283</sup> Alison O'Connor, '*Lughnasa* Fever Hits Sydney Opera House', *The Sunday Press*, 3 January 1993

<sup>284</sup> 'By this time next year there'll be something like 20 to 30 productions on at any one time[...]. In a world that demands theatre on the scale of *Cats*, *Lughnasa's* popularity is wonderfully heartening and a little mystifying,' in Susan Wyndham, 'Dancing with the Irish', *The Australian*, 28 November 1992. See also Sonia Harford, 'Hit Irish Play Will Delight', *Sunday Herald-Sun*, 29 November 1992; Jason Romney, 'A Feast of Irish Excellence', *Herald Sun*, 2 December 1992; Frank Gauntlett, 'Irish Jig in a Ripe old Age', *Daily Telegraph Mirror*, 5 January 1993; Tim Lloyd, 'Irish Tale Reaps Rich Harvest', *Advertiser*, 8 March 1993 and Alison O'Connor, '*Lughnasa* Fever Hits Sydney Opera House', *The Sunday Press*, 3 January 1993.



In the original production Barry McGovern was cast as Jack, he was later replaced by Alec McCowan and Donal Donnelly. By 1992/ 93 the Australian audiences saw Father Jack as interpreted by Des Cave. Patrick Mason directed these actors differently, as Kevin Myers described in *The Irish Times*, having seen the first and last versions.<sup>285</sup> McGovern's priest was a dark, implicitly sinister figure, quite unlike the comedic version Jack had become by the tail end of the play's long international tour. Returning to Ireland in April, it had another run at the Gaiety. In just two years *Dancing at Lughnasa* was established internationally as a modern classic in the theatre.

What occurred after the Abbey's transfer to the English National Theatre was the audience's interpretation of the play as heritage play. Certainly it had some of the trappings: a kitchen in rural Ireland, peasant dress and the impoverished but dignified family, as well as the regular intrusion of period music. Joe Vanek's now iconic set design depicting a cornfield with poppies receding behind the house, became, as Enriqa Cerquoni argues, a physical manifestation of Irish national identity, embodied in scenic representations.<sup>286</sup> As well as having cast changes along the way, the different spaces in which the company played forced a reimagining of the set. Different stages presented different technical problems with each new staging in an attempt to reconstruct the set as faithfully as possible. A proscenium arch in one theatre might suggest a less subtle reading of the 'framing' of Michael's adult memories, and a smaller stage suggest a more intimate, involved experience for the audience. The transfers charted the process of reinvention and adaptation to new stages, but 'masked a lack of change in its sense of Irishness, rather like an emigrant space relying on memory'.<sup>287</sup> As Cerquoni observes, the image becomes the memory of a memory, while audience sought the authentic reproduction of the original production.

The transfer of *Lughnasa* on to the West End in 1990 might have been a welcome departure among the many generic franchised productions for that audience.

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<sup>285</sup> Kevin Myers, 'An Irishman's Diary' 23 January 1993.

<sup>286</sup> Enriqa Cerquoni, 'The Transience of the Visual Image in Touring Theatre: *Brian Friel's Dancing at Lughnasa*', in *Irish Theatre in England*, ed. by Richard Cave and Ben Levitas, (Dublin: Carysfort Press, 2007).

<sup>287</sup> Cerquoni, p. 189.



Returning to Dublin after its West End run and unprecedented success on Broadway however, I would argue that *Lughnasa* now represented for Irish audience not the latest Friel play by the Abbey, but a worldwide success, already viewed by thousands of audience members and in which a Dublin audience now participated. The play began as local and that was the genesis of its appeal, but the re-transmission of the play to Dublin and the highly subscribed revival rested upon its new status as a global theatrical event.

Una Chaudhuri writes that 'the intrinsic doubleness of theater, the fact that it produces and reproduces something that is prior to it (the script), makes for an inherent displacement and temporalisation. Putting its material into play again and again, from rehearsal to rehearsal and then from night to night, the theatre is a space of creative reinscription, a space where meaning, like deterritorialized identity, is not merely made but remade, negotiated out of silence, stasis, and incomprehension.'<sup>288</sup> *Lughnasa* was reinscribed by the unprecedented success it enjoyed and was soon accepted into the canon. In its transfer, which gained critical and popular (as well as commercial) acclaim on each successive run, *Dancing at Lughnasa*, was watched by thousands. Returning to Dublin, the play was remade as not just a new Friel play, but as a major global event, in which the Dublin audience watching it for the second (or third) time around were now participating. The success of *Lughnasa* led to both a reorientation of the Abbey and of Irish theatre's global reputation and the reorientation of the Abbey's reputation back in Dublin. Ironically when the play's critical success internationally was met with enormous commercial success and the retransmission of the play to an Irish nation took place, it was then received with fuller houses and even more positive reviews in the Irish press (even retractions by some Irish critics). The appeal of *Lughnasa* for Irish audiences, on returning from international tour, was its status as major global theatre event.

The huge West End and Broadway success of *Lughnasa* created an economic dynamic in which the Abbey could follow up very quickly with Friel's next play.

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<sup>288</sup> Una Chaudhuri, 'Theater and Cosmopolitanism: New Stories, Old Stages', *Cosmopolitan Geographies: New Locations in Literature and Culture*, ed. by Vinay Dharwadker, (New York: Routledge, 2000), pp. 171-95.

Unlike *Lughnasa*, *Wonderful Tennessee* was designated for Broadway from the beginning, in anticipation of another run there, while a documentary was produced by Noel Pearson with RTÉ television on the making of the play, all in anticipation of another Friel work that would have similar appeal and success. Indeed *Tennessee* shared with *Lughnasa* the power of nostalgia and memory, the comfort of ritual and a declining traditional way of life, but in this case it dealt with more contemporary middle-class characters and not the distant, romantic rural characters of the Mundy sisters (Fig 2.16). While Friel neither set out to undermine his audience, nor, one would assume, to write a failure, there is a distinct difference between the two plays that forces the audience to confront unappealing middle-class characters who seek to own and preserve the past through buying up pieces of it. Certainly Friel draws away from easy sentimentalisation, and it is possibly this tendency the audience found in *Lughnasa* that contributed to its enormous success, against the writer's intention.

The success of *Lughnasa* revived both the reputation and the financial situation of the Abbey Theatre, breathing new life into productions like *The Gigli Concert* which transferred to London in 1991.<sup>289</sup> But as director (then Artistic Director shortly after) Patrick Mason points out, its success was also something of a gilded cage:

It's the first major international commercial success of the start of the Celtic Tiger years. It was a mega success on Broadway. It ran for nearly four years in the West end and it ran for a year on Broadway. This is money, [...] this isn't cultural diplomacy, this is a cash cow: Irish theatre earning megabucks. Suddenly the gilded cage is 'Well, your play's not on Broadway, it's not on the West End, then what is it?'<sup>290</sup>

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<sup>289</sup> This revival arrived on the back of much praise for *Lughnasa*, and while other tours generally inspire tentative reviews of a difficult play, in this case they were notably more open. A later production of *Gigli* in 2004 would be more problematic (Your phrase seemed confusing, suggesting a return to good form; it will be discussed in Chapter Five.

<sup>290</sup> Interview with Patrick Mason, August 2010.

Because *Lughnasa* was a welcome success in supplanting audience expectations of pious revivals of Abbey classics, it in turn became embedded in the minds of audiences and proved just as inconvenient a pigeon hole:

They want *Lughnasa* again, they want another *Lughnasa* and they don't get it because Friel won't do that.<sup>291</sup>

### **Ballybeg: You Can Never Go Home Again.**

Three years after the start of the enormous success of *Dancing at Lughnasa*, the Abbey Theatre mounted a Broadway staging of Friel's *Wonderful Tennessee* (1993). After a run in Dublin (which in fact exceeded *Lughnasa*'s first run by 24 performances)<sup>292</sup>, the play was taken for a scheduled twenty-week engagement on Broadway in the 900-seat Plymouth Theatre. The stakes are obviously higher in Broadway, with greater financial pressure on a play. The Plymouth, for instance, would need to make \$250,000 a week at the box office to break even, but the production of *Wonderful Tennessee* was responding to a demand for more of the recent Abbey success. The Irish programme indicated it was a play presented 'by arrangement with Noel Pearson', and so it was already more of a partnership than a typical Abbey production. Audiences were given a play written by the same playwright, also set in Ballybeg, with the same director (Mason), set designer (Vanek), producer (Pearson) and at least one actor in common (Catherine Byrne, first as Chris in *Lughnasa*, now as Angela.)<sup>293</sup> *Wonderful Tennessee* played at the Plymouth Theatre, New York, from 24 to 31 October 1993, where it closed after only nine performances. When *Wonderful Tennessee* closed on Broadway, a successful production of *Dancing at Lughnasa* was playing to positive audiences at the Philadelphia Drama Guild/Annenberg Centre and some 63 productions of *Lughnasa* were being staged across the US. According to

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<sup>291</sup> Interview with Patrick Mason, August 2010.

<sup>292</sup> I am grateful to Anthony Roche for bringing this to my attention.

<sup>293</sup> The production also included Donal McCann and John Kavanagh as Terry and Frank, returning to Broadway after the success of *Juno and the Paycock* there in 1988, a transfer of the production directed by Joe Dowling for The Gate theatre after resigning from the Abbey. *Juno* had 6 previews, twelve performances, and excellent notices.



drama critic Gerald Weales, Friel's work had 'become a staple of regional theatres all over the country'.<sup>294</sup>

Patrick Mason did not want *Wonderful Tennessee* to go to Broadway,<sup>295</sup> and recalls that Friel was also unconvinced (the story Noel Pearson told in the American press was that Friel told him 'your *Left Foot* has gone to your head').<sup>296</sup> But the Shubert Theater wanted it, and had both a theatre that would otherwise have been dark and the financial provisions. The Abbey ran the play in Dublin first, then cut some nine minutes from it (it was being constantly reworked during previews in New York), while certain typical concessions to international audiences were made.<sup>297</sup>

Despite Mason's reservations, early days augured well for the play:

The money was there and we went and one thing I insisted on was at least three weeks' previews. Then it sold out; not a ticket to be had. As the weeks went on as the previews went on we were fine-tuning the show, and the response was getting better and better. I remember in the last week of previews, there had been standing ovations. I said to Brian, 'I could be wrong but we seem to be making contact'. What we didn't know was that there was *no* booking for after the previews whatsoever, the previews weren't generating bookings. So the whole thing came down to the reviews and the reviews were just not good enough. We were gone in a week.<sup>298</sup>

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<sup>294</sup> Gerald Weales, *Commonweal*, 3 December, 1993.

<sup>295</sup> Interview with Patrick Mason, August 2010.

<sup>296</sup> Cited in *Brian Friel in Conversation*, ed. by Paul Delany, (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2000), p. 221. It was a reference to the fact that Pearson had produced the internationally-successful and award-winning 1989 film adaptation of Christy Brown's *My Left Foot*.

<sup>297</sup> 'In New York you're not going to push a Donegal accent, you're going to use one that is milder, and the first person that will ask you to do that is Brian Friel. In terms of the American *Wonderful Tennessee*, there were actually some lines that simply had to be restated, that simply didn't work. And that was used to fine-tune it for an audience as far as we could without comprehensively or materially changing the play.' Mason, interview, August, 2010.

<sup>298</sup> Interview with Patrick Mason, August 2010.

Contrary to popular thought, *Wonderful Tennessee* was not 'Broadway's biggest flop of the year'.<sup>299</sup> 75% of the plays presented on Broadway lose money and while critics questioned the wisdom of taking the play to Broadway,<sup>300</sup> it won many positive reviews, standing ovations (with McCann was singled out for his excellent performance).<sup>301</sup> In some ways, the ignominy to which the play was consigned is unfair. A number of factors undermined the run, and the major catalyst was Frank Rich's review in *The New York Times*, the most important review for a Broadway show.

The title of the review 'Futile Wait for a Ferry to a Mystical Island', probably not even written by Rich, but most likely a sub-editor at the paper, did the damage.<sup>302</sup> 'Wonderful Tennessee,' Rich wrote, 'is an eternal drama'. Comparing it to *Lughnasa*, he argued that 'this time there is no ecstatic dance to bring the suffering characters in joyous touch with the ineffable, and there is no distance of decades and class separating those characters from much of the audience.'<sup>303</sup> Moreover the characters 'have psychiatrists, unpaid bills, failed ambitions and sexual pangs we can recognize directly as our own.'<sup>304</sup> In other words, this was not *Lughnasa 2*, but a play that deserved attention nonetheless. The 'futile' of the review's title referred to the characters' long wait at the pier, but as Noel Pearson later argued, a glance at the subheading may have been enough to discourage an audience from investing in a night at the Plymouth.<sup>305</sup> To attend a Broadway show is to participate in an expensive event, and, given the mainstream appeal of Broadway that buoys it up financially, the audience tends to make very conservative decisions. *WT* had 'exhausted much of its advance sale in three weeks',<sup>306</sup> and now depended more on reviews than ever. On Broadway

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<sup>299</sup> Stephen Dodd, 'Friel's Light Goes Down on Broadway', *Sunday Independent*, 31 October 1993.

<sup>300</sup> Matt Wolf, 'Broader Issues on Broadway', *The Times*, 19 January 1994.

<sup>301</sup> David Richards, 'Brian Friel Distills Words into Otherness', *New York Times*, 31 October 1993, Brian Rohan, 'Arts Chart', *Irish Voice*, 6 October 1993.

<sup>302</sup> Frank Rich, 'Futile Wait for a Ferry to a Mystical Island', *New York Times*, 25 October 1993

<sup>303</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>304</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>305</sup> Myles McWeeney, 'Pearson - and the Anatomy of a Flop', *Irish Independent*, 30 October 1993.

<sup>306</sup> Matt Wolf, 'Broader Issues on Broadway', *The Times*, 19 January 1994.

though, 'any serious play receiving less than complete raves is quickly put out to pasture.'<sup>307</sup>

Working backwards from the reviews as a source of the play's commercial failure, it is important to consider the play, its crucial difference from the play the audience wanted, and how in fact Friel had inadvertently implanted its failure from the beginning.

Among the many differences between the two plays was the fact that *Tennessee*, unlike *Lughnasa*, was designated for a major tour and Broadway run, whereas *Lughnasa*'s marathon run was the result of growing popularity, transferring to larger theatres after word-of-mouth. The success of *Lughnasa* had created the opportunity for the *WT* tour to be mounted. I would argue that in one regard the lack of commercial success of *Tennessee* was foreseeable, in the context of the network that *Lughnasa* had become part of, and into which *WT* was immediately and inappropriately connected through marketing, as well as the context of the career of Brian Friel, and that this production represented the disparity between the Abbey's vaulting ambition and Friel's characteristic response to popular success.

*Wonderful Tennessee*'s imagining of Irish identity is of a more metropolitan typology. Located on the liminal space of a pier, (far enough outside of Ballybeg to deny the recognisably local) in 'present day', and at a considerable remove from the poverty of the Mundy household, the play's events are concerned with the participation of three couples in an outing to celebrate the birthday of McCann's character, bookie and promoter Terry. Awaiting a boatman to take them to an island only occasionally visible offshore ('Oiléan Draoichta: Island of Otherness') which Terry intends to buy, the couples drink and sing over the course of an evening and night. The inside note for the programme was an

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<sup>307</sup> Wolf, 1994. See also Donal McCann, 'Tennessee Waltz', *The Irish Times*, 27 November 1993, 'Broadway Bombshell for Friel', *Irish Press*, 27 October 1993, Angela Phelan 'Closure of New Friel Play to Cost \$1m', *Irish Independent*, 27 October 1993, William Roche, 'Interest in Friel's New Play Hits Fever Pitch', *The Sunday Press*, Angela Phelan 'Broadway Cool on Friel', *Irish Independent*, 25 October 1993, Mary Holland and Sean Cronin, 'Broadway is not so Wonderful for Friel', *The Irish Times*, 30 October 1993, Myles McWeeney, 'Pearson – and the Anatomy of a Flop', *Irish Independent*, 30 October 1993.



extract from *In Conall's Footsteps* by Lochlann McGill, on pilgrims' rituals, a helpful gloss on the events of the play's final act that directed the reader toward Friel's interest in ritual.

Reviews of the Irish run pointed out the play was already destined for Broadway,<sup>308</sup> but critics like Benedict Nightingale thought it unlikely to have the same impact, as this time Friel had 'put more emotional distance between himself and his people'.<sup>309</sup> Less elegantly, Paul Taylor at *The Independent* thought it 'dodgy'.<sup>310</sup>

When Friel accepted a Tony award for Best Play for *Dancing at Lughnasa*, his response was to cite Graham Greene that 'success is only failure deferred'. A somewhat unhelpful response to give amid the unrelenting praise for the play (though he is notoriously uncomfortable in interviews), Anthony Roche sees Friel's response as a reaction against:

a process of simplification when his plays achieve huge success, their deep-felt emotion sentimentalized, their political and historic ironies flattened or removed.<sup>311</sup>

In his follow-up, then, I would argue, Friel returned to the same themes of the dysfunctional family group confronted with the ineluctable passage of time, but in a structure that denied sentimentalisation. As Roche argues, *Wonderful Tennessee* was a 'more abstract and philosophical' approach to many of the same themes which featured in *Lughnasa*.<sup>312</sup> Friel is given to entering into a dialogue with the popular responses to his plays, returning after commercial successes with texts that subvert expectations. His work oscillates between accessible and popular, and challenging and abstruse, because despite his being one of the most commercially successful Irish playwrights, Friel has not made a consistent effort

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<sup>308</sup> O'Hanlon, Ray, 'Friel's Wonderful Tennessee Set to be a Hit on Broadway', *Irish Press*, 25 October 1993.

<sup>309</sup> Benedict Nightingale, 'Dancing with Tears in their Eyes', *The Times*, 6 July, 1993.

<sup>310</sup> Paul Taylor, 'Absolute Beginners', *The Independent*, 5 July, 1993.

<sup>311</sup> Anthony Roche, Introduction, in *The Cambridge Companion to Brian Friel*, ed. Anthony Roche, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 3.

<sup>312</sup> Anthony Roche, *Brian Friel: Theatre and Politics*, (Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), p. 2.

to win over an average audience. He does, instead, consistently mine themes like ritual and memory, on his own terms. Anthony Roche and Thomas Kilroy point out this is a 'process and pattern' at work in Friel's career.<sup>313</sup>

As D.E.S. Maxwell has argued, the content of Friel's narrative and dramatic work is characterised by continuing explorations of related themes. Thomas Kilroy sees *The Communication Cord* (1982) and *The Loves of Cass McGuire* (1966) as responses to the successes of *Translations* (1980) and *Philadelphia Here I Come* (1964):

You could read *The Loves of Cass McGuire* as a response to the huge success of *Philadelphia, Here I Come!* in the United States, particularly among Irish-Americans. It is the kind of rejoinder which this writer was to repeat with *The Communication Cord* (1982), which consciously subverts the consolatory, tribal imagery of the preceding play, *Translations*.<sup>314</sup>

*Cass McGuire* (1966) was the second of Brian Friel's plays to be produced on Broadway, after *Philadelphia, Here I Come!*, which played successfully on Broadway from February to October 1966 at the Helen Hayes theatre (for 326 performances in total). Almost overlapping with *Philadelphia*, *Cass McGuire* premiered on Broadway, also at the Helen Hayes Theatre, and, as with *Philadelphia*, in a production by the David Merrick Arts Foundation directed by the Gate Theatre's Hilton Edwards. The first Irish production was 10 April the following year at the Abbey Theatre, with Siobhán McKenna in the leading role, and including Bill Foley and Maire O'Neill. On the Irish production, Friel told the Irish media:

I'm glad it's being done here – there won't be the same sort of frantic do-or-die attitude that you get on Broadway, and I think an Irish audience will have more understanding.<sup>315</sup>

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<sup>313</sup> Ibid, pp. 2-3

<sup>314</sup> Thomas Kilroy, 'The Early Plays', in *The Cambridge Companion to Brian Friel*, p. 12.

<sup>315</sup> 'An Irishman's Diary', *The Irish Times*, 17 March 1967.

*Wonderful Tennessee*, in following the success of *Lughnasa*, repeats the pattern of the success of *Philadelphia, Here I Come* and Friel's follow-up *The Loves of Cass McGuire*.

Set in contemporary Ireland, in Eden House, a home for the elderly, the play centres on Cass McGuire, an Irish emigrant who has returned to Ireland after fifty years of working among impoverished down-and-out characters, who are themselves rooted in the past. Cass's family reunion is problematic: now self-consciously middle class, the family recoil from Cass who is an alcoholic bag-lady character prone to unselfconscious vulgarity. In placing her in Eden House the family abandon her to a lonely rediscovery of the home she left. A symptom of her eccentricity as far as her family is concerned, Cass's addresses to the audience indicate her link with reality and the control she has over her story. As the play progresses, she loses her ability to see the audience while her control over the events in her life declines.

Cass is an unconventional female lead, but most strikingly she is a rejection of the figure of the romantic Irish exile. The bookending of Gar and Cass offers the suggestion that emigration is a worse option than staying in Ireland. *Cass* followed the thematic framework established in *Philadelphia, Here I Come*, but uncompromisingly so. In a similar vein, Friel's *Wonderful Tennessee* consistently engages with Friel's interest in ritual that can be traced from *Faith Healer* and *Dancing at Lughnasa*, but is both a counterpart to *Lughnasa* as well as an extension of it. As Anthony Roche argues, Frank's declaration from the pier in *Wonderful Tennessee*: 'Next parish Boston, folks!'<sup>316</sup>, 'points the way entire Donegal families have gone.'<sup>317</sup>

Friel's portrait of Cass McGuire is not without pity, Thomas Kilroy notes, but it is severe. Kilroy argues that if Gar is an exile, Cass is doubly so, being an outcast on her return. In *Tennessee*, a similar subversion occurs. Friel documents material

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<sup>316</sup> Friel, *Wonderful Tennessee*, p. 356.

<sup>317</sup> Anthony Roche, *Brian Friel: Theatre and Politics*, p. 62. In this remark the play also anticipates Tánaiste Mary Harney's notorious statement: 'Geographically we are closer to Berlin than Boston' in her remarks at a meeting of the American Bar Association in the Law Society of Ireland, Blackhall Place, Dublin on 21 July 2000, often cited as an example of the Celtic Tiger's dependence on the American economy.



improvement at the expense of cultural loss again in *Tennessee*. The characters, like the Mundy sisters, represent a crucial point in Ireland's modernization, in this case middle class, but nonetheless struggling for self-determination; the events play out in a pagan context. The difference this time is that they are familiar to their audience and lack a discernable rural charm. Moreover with the exception of accent, the characters are not as obviously Irish. If the popularity of *Lughnasa* lay in the showcasing of the decline of people in the local, the characters in *Tennessee* are the type that bought the factory-made gloves that made Agnes and Rose redundant.

Some scenes are mirrored between *Lughnasa* and *Tennessee*. In *Lughnasa* when Agnes returns from the village, she tells Maggie about an old friend, Bernie O'Donnell who has returned from London, now married to a Swede, successful and incredibly youthful:

Kate: Absolutely gorgeous. The figure of a girl of eighteen. Dressed to kill from head to foot. And the hair! – as black and as curly as the day she left. I can't tell you – a film star!<sup>318</sup>

It is this conversation that provokes in Maggie the memory of her own youth, a story about a local dance, which then leads to the garish face-painting with flour before the play's most famous scene, in which the sisters dance with 'animated defiance'.<sup>319</sup> The success and glamour of Maggie's peer offsets her penurious life, existing from one Wild Woodbine cigarette to another, suggesting a life Maggie might have had, had she broken from the family. *Lughnasa* shows the audience self-sacrifice in order to preserve a family that is dispersed by emigration nonetheless by the story's end.

In *Wonderful Tennessee* on the other hand, Terry recalls meeting Michael Robinson, a college friend of George's, in London. Robinson's situation is in stark contrast to Bernie's:

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<sup>318</sup> Brian Friel, *Dancing at Lughnasa*, in *Plays: 2*, (London: Faber & Faber, 1999), p. 32.

<sup>319</sup> Friel, *Lughnasa*, p. 35.

Terry: Great...fine...well, not so good. Bumped into him in a pub. Didn't recognise him – not that I ever knew him well. Actually I thought that he was a down-and-out touching me.

Talked for over an hour. Couldn't shut him up. Eventually I gave him some money and just...walked away.<sup>320</sup>

If Bernie O'Donnell represents a juxtaposition of success, Michael Robinson recalls for the audience the fate of Agnes and Rose in *Dancing at Lughnasa*, and the outcome for many emigrants. What is additionally uncomfortable for the audience is Terry's reaction to the meeting. Terry, ostensibly generous and friendly, walks away from Robinson as quickly as he can. He is at once typical of the accomplished middle class, and the personification of a recognisable materialistic new Ireland: proud of its noble peasant past, but anxious to leave the trauma of its poverty behind.

In *Lughnasa* the audience valued rural, impoverished characters and could pity them their powerlessness in the face of inevitable death, poverty and heartbreak. In *Tennessee*, however, the community of individuals showed the audience their own attempt to reconstruct and possess the past. This is achieved in various ways: in Terry's sister, Trish, appearing to have forgotten the part she had in her dying husband's giving up classical music and so reconstructing her memories to make them acceptable, and most significantly, in Terry's attempt to own the magical island. Terry's memories of the island he visited with his father are at obvious odds with his current life. Visiting the island, Terry had to remove his shoes and socks, but now awaiting the boatman, Terry, reported by other characters to be wealthy and generous (or at least to behave as such), brings symbols of materialism: champagne and a hamper of expensive food. The boatman never appears to transport the characters to the island, possibly because Terry's wealth precludes his admission, or perhaps, Peter Pan-like, he has grown too old and outgrown innocence. For an audience who made *Dancing at Lughnasa* an enormous commercial success, Terry's crude gesture of buying the island is a critique on attempting to control memory and possess the past.

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<sup>320</sup> Friel *Wonderful Tennessee*, in *Plays: 2*, p. 379.

Flaws in the production aside, (such as the technical limitations of the pier stage, which enforced a stagnant atmosphere), *Wonderful Tennessee* was a frustrating display of middle class behaviour, at odds with the expectations of average middle class audiences. Frank Rich, reviewing the play in the *New York Times* noted that the play explored more or less the same themes as *Lughnasa*.

One of the least appealing characteristics was that familiar first-world problems of the characters.<sup>321</sup> Frank Rich wrote that, during the production he attended, when Angela complained about the futility of this 'useless, endless, unhappy outing,' the audience laughed, and applauded 'in somewhat derisive agreement.'<sup>322</sup>

If, as Helen Lojek argues, the defining characteristics of Irish identity 'have been embedded in Ireland's rural west', then *Wonderful Tennessee's* middle-class metropolitan characters represent a departure from those expectations, and an intervention to confront the audience with an image of itself, re-perceiving the past.<sup>323</sup>

### **The Politics of Representation: Conclusion**

The Abbey underwent a reputational renaissance during the period discussed by making use of local and global performance networks. However this success, though critical as well as commercial, conducted the theatre into a new realm of expectation and would lead audiences to adopt a new interpretive strategy, no less limiting than its predecessor.

The renaissance of the Abbey Theatre in the 1980s and early 90s did not just involve the staging of well-written new plays, but had more to do with the Abbey's opening up to a global theatrical discourse and the newly relevant engagement of Dublin audiences with international ones. By making use of the

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<sup>321</sup> Frank Rich, 'Futile Wait for a Ferry to a Mystical Island', *New York Times*, 25 October 1993.

<sup>322</sup> Ibid.

<sup>323</sup> Lojek, p. 78.



interlinking processes of globalisation the Abbey was able to reposition itself internationally, and by association, nationally, during this time.

*The Field*, when considered alongside *The Great Hunger*, discloses the national problem of questioning and asserting Irish identity in a cultural and economic context that saw national boundaries becoming more fluid. Both plays are anti-pastoral: that is, both function as rebarbative texts to the assertion in the Irish literary revival of idyllic rural innocence. They both present instead the Irish peasant as warped by the circumstances of the Ireland they know: coincidentally both are set in the not-so-distant, but industrially and culturally regressive, past. As both plays were written (or rewritten) relatively recently, it is important to consider the engagement of the texts with contemporary theatrical idiom (the changing context of production and reception) and the changing status of Ireland. Both arguably engage with a globalising world: *The Great Hunger* in influence, form and practice, *The Field* in content: for the play itself, though it is in many respects a conventional 19<sup>th</sup>-century play, the concerns raised by the characters within represent a reaction to modernisation and the inevitable imposition of the outside.

As Helen Freshwater writes in *Theatre and Audience*, 'the desire to reconfigure the relationship between theatre and its audiences was a recurring theme in experimental practice during the twentieth century'.<sup>324</sup> If, as Brian Cliff claims, the Irish Literary Theatre 'ensured its own entanglement, as well that of its successors' in the 'rhetorical web' of expectation of 'a theatre in the nation's service' by 'building on preexisting tensions within the broader literary and national movements'<sup>325</sup>, then in the 1980s and early 1990s the international touring reflects an engagement with new frameworks: local, international and global networks that, with varying success created the opportunity for new Irish writing to be toured internationally, beginning a process of recoding the Abbey in a changing performance and reception context.

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<sup>324</sup> Helen Freshwater, *Theatre and Audience*, (London: Palgrave, 2009), p. 2.

<sup>325</sup> 'As Assiduously Advertised': Publicizing the 1899 Irish Literary Theatre Season', *Critical Ireland*, ed. by Alan A. Gillis and Aaron Kelly, (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2001).

Brian Friel's work is a record, Seamus Heaney says, of 'what it has been like to live through the second half of the twentieth century in Ireland.'<sup>326</sup> In spite of the latent anti-pastoral theme of *Dancing at Lughnasa*, and of its suggestions of the unreliability of memory and nostalgia, (Michael never appears as a child onstage and so is an unreliable recorder of the past<sup>327</sup>), the play nonetheless won acclaim internationally for its authenticity and quaint otherness. Mireia Aragay argues that, after a period of economic difficulty, Ireland was beginning to emerge as a more modern, metropolitan country and so the play fulfilled a longing for nostalgia.<sup>328</sup> I would argue rather that the enthusiastic Irish audiences did not come until after the play had earned such acclaim from international critics, audiences and awarding bodies who wanted it for its very nostalgia and the defunct pastoral Ireland it offered, and by the time it got back to Ireland it was now a metropolitan import: not the new Friel play, but the newest global smash on Broadway. International audiences craved the fulfilment of a nostalgic representation of Ireland onstage, as the previous chapter has argued they always seek, while Irish audiences were craving a major global theatrical event, and *Dancing at Lughnasa* was able to be both plays. Patrick Lonergan writes that theatre must 'tackle (or exploit) the commodification and essentialization of identity within global culture in the present'.<sup>329</sup> In a sense this is what drove the *WT* tour and large-scale marketing of the Friel-Mason dynamic.

The Abbey Theatre has always conceived itself in an international context and touring internationally has been an important aspect of its remit. The international audience often has a powerful influence on the plays chosen for touring, and the Abbey had, in the latter half of the twentieth century, on occasion lost the agency of self-definition when at the mercy of both the diasporic audience and those for whom Irish identity is necessarily fixed. Shortly thereafter, however, international touring became an even greater impulse for

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<sup>326</sup> Seamus Heaney, Friel Festival Programme (April–August 1999), p. 23.

<sup>327</sup> Prapassaree Kramer, 'Dancing at Lughnasa: Unexcused Absence', *Modern Drama*, 43:2 (Summer 2000), 171-181, [172].

<sup>328</sup> 'Ireland, Nostalgia and Globalisation: Brian Friel's *Dancing at Lughnasa* on Stage and Screen', *International Journal of English Studies*, 2:2, (2002), 83-93.

<sup>329</sup> Lonergan, p. 27.

change for the Abbey Theatre's reputation, in terms of critical and commercial success.



Chapter Two images:

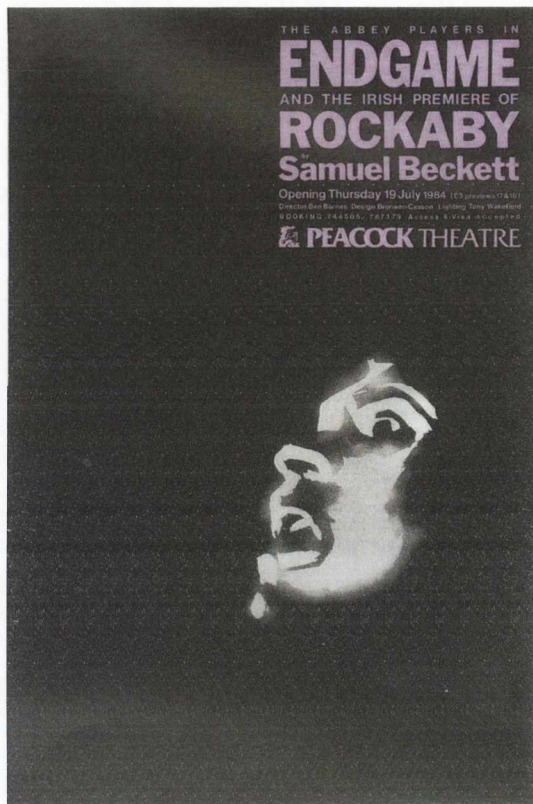


Fig. 2.1 Poster for *Endgame* and *Rockaby* at the Peacock, 1984.



Fig. 2.2 *Endgame* directed by Ben Barnes, with Barry McGovern and Godfrey Quigley, 1985.

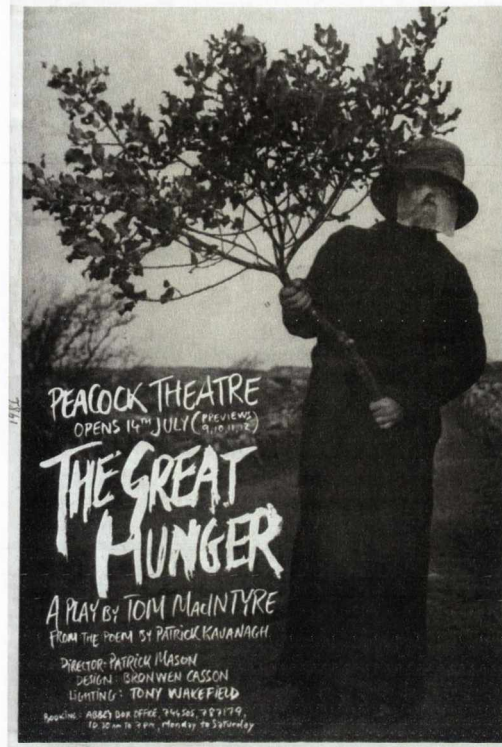


Fig. 2.3 Poster for *The Great Hunger* directed by Patrick Mason, at the Peacock, 1986.



Fig. 2.4 The procession scene from *The Great Hunger*.





Fig. 2.5 Tom Hickey and 'Mother' in *The Great Hunger*.



Fig. 2.6 The cast of *The Great Hunger* in Edinburgh after winning the Fringe First Award, 1986. From left, Tom Hickey, Cónal Kearney, Vincent O'Neill, Dermod Moore, Patrick Mason, Michèle Forbes, Bríd Ní Neachtain and Joan Sheehy.





 **ABBNEY THEATRE**

OPENING MONDAY 9th FEBRUARY, 1987 (£5 previews Tues.3 - Sat.7)

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Des Nealon, Niall O'Brien, Macdara Ó Fatharta, Maura O'Sullivan, John Olohan, Niall Tóibín.

Director Ben Barnes Set & Costume Design Tim Reed Lighting Design Rupert Murray

# The Field

## John B. Keane

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Bradford Foreman

Fig. 2.7 Poster for *The Field* at the Abbey Theatre, 1987.





Fig. 2.8 Brendan Conroy, Donal Farmer and Niall Tóibín, *The Field*, directed by Ben Barnes, in Red Square, Moscow, 1988.



Fig. 2.9 *A Whistle in the Dark*, directed by Garry Hynes, 1986, transferred to London 1989.





Fig. 2.10 From the (original) cast of *Dancing At Lughnasa* by Brian Friel: Bríd Brennan, Catherine Byrne, Bríd Ní Neachtain and Frances Tomelty, directed by Patrick Mason, on the Abbey Stage, 1990.

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THE LONDON THEATRE GROUP presents THE ABBEY THEATRE DUBLIN production  
FOLLOWING ITS SELL-OUT SEASON AT THE ROYAL NATIONAL THEATRE

**Dancing at Lughnasa**

'BRIAN FRIEL'S NEW MASTERPIECE...  
ASTONISHING'  
*The Times*



'POIGNANT, HILARIOUS & SPELL-BINDING'  
*The Times*

'WONDERFUL, TOUCHING & GLORIOUSLY COMIC'  
*The Times*

**PHOENIX THEATRE**  
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Fig. 2.11 Flyer for *Dancing at Lughnasa* at the Phoenix Theatre, London, 1991.

An Irish family gathers at harvest-time to sing, dance, laugh and quarrel. Brian Friel has filled his award-winning new masterpiece with the passions, hopes and regrets of this family, making *Dancing at Lughnasa* the most exciting and moving play the West End has seen for many years.

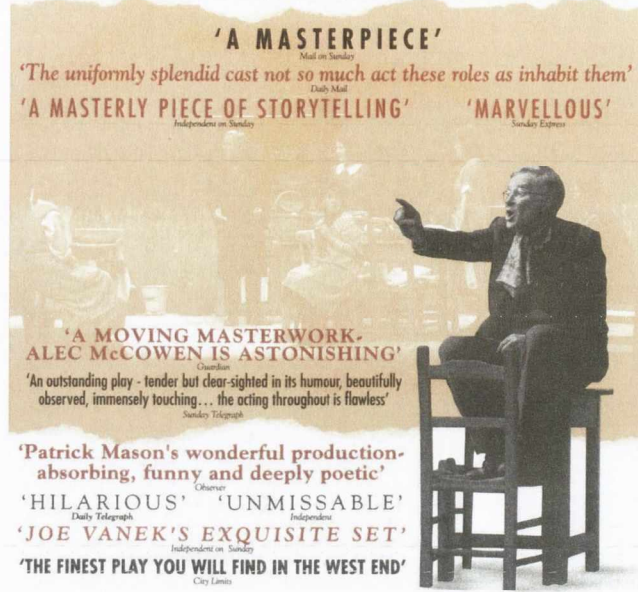


Fig. 2.12 Inside: flyer for *Dancing at Lughnasa* at the Phoenix Theatre, London, 1991, depicting Alec McCowen as Jack.



Fig. 2.13 The cast of *Dancing at Lughnasa* with writer Brian Friel and director Patrick Mason, 1990.



Fig. 2.14 The cast of *Dancing at Lughnasa* in Sydney, 1993.





Fig. 2.15 Dearbhla Molloy as Maggie in *Dancing at Lughnasa*, 1992.

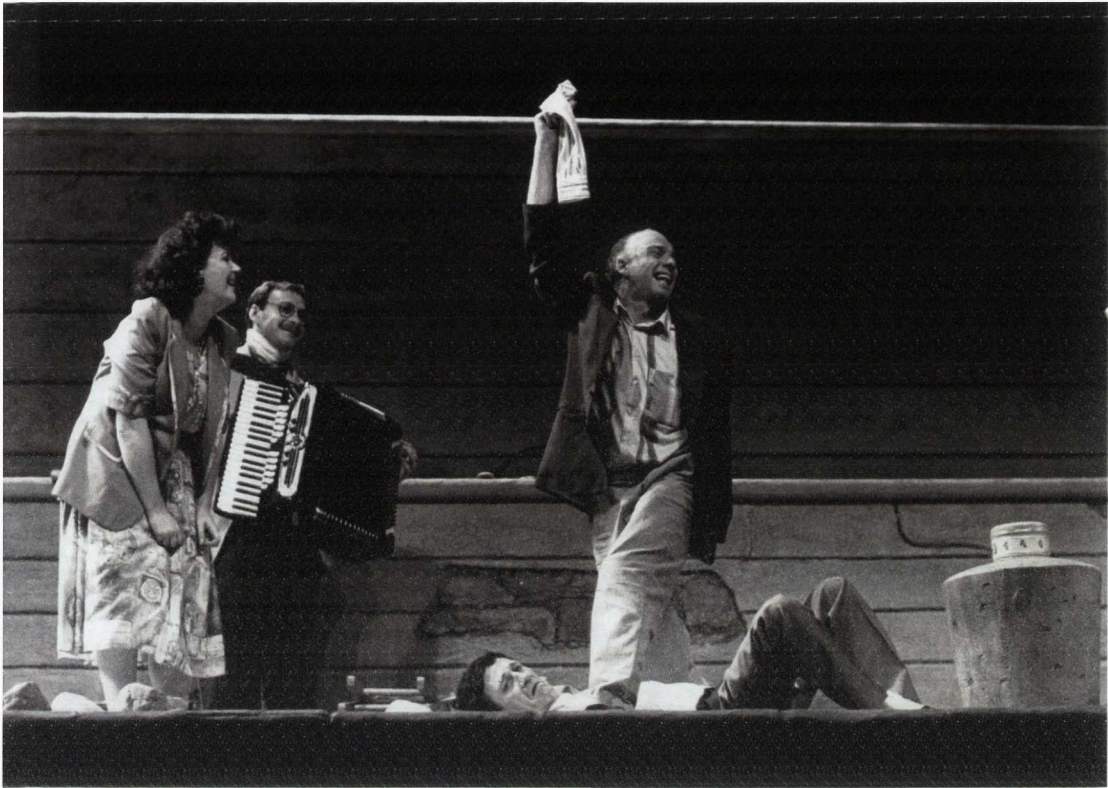


Fig. 2.16 Marion O'Dwyer, Robert Black, Donal McCann and John Kavanagh in *Wonderful Tennessee* by Brian Friel, directed by Patrick Mason, on the Abbey Stage, 1993.

### Chapter Three:

#### Revival of the Repressed: 1994-2000

Tours and transfers during this period:

*Faith Healer* (US, 1994), *The Well of the Saints* (Edinburgh, Paris, Australia, 1994-6), *The Cavalcaders* (UK, 1994), *Observe the Sons of Ulster Marching Towards the Somme* (Edinburgh, Paris, Bonn, Brussels, UK, Malvern Festival, Paris, 1995-6); *The Mai* (UK, 1995); *Portia Coughlan* (UK, 1996); *The Secret Fall of Constance Wilde* (Melbourne Festival, 1998, UK, 2000); *Tarry Flynn* (UK 1998), *The Colleen Bawn* (UK, 1999); *Dolly West's Kitchen* (UK, 1999-2000); *The Wake* (Edinburgh, 1999); *Living Quarters* (1999); *The Freedom of the City* (US, 1999); *Love in the Title* (US), Singapore, (2000).

#### Introduction: 'I always knew when nothing was going to happen'

Despite the success of *Dancing at Lughnasa* and an increase of arts funding, the next period, 1994-2000, began with the Abbey Theatre on unstable ground, in terms of reputation and even financially. With the appointment of Patrick Mason as Artistic Director in 1994 a new phase of the Abbey Theatre began, coinciding with major changes in the nation it represented. Making a concerted effort to represent the theatre as open, Mason looked to neglected texts, neglected relationships and neglected histories. This section will consider the importance of *The Well of the Saints* as a project by the newly appointed AD to recast the Abbey as avant-garde and modern, showing that the dramaturgical history of the



Abbey did in fact include non-naturalist texts, and to break the frame of naturalism without rejecting the theatre's past outright.

In engaging with the past, the plays supported and toured by the Abbey, such as *Observe the Sons of Ulster Marching Towards the Somme* and *Dolly West's Kitchen*, encouraged a reconsideration of historical narratives. This move helped revive the Abbey's role in representing the nation as an alternative to official narratives. Meanwhile touring the plays of Marina Carr, Thomas Kilroy and Hugh Leonard would provoke reconsiderations of the authority and integrity of the Irish family.

In April 1994, within months of the unsuccessful Broadway run of *Wonderful Tennessee*, the Abbey Theatre returned to the US with a revival of Joe Dowling's 1980 production of Brian Friel's *Faith Healer* (first produced in 1979) with Donal McCann in the title role that he had come to be associated with (see Fig. 3.1). Joe Dowling's 1980 production is generally thought to have rescued the play from its reputation as Broadway disaster. After positive reviews in Dublin in 1990, the play had been produced to critical acclaim at the Royal Court, London in 1992, with Sinéad Cusack taking over from Judy Geeson for the UK transfer (Geeson resumed the role in the US). In 1994, *Faith Healer's* status was now more than that of a Broadway flop: it was also an undiscovered gem that might appeal to audiences interested to see another Friel play, after the international fame brought by the success of *Dancing at Lughnasa*, which was not fulfilled by *Wonderful Tennessee* on Broadway.

*Faith Healer* was produced on the Newton Schneck Stage of the Long Wharf Theatre in New Haven, Connecticut. The Long Wharf is a major regional theatre (which won a Tony Award for Outstanding Regional Theatre in 1978), known for launching new plays and particularly for being a springboard for Broadway transfers.

As a Broadway stop-over in a wealthy, upper-class area, the Long Wharf had a demanding, critical audience in 1994. Into this atmosphere of frustration with the theatre season, Dowling's production of *Faith Healer* brought with it the reputation of the Abbey Theatre, (generally considered the most proficient in the performance of Irish theatre), the enormous success of Friel's *Lughnasa* on

Broadway from 1991-2, but also the commercial disappointment of *Wonderful Tennessee*, just months previously.<sup>330</sup> *Faith Healer* was not booked in to the Long Wharf because it was on its way to Broadway. Where *Lughnasa* ran for almost a year in the Plymouth, and *Wonderful Tennessee* went straight to Broadway, *Faith Healer*'s less ambitious five-week run at the Long Wharf was a continuation of a downward trajectory for the Abbey in the US. There was still positive anticipation in the press, though *Wonderful Tennessee* cast a long shadow, and in interviews the cast, especially Donal McCann, were noticeably defensive of the play.<sup>331</sup>

The initial response was not promising. In opening night reviews, some journalists reported that several audience members appeared to fall asleep, and, after the first act, a quarter of the audience (approximately 200 people) left during the interval, leaving a conspicuous gap in the auditorium.<sup>332</sup> This was not, however, to have as negative an impact on the rest of the run as, for instance, Frank Rich's lukewarm but generally positive review had had on *Wonderful Tennessee*.

As with most theatrical production, press reviews are prone to errors: characters' names are confused, plots are misunderstood, and as discussed with regard to the 1981 tour of *Shadow of a Gunman*, the political consciousness of the author can be misconstrued by extant events. In the case of *Faith Healer*, the influence of the press on the play's potential audience hinged on one error in particular. The reviews fall roughly into two categories. The first were those who mistakenly took *Faith Healer* for a new Friel play, and judged it to be structurally and aesthetically a failure, too staid and lacking in direction, though the cast

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<sup>330</sup> In, for instance, Mary Colurso, 'Gather 'Round 'Faith Healer'', *New Haven Register*, 12 April 1994; Malcolm Johnson, 'Difficult Faith Healer Requires Attention', *The Hartford Courant*, 18 April 1994; Joanne Greco Rochman, 'Faith Healer Touches the Audience with Magic', *The Stratford Star*, 20 April 1994 and David Rosenberg, 'Faith Healer Fails to Move the Spirit', *Norwalk CT Daily*, 22 April 1994.

<sup>331</sup> Gloria Cole, 'McCann at Long Wharf for Friel's Faith Healer', *Connecticut Post*, 10 April 1994.

<sup>332</sup> 'Perhaps a cultural gap is at work here, but more people left at intermission on opening night than this reporter has seen in 14 years of reviewing Long Wharf. They didn't look hostile, they looked drowsy,' in Robert Viagas, 'Faith Healer Displays the Power to Put Theater Audience to Sleep', *New Haven Register*, 17 April 1994, also mentioned in Jean Dunn, 'Faith Healer Fails to Click', *Voices*, 20 April 1994 and David Rosenberg, 'Faith Healer Fails to Move the Spirit', *Norwalk CT Daily*, 22 April 1994.



were almost universally praised, with the consensus being the Abbey were a fine company working with an inferior script.<sup>333</sup> The second category of reviews, which emerged as the opening week progressed, tended to accurately relay the story of the play's 1979 20-week run on Broadway, and the fact that it was an unfortunate commercial and artistic failure. Then, with the *New York Times* review of Dowling's *Faith Healer*, the play was being touted as that lost Friel masterpiece and that, furthermore, 'any connoisseur of theatre should take the next train to New Haven.'<sup>334</sup>

With that influential *New York Times* review, and the publication of an angry letter to one regional paper berating its harsh judgement of the play, the end of the run saw increasingly positive notices; the later critics commended the writing, the cast and the direction, and suggested that the challenge to the audience was in the style, lost in translation between the European and American approaches to theatre.<sup>335</sup> It was to be the beginning of a period of retrieval and renewal reflected in the Abbey Theatre's international projects.

From 1994-2000, Ireland was undergoing major economic changes; moving from an export-led, hence international, economy in the beginnings of the 1990s to a property-dominated, insular economy after the 'dot com' collapse in 2001. The country experienced profound social change too: homosexuality was finally decriminalised in 1993; in 1995 Ireland passed the fifteenth amendment to its constitution to repeal the constitutional prohibition of divorce -- between 1996 and 1999 there were to be six further amendments to the constitution; the Belfast Agreement in 1998 promised to bring an end to the violence in Northern Ireland; and this period also saw the beginning of the break up of church authority in Ireland. While an anti-clerical feeling had been fomenting for years, it was fully unleashed in the wake of many child abuse scandals from which the church never recovered. Writing a few years later in *The Independent* on Frank

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<sup>333</sup> See above reviews.

<sup>334</sup> Ben Brantley, 'From 3 Versions of a Shared Past, a Vision of Memory's Power', *New York Times*, 26 April 1994.

<sup>335</sup> Specifically, one critic warned readers that 'European' theatre practitioners employ 'pregnant pauses - dead spots', and that this was an idiosyncrasy to be appreciated. Jules Lang, Letter, *Norwalk CT Daily*, 4 May 1994 and Irene Backalenick, 'Friel's *Faith Healer* is an Irish Lullaby', *Westport News*, 20 April 1994.



McGuinness's *Observe the Sons of Ulster Marching Towards the Somme*, Patrick Mason summed up the rapid maturation of Ireland thus:

One of the more extraordinary aspects of recent events in Ireland has been the collapse of the political power of the Catholic Church after a wave of scandals over child abuse in church-run orphanages and industrial schools. And whatever the battle over divorce and contraception, both now legal in the Republic, the liberalising of anti-gay legislation was achieved with remarkable speed, and brought Ireland into line with Europe... except for the UK that is, a country that, ironically, remains more illiberal and deliberately cruel in its legislation than the Republic.<sup>336</sup>

Fintan O'Toole neatly characterises this period as Ireland's finally obtaining the benefit of being a rural, undeveloped country. If there was no industrialisation of Ireland, O'Toole argues, 'the transformation that had taken place in other western societies over hundreds of years was to be telescoped into less than a decade'.<sup>337</sup> Ireland could go from pre-industrial to postmodern in an elegant metamorphosis.

The rise in the 1990s of what was called 'new brutalism' or 'in-yer-face' theatre made a space for London-Irish playwright Martin McDonagh.<sup>338</sup> 1996 was the year in which Druid Theatre made a celebrity of the controversial playwright, premiering his *The Beauty Queen of Leenane* in Galway's newly renovated Town Hall Theatre, before bringing it to international audiences and winning awards. McDonagh's success provoked a reappraisal of modern Irish drama, and his public persona contrived to bring the discussion into more mainstream media.

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<sup>336</sup> Patrick Mason, 'Theatre: Love Is Sweeping The Country', *The Independent (London)*, 10 May 2000.

<sup>337</sup> Fintan O'Toole, Introduction to *Plays 4* by Tom Murphy (London: Methuen, 1997). O'Toole expands this idea in *Ship of Fools: How Stupidity and Corruption Sank the Celtic Tiger*, arguing that a pre-industrial fixation on property drove the economic crash after the Celtic Tiger period of the early 2000s (London: Faber and Faber, 2009).

<sup>338</sup> The movement is well documented in Aleks Sierz, *In-Yer-Face Theatre: British Drama Today*, (London: Faber and Faber 2001) and Clare Wallace's *Suspect Cultures*, (Prague: Litteraria Pragensia, 2006).

In 1998 Noel Pearson's film adaptation of Friel's *Dancing at Lughnasa*, with a screenplay by Frank McGuinness, was released. The critical reception was positive, but reserved, and it did not recoup production budget in the box office. In 1999 Dublin city hosted a 'Friel Festival' to celebrate the writer's 70th birthday. There were productions of *Dancing at Lughnasa*, *Living Quarters* and *The Freedom of the City* at the Abbey, as well as talks and adjunct events.

In 1993, at the beginning of the period considered here, the Arts Council's expenditure on drama was £3,931,000, or 33.7% of Arts Council spending.<sup>339</sup> Two new Irish theatres opened during 1993, the Watergate Theatre in Kilkenny and the Garage Theatre in Monaghan, and the first season of the Irish-language theatre company, Amharclann de hÍde, jointly funded by the Council and Bord na Gaeilge, was presented at the Project Arts Centre. Two Irish artists, Dorothy Cross and Willie Doherty, had their work exhibited at the Venice Biennale. This was the first time in twenty-five years that Ireland was represented at the major contemporary art event.

At the behest of the new coalition government between Fianna Fáil and Labour, a systematic three-year plan for the arts in Ireland was submitted by the Arts Council for approval as Government policy. It stressed the Arts Council's intention to 'facilitate the maximum possible touring by professional companies with a view to making balanced provision for audiences', 'to encourage more cross-border touring' and to 'encourage co-productions/exchanges between individuals and companies in Ireland and overseas'. In 1993 the council's budget of £500,000 was the largest allocation ever for theatrical touring, and this was increased to £549,000 the following year.<sup>340</sup>

Numerous cultural exchange programmes were sponsored, such as Ireland's designation as Focal Theme Country at the Frankfurt Book Fair 1996 ('Ireland and its Diaspora'), predicted to be 'the largest Irish cultural event ever to take

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<sup>339</sup> Chairman's report, Arts Council of Ireland *Annual Report*, 1993.

<sup>340</sup> Arts Council of Ireland Publications 1993-94: *Awards 1993 and Awards 1994 A Capital Programme for the Arts 1994-97 1992 Annual Report Art Matters, Nos 15,16,17 and 18 Tokens and Inside Out (Catalogues for touring exhibitions to schools) The Guide to Exhibition Venues in Ireland (Second edition)*.

place in Germany'.<sup>341</sup> There was to be a major arts festival in Frankfurt with celebrations elsewhere in Germany as well. The preparation of the programme for this festival continued throughout 1994. The appointment of a minister with responsibility for arts and culture in 1994 marked a fundamental change in Irish cultural policy, and that Minister, Michael D. Higgins, achieved a major increase in Arts Council funding, with an increase in drama spending to £4,650,000.<sup>342</sup>

The public's attitude to the arts in Ireland was apparently positive: in 1994 the Arts Council commissioned an independent national survey of the Irish public's engagement with the Arts, entitled *The Public and the Arts: A Survey of Behaviour and Attitudes in Ireland*.<sup>343</sup> The study, following up from a 1981 survey, found 'a growth in aggregate attendance levels from 60% in 1981 to 78% in 1994'. This increase was found for all artforms, including film, but excluding ballet. The study also found that respondents thought the arts had become more accessible in the past ten years (84%), with a high number agreeing that 'current expenditure on the arts should be maintained at its current level even in times of economic recession'.<sup>344</sup> Of the allocation provided to 30 producing and/or receiving theatre organisations during 1994, the largest grant was made to the National Theatre Society.<sup>345</sup> The Abbey staged fourteen productions during the year including seven new plays by Irish writers and seven revivals of plays by Irish writers. In addition five tours were undertaken to venues in Dublin, Cork, London, Edinburgh and the US.

*The Public and the Arts* also found that there was a very strong support among the Irish population for the idea of the cultural value of the arts. Nonetheless this was not an unequivocally positive period when Patrick Mason became Artistic Director of the Abbey Theatre (appointed in 1993, he began in January, 1994). In May 1994 all the theatre's 100 permanent staff were put on protective notice.<sup>346</sup>

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<sup>341</sup> Arts Council of Ireland *Annual Report* 1994.

<sup>342</sup> Ibid. The Abbey Theatre received £300,000 from the Arts Council and the *L'imaginaire irlandais* festival (discussed below) was given £121,575.

<sup>343</sup> Arts Council of Ireland *Annual Report*, 2006.

<sup>344</sup> Ibid.

<sup>345</sup> £2,199,000 to the Abbey and Peacock Theatres. By comparison the Dublin Theatre Festival received a grant of £201,000 and the Gate Theatre £470,000.

<sup>346</sup> Edward O'Loughlin, 'Peacock staff to vote on strike action', *The Irish Times*, 7 May 1994.



With falling audiences and rising debt, accumulated losses were reaching crisis point. During the first five months of Mason's directorship, the Abbey achieved only 42% attendance (down 10% from the previous year). The theatre's official breakeven point, 65% (as mentioned in the previous chapter), was becoming too high to reach, despite the Arts Council's request they aim for 75%.<sup>347</sup>

With the appointment of Mason as Artistic Director, the Abbey published *A High Ambition*, the first of a number of policy documents announcing his plans as AD. Publishing the AD's policies in this open manner was an unusual gesture for the Abbey. Another precedent established by Mason was his use therein of the term 'Society', referring to the National Theatre Society, rather than 'theatre' or 'company'. It was the beginning of an ideological shift in which the Abbey presented itself as more open, and took on more conspicuously political projects.

Mason's approach as AD was an opening up of the National theatre, with a distinct effort to foreground the complexity of Irish identity:

I see this National Theatre as one that will be cognisant of its past, true to its best traditions, but bold enough to respond to the creative demands of a burgeoning number of theatre artists and practitioners. Above all it will be a National Theatre that continues to give a voice to the diversity of experience that will shape the identity of the modern Irish state [...]

There is one essential mode of access [...] and that is the openness of the National Theatre to the best theatre talent in the country. For the resources that have been gathered over the years by the Society, its equipment, its stages, and its subsidy are there to be put at the service of the most talented, visionary, and expert of Ireland's theatre and practitioners.<sup>348</sup>

## Reanimating the Repertoire

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<sup>347</sup> Paddy Woodworth, 'Abbey Will Ring Down Curtain in October unless Money Rolls in', *Irish Times*, 4 June 1994.

<sup>348</sup> Response to question to Patrick Mason during the December 1994 Abbey debate, cited in *Views Of Theatre In Ireland: Report Of The Arts Council Theatre Review 1995-96*.

The reputation of the Abbey Theatre was built on the plays of Synge and O'Casey and the national and international repertoires reflect that debt. Initially the Abbey's appeal as an international theatre was in its reputation for proficiency in staging Irish theatre – a distinct style almost akin to Kathakali or Kabuki theatre for many international audiences – and it was the naturalism of the early plays that made the Abbey stand out. By the 1990s however, the Abbey could not depend on its reputation as avant garde, and naturalist was no longer equivalent to modern.

Mason circumvented this problem by reviving *The Well of the Saints* and ultimately using this 1905 play to rehabilitate the Abbey's past in the 1990s:

In my first season I had internal pressure from the old guard about doing more of the Abbey repertoire, then, externally, people were asking 'why are we doing all this old stuff?' I had worked on the National Opera with Brian McMaster who had gone on to become the Edinburgh Festival director and fortunately for me he liked my work. When I took over the Abbey he rang and asked for a production. I said I was doing *Well of the Saints*, a great play. The fact that it was Synge but not *The Playboy*, was a kind of plus because no one had ever seen *Well of the Saints*. He said 'fine, bring it'. And that's how that happened.<sup>349</sup>

One of the commitments given in the Abbey's policy document was to increase touring, and in March 1994, a community tour of Dublin was undertaken with Jimmy Murphy's *Brothers of the Brush* (1993), while JM Synge's *The Well of the Saints* was taken to Scotland for the EIF a month after that other 'neglected' play, *Faith Healer*, was taken to the US.

When *Well of the Saints* was produced and eventually transferred, it was the first time the Abbey Theatre had staged the play in fifteen years. In an interview with Peter Whitebrook in the Edinburgh programme, Patrick Mason talked about *The Well of the Saints* as a 'medieval morality play, but one that's violently anti-religious.' In 1995 he argued 'The Abbey is obviously deeply associated with

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<sup>349</sup> Interview with Patrick Mason, August 2010.

Synge and his plays but the other part of their work is in creating a contemporary repertoire and I think this is one of the finest and most challenging plays that we have in the contemporary Irish repertoire.’<sup>350</sup>The company were reviving a neglected text, but as the play came when the Catholic Church was destabilised as a monolithic power in Ireland, it was also a timely revival, engaging with the mood of the time. That engagement was quite deliberate, in Mason’s view, it was a ‘more shocking play than *The Playboy*: it’s a far more radical and aggressively anti-clerical play.’<sup>351</sup>

For this production, the programme and accompanying press previews situated the play as a lost classic. Comparisons to Beckett in the programme notes indicated that Synge’s play was not merely a showcase for elegant speech, but a piece of theatre that could take its place among international theatre. Indeed Synge is said to have had an influence on Lorca, whose influence on Tom Murphy has also been recorded. That circularity places Synge not as Irish theatre patriarch, but one among contemporary international theatre practitioners.<sup>352</sup> Synge’s influence on international theatre includes Eugene O’Neill, who was inspired to write after seeing an early Abbey tour of *The Playboy* and Bertolt Brecht adapted *Riders to the Sea* as *Die Gewehre der Frau Carrar* in 1937. Fintan O’Toole cites other writers who count the Abbey as an important influence, such as Michel Tremblay in Canada, Wole Soyinka in Nigeria or Derek Walcott in the West Indies.

Mason made frequent public statements on the play, indicating his intention to direct all of Synge’s plays while he was AD at the Abbey, and setting out Synge in an international framework too:

What is important in the Irish context is that Synge was the first modern Irish playwright in theatre at a time of great romance and sentimentality of the nation. He set out very starkly to record the truth and his plays are an extraordinary mixture of humour and savagery, and this strange ability to laugh at the blackest moment which he shares with Beckett.

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<sup>350</sup> Sara Villiers, ‘Facing the Ghosts of the Guns’, *The Herald*, 7 August 1995.

<sup>351</sup> Interview with Patrick Mason, August 2010.

<sup>352</sup> *Well of the Saints* programme, Abbey Theatre, 1994.



I think festivals are about creating a dialogue.[...]The distinction of the Abbey doing Synge is that it has something to say internationally. It is an insight into the country but it links on a far deeper level to aspects of the human condition. And, of course, everyone likes a good story, and this is a very good story.<sup>353</sup>

The text, though set in the very distant past, spoke of an Ireland in thrall to an institutional religion, in which two characters shake off that deference, choosing instead to place faith in the imagination. In Mason's production, the play was staged on a sparse set designed by Monica Frawley: rags hung on free-standing sticks, and heavy hessian-type cloth delineated the stage area. During the scenes in which the beggars were blind, Trevor Dawson's lighting scheme designated that the set was well lit, but, once their sight was restored by the Saint, it was replaced with a harsher, flinty light. The scene of Martin Doul's working for the blacksmith was lit to look particularly dark and brutal, but once he and Mary reject the Saint's help for a second time, the lighting again became brighter and warmer. In addition, lights strung around the set for the wedding scene contributed to a carnivalesque tableau at the play's conclusion. (Figs. 3.2 and 3.3). At the play's conclusion when Martin and Mary Doul, played by Derry Power and Pat Leavy, rejected the community and its attendant religion, the actors walked literally off the stage, in a move that pointed up their defection from the narrative in the strongest possible terms.<sup>354</sup>

Nonetheless, the Dublin reviews were negative, verging on hostile. *The Scotsman*, on the other hand, gave the Dublin production a very positive notice.<sup>355</sup> It was not common for international papers to review Dublin productions, unless they were likely to transfer, and clearly a transfer to the Edinburgh was on the cards, after Patrick Mason had made it clear that he was working to reaffirm the Abbey Theatre's connection with the EIF.<sup>356</sup> And so, despite Dublin's response to the

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<sup>353</sup> 'Festival Week 2', *Scotland on Sunday*, 21 August 1994.

<sup>354</sup> I am grateful to Anthony Roche for drawing my attention to this detail.

<sup>355</sup> 'Do not miss it when it travels to Edinburgh for the International Festival.' Don Smith, 'Neglected Gem Well Polished', *The Scotsman*, 11 June 1994.

<sup>356</sup> 'In 1993, I was appointed Artistic Director of the Abbey Theatre, and with the encouragement of Brian MacMaster revived the link between Edinburgh and Dublin.' Patrick Mason, 'Stage Whispers', *The Scotsman*, 14 August 2001.

play, *Well* was taken to Edinburgh and staged at the King's Theatre from 24-28 August 1994.

Ahead of the Edinburgh transfer, the Abbey issued a press release pitching the play as a singular theatrical opportunity:

*The Well of the Saints* by JM Synge opens at the Kings Theatre, Edinburgh on 24 August and runs until Sunday 28 August. This is the first time in twenty years that the Abbey Theatre has performed at the international festival. *The Well of the Saints* is attracting a great deal of attention and is considered to be one of the main events of this renowned festival.<sup>357</sup>

While it is to be expected that a theatre would sell a new play as the must-see event of the season, what is distinctive about this approach is the emphasis on *opportunity*: the theatre programme emphasised *Well* as a lost text which had not been staged at the Abbey in 15 years. And while it is true that the Abbey had not performed at the Festival proper since *Oedipus* in 1975, the Abbey had been to the Fringe and won acclaim and an award for *The Great Hunger* with the same director only eight years previously.

In fact, such was the emphasis on the unfamiliarity and rareness of the enterprise, the programme for the Festival run of *Well* indicated that the production was 'performed in English', a highly unusual note to make in an English-speaking country.<sup>358</sup> Whereas the later French tour was subtitled and so notifying the audience that it was not in French makes immediate sense, notifying an Edinburgh audience suggests a presumption on the part of the Abbey Theatre that they would have to make it clear that they were more mainstream or accessible than audiences might presume.

During this festival, the Glasgow company Communicado brought that staple Abbey play of Synge's *The Playboy of the Western World* to the Traverse for the Fringe. A company known for physicality of their approach, Communicado distinguished themselves among the many other Fringe performances to earn

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<sup>357</sup> The National Theatre Society Limited, Press Release, 24 August 1994.

<sup>358</sup> *The Well of the Saints* programme: Edinburgh International Festival. King's Theatre 24-28 August 1994.

very positive reviews across several mainstream papers over the festival. Probably the company's choice not to stage the play in strict naturalist terms protected them from unfavourable comparisons to the Abbey. In addition, the production helped to place Synge in a more modern context than usual. Michael Billington in the *Guardian* for example, wrote at the time that one often thinks of Synge as 'folksy'.<sup>359</sup>

The Abbey opened at the King's Theatre, and quickly sold out to the end of the run after excellent reviews:

Abbey Theatre Dublin celebrate a rare six months spell without sacking their latest artistic director by bringing over Patrick Mason's production of JM Synge's lyrical eye-opener on blindness.<sup>360</sup>

Catherine Lockerbie erroneously, but helpfully, reported the play as having 'already been warmly received in Dublin: a fine Irish fable...'<sup>361</sup> and wrote of the play as having its origins in French farce, with an influence of Ibsen. Picking up on the international dimension of this Synge play, writers like Lockerbie did not expand on the Irishness of the play, but stated instead her preference for Synge over Beckett, deeming Synge 'less pretentious'. This review had the dual benefit of attracting those who were interested in the modernist element to the production, while still encouraging those less dedicated Festival audience members who might be dissuaded by the invocation of Beckett.

In the *New Statesman*, Angus Calder positioned the production as new and vital:

This festival and its Fringe have provided the chance to rediscover JM Synge, often reduced by English actors to whimsy. We've seen his last two completed plays in starkly stylised productions which confirm that he

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<sup>359</sup> Michael Billington, 'The Blind Rejection of an Irish Saint', *The Guardian*, 26 August 1994.

<sup>360</sup> 'Showguide', *The Herald*, 24 August 1994, see also 'Openings', *Financial Times*, 22 August 1994, *The Sunday Times Scotland*, 14 August 1994, 'Edinburgh Festival Critics Awards', *Scotland on Sunday*, 28 August 1994, Barbara Denkert, 'Take in the Sounds of Summer', *The Times*, 20 August 1994, Angus Calder, 'Weird and Wonderful', *New Statesman & Society*, 2 September 1994, John Linklater, 'Comedy with Painful Undertone', *The Herald*, 25 August 1994.

<sup>361</sup> Catherine Lockerbie, 'Festival Preview', *The Scotsman*, 13 August 1994.



was a great dramatist. And we have heard his wonderful language, properly spoken, create an Ireland as fresh as next Saturday.<sup>362</sup>

John Linklater's *Herald* review informed readers that Mason was 'on the head-hunting list of the board of the Royal Lyceum when they made the search for an artistic director 18 months ago,' but took the same job at the Abbey,<sup>363</sup> while in *The Sunday Telegraph*, John Gross wrote 'the sooner London gets to see this production the better.'<sup>364</sup> Patrick Mason was written of as a fresh, important figure in international theatre, and in many media reviews and previews the emphasis offered was not on the cultural value of *Well* as an Irish play, but on the relevance of seeing a Mason production. *The Well of the Saints* had the unusual position of being presented as a relevant event in British theatre, as opposed to the transmission of a niche theatre experience. Later in the run Linklater, after comparing the blind beggars with Beckett's Nagg and Nell, Winnie and Willie, also identified the play as 'an unsettling metaphor for the state of Ireland in this otherwise genial comedy.'<sup>365</sup> Michael Billington wrote of Synge's 'merciless eye for the cruelties of Irish life', in a review that went on to compare the Saint character with Friel's Frank Hardy.<sup>366</sup> So where references to the Irishness of the play emerged, it was not to laud the authenticity of an historical re-enactment of a shared idea of a traditional Ireland, but to consider Ireland in a contemporary, internationally relevant context, that was not romantic.

This may go some way toward explaining why Irish critics were still antagonistic towards the production. As previously argued, an Abbey production may have had notices in Dublin, but going on to earn accolades in the international press usually results in the retransmission of those accolades back in Dublin. *The Great Hunger* is one such production, enjoying local acclaim after its Edinburgh, London and Paris tours. There was anxiety and debate in the Irish media prior to the USSR visit, largely focussed on the suitability of the play to represent Irish contemporary theatre, while still celebrating positive reviews. In the case of *Well*

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<sup>362</sup> Angus Calder, 'Weird and Wonderful', *New Statesman & Society*, 2 September 1994

<sup>363</sup> John Linklater, 'McMaster's Touch', *The Herald*, 10 August 1994

<sup>364</sup> John Gross, 'From Minor Injustice to Cause Celebre', *The Sunday Telegraph*, 4 September 1994.

<sup>365</sup> John Linklater, 'Comedy with Painful Undertone', *The Herald*, 25 August 1994.

<sup>366</sup> Michael Billington, 'The Blind Rejection of an Irish Saint', *The Guardian*, 26 August 1994.

of the Saints, *The Irish Times*'s Paddy Woodworth relayed this positive international reception with belligerence. On the one hand he wrote of the 'excellent houses, an almost unbroken string of rave reviews from the Scottish and English media, and finally a Critics Award for Theatre last week' as 'cause for national pride and rejoicing', with an emphasis on the 'cultural presence abroad' of Irish theatre, gratifyingly demonstrated in the Tony awards, Academy awards and Grammy awards won in recent years, but also of the apparent failure of the Abbey to please its national audience, having attracted 'only poor to middling houses at home, and some exceptionally hostile reviews':

We do have to be a little wary of the praise of the stranger – British critics are not in the best position to assess Irish drama, though their views are often illuminating.<sup>367</sup>

Later when Mason left the Abbey, he was given a special tribute award by *The Irish Times*. He told *Scotland on Sunday* in 2001 that he felt there was some irony involved in getting such an award from the newspaper, referring to Woodworth's remark; 'Small wonder Yeats called it "this rude, unmannerly town".'<sup>368</sup>

The argument depicts perhaps a critic having to reconsider a misjudged review (although Woodworth insists that *The Irish Times* recognised the play's 'power' in Dublin). Woodworth also encouraged a debate on the Abbey Theatre's failing to draw an audience at home while earning critical acclaim, questioning whether this was a success or a failure of the theatre. The 'final judgement' of a play should be an Irish one, argued Woodworth. In the context of this review, it was the case that, at a time when the role of the national theatre was being publicly debated, and the threatened closure of the Abbey over financial problems seemed a real possibility, national endorsement was extremely important.<sup>369</sup>

As grudgingly acknowledged in the second round of Irish reviews, *The Well of the Saints* won the Critics' Award on in September 1994, a major boost given those

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<sup>367</sup> Paddy Woodworth, 'The Abbey's Well, at Home and Away', *The Irish Times*, 1 September 1994.

<sup>368</sup> Jackie McGlone, 'Festival Theatre', *Scotland on Sunday*, 12 August 2001.

<sup>369</sup> Dáil Éireann Debate: Funding of National Theatre Company, Vol. 442 No. 10, 19 May 1994. Available at: <http://debates.oireachtas.ie/dail/1994/05/19/00007.asp>



problems at home. As a result of that success in Edinburgh, at the end of August, the Abbey were invited to perform in Perth, Australia the following year. The Abbey brought *Well to His Majesty's Theatre*, Perth, 28 February to 11 March 1995.

Coming to Australia after a major international festival with admiring reviews and an award, the Abbey was welcomed with open arms. In a substantial review for *The Australian*, Deborah Jones introduced the historical context of the play in terms of Synge's attempt to create a new Irish drama, while writing that Mason was also the director of *Lughnasa*, 'much admired internationally, including in Australia.'<sup>370</sup> In fact the Abbey's commercial run of *Lughnasa* had only ended a year previously, so critical goodwill prevailed. Chris McLeod of *The West Australian* cited the disquiet caused by the premiere of the play at the Abbey, while aligning Synge to Beckett,<sup>371</sup> as did Alison Farmer in *The Sunday Times Perth*.<sup>372</sup>

*The Australian Financial Review* was more essentialist in its appraisal:

This is a wordy play and the actors deliver the Irish tongue in the classically strong Abbey manner, concentrating on the searing dialogue, all actions an adjunct to the power and lyricism of the word.<sup>373</sup>

The piece also compared 'the erotic physical movements of Molly' with 'the women dancing in the Mason-directed *Dancing at Lughnasa*, which was recently in Australia'.<sup>374</sup> What this review shows is that, though the Abbey never quite shakes off its association with traditional, romantic notions of Ireland, the success of Mason and Friel had had a major impact in the perception of the Abbey abroad. But the Irish critics were still defensive:

Irish theatrical triumphs are not thin on the ground just now, anyhow, with Patrick Mason's production of *The Well of the Saints*, which was

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<sup>370</sup> Deborah Jones, 'Festival of Perth', *The Australian*, 3 March 1995.

<sup>371</sup> Chris McLeod, 'Saints be Praised', *The West Australian*, 2 March 1995.

<sup>372</sup> '[*The Well of the Saints* is] said to be Samuel Beckett's favourite play'. Alison Farmer, 'Hard to View anything Finer', *Sunday Times Perth*, 5 March 1995.

<sup>373</sup> 'Hit and Miss', *The Australian Financial Review*, 3 March 1995.

<sup>374</sup> *Ibid.*



accorded a mixed response in Dublin before going to glory at the Edinburgh festival, making jelly of the critics in Sydney.<sup>375</sup>

The same report went on to surmise that 'perhaps it is inevitable that a foreign press should see a production as drawing on traditional strengths.'<sup>376</sup> But the international reviews saw more than 'traditional strengths' in the production: comparisons to international writers placed Synge in a broader theatrical discourse, while the critics also encouraged a reading of contemporary Ireland through the prism of Synge's anti-clerical text.

It is difficult to imagine now the hostility that persisted among Dublin critics for Synge's play, after Druid Theatre Company's ongoing revival of the playwright's work. But as with the transfer to Edinburgh, there was neither an acknowledgement that the Abbey's *Well of the Saints* might have improved as it developed in performance, nor that its international significance transcended what had been perceived locally as an unnecessary revival.

It is important to consider how Garry Hynes's Synge projects with Druid in the 1980s were probably responsible for the openness of international audiences to Synge. From the early eighties Druid referred to Synge as their 'house playwright' and Patrick Lonergan has written about their use of Synge to develop from a regional theatre to an international one, with their 1982 production of *The Playboy* often cited as the definitive one which toured internationally and won several awards.<sup>377</sup> This I would argue, in addition to creating the Druid trademark, reignited Synge's reputation, sparked off numerous revivals of his work throughout the eighties, and created a space for the Abbey Theatre to revive his lesser-played texts. It also contributed to the success of Martin McDonagh's 1996 *Leenane Trilogy*, which is largely derived from Syngean memes, such as rural settings, unusually stylised Hiberno-English with morally flexible views of murder.

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<sup>375</sup> 'Triumphing Down Under', *The Irish Times*, 23 March 1995.

<sup>376</sup> *The Irish Times*, 23 March 1995.

<sup>377</sup> Patrick Lonergan, 'Druid Theatre and John Millington Synge', <http://syngecycle.com/aboutdruidsynge/druid-theatre-and-john-millington-synge>.

In 1996 *The Well of the Saints*, was taken to the Théâtre de l'Odéon, Paris, where it played from 28 May to 1 June, coinciding with the Abbey's tour of Frank McGuinness's *Observe the Sons of Ulster Marching Towards the Somme*.

### Remaking history

While Dublin was in the midst of a consumer boom, plays such as Tony Kushner's *Angels in America: Millennium Approaches* (1995) brought homosexuality to the national stage in the mid 1990s.<sup>378</sup> The play might have been expected to provoke scandal, given the many overt references to sex, blasphemy and homosexuality, but the critical previews tended to give the play a *carte blanche*, given the timely and politically appropriate subject matter treated. This in turn dissuaded potential audiences from perceiving the play as relevant to them, so they tended to stay away.<sup>379</sup> Nonetheless, the Abbey under Patrick Mason staged plays that revisited previously suppressed historical truths like the nation's ambivalent status in international wars or the hidden narratives of Irish homosexuality:

There is a broadly educational purpose to the Abbey to say 'Look, we are different people, there are different narratives. There are many narratives when it comes to the nation and we can show a lot of them. We are not just a one-trick pony.' It was a very fertile period in terms of new writing and established writers taking radical looks at narratives. It was a deliberate policy, and I tried to do it with the money I had.<sup>380</sup>

While nostalgia was not a new theme on the national stage, plays presented in the mid 1990s did notably include repressed histories, these included *Portia Coughlan* and *The Mai* by Marina Carr (discussed below), *The Only True History of Lizzie Finn* (1995), which includes an Irish character who fought in the Boer war, premiered on the Abbey main stage, preceded by Barry's extremely successful *The Steward of Christendom* (1995) with Donal McCann, about the displacement

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<sup>378</sup> Patrick Lonergan has discussed in *Theatre and Globalisation* why the Kushner play failed to have the impact it was expected to on the Abbey's Dublin audience, citing a tendency by popular reviewers to ghettoise the play by complimenting the Abbey for staging it, but declining to participate in the discourse it stirred, seeing it as irrelevant to all but specialist audience goers.

<sup>379</sup> Lonergan, *Theatre and Globalization*, p. 132.

<sup>380</sup> Interview with Patrick Mason, August 2010.

of Thomas Dunne, a loyalist southern Catholic and the last Chief Superintendent of the Dublin Metropolitan Police, during the formation of independent Ireland. A co-production by the Royal Court Theatre and Out of Joint, it opened at the Royal Court in London before transferring to Dublin's Gate Theatre). *April Bright* (1995) by Dermot Bolger premiered on the Peacock stage and is a fairly conventional play but nonetheless treats the harmonisation of past and present. Billy Roche's *The Cavalcadors* in 1993, which also opened at the Peacock and transferred to the Royal Court main house, was a popular memory play, the first of Roche's to premiere in Ireland after popular success in London. Thomas Kilroy's *The Secret Fall of Constance Wilde* (discussed below) and a 1996 revival of Wilde's *A Woman of No Importance*, also dealt with suppressed family secrets.

With the revival of Frank McGuinness's 1985 play *Observe the Sons of Ulster Marching Towards The Somme* in 1994 and again the following year, the Abbey was staging a timely revival (Fig. 3.4). Initially, Patrick Mason has said, the play was to be revived twelve months later, but on hearing about the IRA ceasefire brought about by momentous advances in the peace process, Mason suggested to McGuinness they bring the revival forward. During the rehearsals, the Loyalist ceasefires were announced. The opening night included loyalists from the Shankhill Road who had been invited at the instigation of the director of marketing and public relations through her contacts as co-chair of Cultures of Ireland, (an independent cultural resource group). The loyalists included members of the UVF and UDA. The minister of Foreign Affairs was present and met them informally, as did the cast.<sup>381</sup>

The trajectory of the play's tour (Germany, France, Scotland, Belgium) reflected the transnational commemorative scope of the play, while other significant events of what RF Foster calls 'contemporary history' overlapped: the UK opening nights coincided with the Canary Wharf bomb attack which broke that ceasefire, and the later leg of the European tour saw reviews of the play that referenced the accelerating peace process.

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<sup>381</sup> I am grateful to Dorothea Melvin for providing me with information on the events of the tour, many of which were prompted by Melvin when she was Director of PR and Marketing at the Abbey Theatre.



*Observe the Sons* transferred from Dublin to the Edinburgh International Festival from 18-23 August, 1995, where it was staged at the King's Theatre.<sup>382</sup> In 1996 *Observe the Sons* embarked on a UK tour: the play was taken to the Barbican Theatre, 6 – 16 March; the Blackpool Grand Theatre from 19 – 23 March; the Royal Court in Liverpool from 26-30 March, the Malvern Festival Theatre from 16-20 April; the Theatre Royal, Plymouth from 23-27 April and returned to Ireland later that month, playing the Town Hall Theatre, Galway from 30 April-4 May and the Opera House, Belfast, 7-11 May. The play was then taken on a European tour: the Théâtre de l'Odéon, Paris from 21-25 May; the Royal National Flemish Theatre, Brussels, Belgium from 6-8 June, then to Germany to play at the Bonner Biennale, Bonn from 13-14 June.

By this point *Observe the Sons* was well established as an award-winning canonical Irish play by a writer who had a prominent presence on the British stage. McGuinness wrote the play, he has said, because:

I felt a challenge to try to enter the Protestant experience and imagination [...] the play is more about recognition than reconciliation. If we are going to redefine our culture then we have to make massive acts of recognition. The Protestant people in Ireland have a story and a history and I wanted to tell it.<sup>383</sup>

*Observe the Sons of Ulster* sought to recover the history of Irish soldiers' experience in WWI, the suppressed Protestant voice of twentieth-century Irish politics and the repressed narrative of Irish homosexuals. In its ceremonialising of the past, McGuinness's text operates across several national histories, not just one. Reviving the play gave an added resonance to Elder Pyper's opening question, 'Again? Why does this persist?' now that the play itself was a part of national memory.<sup>384</sup> The 1994 staging came just a year after the Irish

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<sup>382</sup> The King's is often referred to in reviews as 'the 2,000-seat King's theatre' and the '1500-seat King's', probably to emphasise that it is a large theatre. It seats 1359, which is still a significantly larger capacity than the Abbey.

<sup>383</sup> Sara Villiers, 'Those Irish Troupers Dig the King's', *The Herald* (Glasgow), 18 August 1995

<sup>384</sup> Frank McGuinness, *Observe the Sons of Ulster Marching Towards the Somme*, in *Plays: 1*, (London: Faber and Faber, 1996).

government had de-criminalised male homosexuality and while the peace process in Northern Ireland was at a crucial phase.

*Observe the Sons of Ulster Marching Towards the Somme* was certainly not the first Irish play to include homosexuality on the national stage: Thomas Kilroy's *The Death and Resurrection of Mr Roche* had already presented a portrait of traditional Ireland's fearful conservatism on the subject in 1968. In an article for *The Independent* in 2000, Patrick Mason wrote about the omission from Irish history of gay men, (with the exceptions of Oscar Wilde and Roger Casement) and so their exclusion from its literature and theatre, likening McGuinness's 'refusal to ignore the crucial importance of human sexuality' as having some precedents in Irish theatre, citing the moral outrage of the rioting audiences at *The Playboy of the Western World* and *The Well of the Saints*. *Observe the Sons of Ulster* did not, however, spark riots, because the audiences who attended were ready to be open.<sup>385</sup>

The differences between the original production, directed by Patrick Mason and first performed at the Peacock Theatre in February 1985 and the 1994 revival, again directed by Mason, could be said to reflect the changes in Irish society over those years, while the trajectory of the tour contributed to its fulfilling the role of transnational, commemorative event. The 1994 staging had become more confrontational in tone, with greater tension between the men, while their local identities were reinforced. In addition, the treatment of the love scene was more forthright in the revival, where it was unlikely to surprise the audience that were both aware of it and the play's hallowed status.

There were similarities in the scenery and the minimal use of props in the Abbey's 1985 and 1994 productions. The layout of Act II was similar in both productions, with the various pairs framing the multiple-location scene with Millen and Moore on the bridge over at back in a similar layout. The stage was generally barer in the 1994 revival, and in some ways played more naturalistically. The humour of the play was treated differently in the two

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<sup>385</sup> Patrick Mason, 'Theatre: Love Is Sweeping The Country', *The Independent* (London), 10 May 2000.

productions: while the audience responded to the humour inherent in the text, it was subdued at times to increase the tension. There were also some changes to the script, with the addition of more Northern idioms, such as the use of 'Aye' for 'yes' and, 'pour us a wee sip' instead of 'pour us a drop'.<sup>386</sup> In 1985, the Elder Pyper was played by Geoff Golden with a patrician British accent. The set was sparse, and during the opening 'Remembrance' sequence he lay on blankets which are then rolled out for use as beds in the next scene. In 1994 the play opened with Pyper in a hospital bed. In the revival Pyper's accent was in an upper class register; however there were deliberate and noticeable shades of Irish in this one. The soldiers' beds, initially represented with mattresses in 1985, were designated by rectangles of light projected on the stage in a manner that also resembled open graves in 1994.<sup>387</sup>

In the revival, the meeting between the young soldiers was presented as even more hostile and less jocular than the original, which was played for more laughs. While the revival still allowed the humour of the text to come through, there was more tension in the men's relationship, and a frisson of fear and excitement. For instance the line 'Shut up ya... [pause] Belfast mouth', switches from a joking taunt in the initial production, drawing laughs from the spontaneous localised rebuke, to the angry shout 'Shut up ya Belfast mouth' in the later one, while the line 'Keep him away from me' switches from banter to become an angry roar.

In the initial production during the scene in which Pyper and Craig kiss, the actors, on their knees and in close proximity, spoke their lines quietly in a slow, tender build-up to the embrace, before they then lie down together and the lights come down.<sup>388</sup> In the later production the men stand at a reserved distance from one another during this exchange. There was not the same build towards the embrace, though they still kiss passionately. This time the embrace is spontaneous, more prolonged, sexual, and more physical than previously. This new representation of the scene suggested their finding comfort in physicality, as

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<sup>386</sup> McGuinness, p. 148.

<sup>387</sup> *Observe the Sons of Ulster* 1994 recording, Abbey Theatre archive.

<sup>388</sup> McGuinness, p. 165.



opposed to gradually falling in love. In addition, during the prolonged kiss of the 1994 production, Pyper pulls aggressively at Craig's shirt causing the audience audible discomfort and embarrassment. The two men freeze in embrace for the next speech (Anderson's speaking of the Fenians and Hun). Meanwhile during the pairing scene, the darkened soldiers look like corpses or debris of war.

The decisions made with the newer staging of the play reflect a substitution of tension for humour, a more localised characterisation and less subtleties in the love scene. This could be interpreted as showing how the success of the initial staging allowed the Abbey in the newer production to make use of the nuances that might have pushed the audience too far on first encountering the play. As such, the play's reputation, the very successful director and designer behind it, allowed the Abbey to slightly recast the play to suit the times. In more simple terms, the later cast were all younger men who contributed to a more assertive tone:

There was definitely more violence. The second cast was overall younger than the first, who were all slightly too old. The second were younger by about ten years, so you had a younger, more aggressive energy, a more physical energy. It was a different dynamic, a different energy. Things become possible. The first was in the Peacock, in a small space, where you use much less energy. The revival was in a big space: an epic stage, so all these things come together. And you get bolder, more confident every time you revisit something.<sup>389</sup>

*Observe the Sons of Ulster* played at the King's Theatre, Edinburgh, 18-23 August 1995, for the 49<sup>th</sup> Edinburgh International Festival, in a revival ten years after the premiere. The play was successful at the box office, in a very good year for the EIF.<sup>390</sup> In addition to coinciding with the ceasefire, in the UK that month was 'filled with memories of the Second World War',<sup>391</sup> as it was the 50th anniversary of the victory of the Allies. The play also came after McGuinness's *Someone Who'll*

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<sup>389</sup> Interview with Patrick Mason, August 2010.

<sup>390</sup> The festival had record box-office takings of £1.9 million at the end of its second week Paul Levy, 'Still/Here Preaches at Edinburgh', *Total*, 1 September 1995.

<sup>391</sup> Catherine Lockerbie, 'Men of Ulster March in Unity', *The Scotsman*, 18 August 1995.

*Watch over Me* played to acclaim on the West End, so his name, along with Mason's, had currency in addition to the play's reputation.

Practically all of the UK reviews of the Edinburgh production included reference to the peace process, even short pre-show notices. Generally, they ranged from ecstatic to unmoved, but the majority were very positive. Even mixed reviews that were critical of the length and the schematic division of the action made such criticisms from a respectful distance, with a generally positive conclusion. It is fairly uncommon for critics to discuss the writing of a play once it has been established in the canon, after only a few short years it would then typically be reviewed in terms of the production staging, set, performances etc. *Observe the Sons* received positive notices for the staging, set, and especially Patrick Mason's choice to stage it in the first place, before his direction was commended:

A feat of imaginative yet stringent bridge-building.

A Catholic from the south, he manages to get inside the skins and the mentality of a group of Ulster men to produce a drama that is both an effecting elegy for the courage of the 36 (Ulster) Division who died at the Somme, and a death-wish that is their cultural inheritance.

The finest Irish anti-war play since *The Silver Tassie*.<sup>392</sup>

Evoking the *Silver Tassie* is unusual as, generally speaking, international reviews focus on the better-known O'Casey plays such as *Plough and the Stars*, which as has been discussed, is toured very frequently by the Abbey. Perhaps the comparison comes not merely because the journalist wishes to show his esoteric knowledge of O'Casey, but because *The Silver Tassie* comes from a parallel historical point in Irish history: the crucible of post-war Ireland. The following year when *Observe the Sons* transferred to London, David Benedict described the play, *verbatim*, as the finest Irish anti-war play since *The Silver Tassie* in a sister paper.<sup>393</sup>

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<sup>392</sup> Paul Taylor, 'Theatre', *Independent on Sunday*, 22 August 1995.

<sup>393</sup> David Benedict, 'Theatre', *The Independent*, 8 March 1996.

A survey of the UK reviews for this production shows only Nicholas De Jongh from *The Evening Standard* feeling uneasy about the play's representation of homosexuality, which he tentatively suggests may be 'a few touches too much' and which he was compelled to moderate by describing it to be 'quasi' homosexual.<sup>394</sup> Generally though, McGuinness's representation of openly gay characters passed with little remark, with most critics accepting the likelihood of the characters' homosexuality.

Benedict Nightingale commended the 'marvellously spare, powerfully acted revival', and in his review approached the play from the point of view of the playwright's intentions.<sup>395</sup> Several reviews describe McGuinness as a Republican playwright, implying perhaps a bias. While Michael Billington informed readers that it was a play 'written by a Catholic...' and, inelegantly, that the characters were 'more obsessed with the Fenian than the Hun'.<sup>396</sup> He was not the only reviewer to adopt a carelessness with slang relating to the Troubles, he, Nightingale and Taylor, all writing for major publications, all used the term 'Fenian' to indicate non-Protestant in the play. That British critics should be so familiarised with this standard Protestant Unionist term as to adopt it themselves with familiarity and carelessness, shows the extent to which the play had relaxed attitudes about talking about the Troubles. McGuinness's play, or the Abbey's tour of their revival, had granted permission to use direct language.

Some reviews, including Paul Taylor's, treat Mason as the auteur and in fact only mention McGuinness to say he wrote it; 'the most impressive aspect was director Patrick Mason's decision to revive this play';<sup>397</sup> 'Mason also draws parallels with Sean O'Casey's work, seeing *Observe the Sons* as a counter-balance to *The Plough...*';<sup>398</sup> 'Patrick Mason, whose Dublin Abbey Theatre's production of the *Well of the Saints* was well received last year, is this year staging what must be regarded as an equally authentic production of Frank McGuinness's *Observe the*

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<sup>394</sup> Nicholas De Jongh, 'Passing Bells', *Evening Standard*, 21 August 1995.

<sup>395</sup> Benedict Nightingale, 'Recognising the Somme Total', *The Times*, 22 August 1995.

<sup>396</sup> Michael Billington, 'Theatre International', *The Guardian*, 5 August 1995.

<sup>397</sup> Paul Levy, 'Still/Here Preaches at Edinburgh', *Total*, 1 September 1995.

<sup>398</sup> Ben Brown, 'War and Ceasefire', *The List*, 11 August 1995.



*Sons*’;<sup>399</sup>[Mason made] an astute and obvious decision in deciding to restage this 1985 production to mark Northern Ireland’s ceasefire.<sup>400</sup>

In an interview with *The Herald*, Mason discussed the revival, clarifying the misconception that it was staged because of the ceasefire (which in fact happened during previews), but rather to celebrate the peace process. The ceasefire, as well as their playing during the WWII anniversary, were fortuitous occurrences that allowed for a shared commemorative experience:

There was a feeling of a quite extraordinary play being born and the arrival of a very extraordinary writer, and I think the intervening years have borne that out. We had to do the play again because it speaks very immediately to this island and what is going on here. On the night we previewed in the autumn the Loyalist ceasefire was announced, so on the opening night we were able to invite a lot of people from Belfast, Derry and Enniskillen. It was an extraordinary evening.

The play celebrates very deep human emotions, like pity and love and humour, good humour, but it is also an extraordinary lament. We don’t have many ways of grieving publicly, grieving communally, and that night became one of both celebration and grief, and that is the sign of great theatre.’<sup>401</sup>

*Observe the Sons* was again revived, with some recasting, and transferred to the Barbican from 6-16 March 1996, before continuing to Blackpool, Liverpool, Malvern and Plymouth.<sup>402</sup>

At that point in 1996 the ceasefire celebrated months previously had been broken, with IRA bombings in Canary Wharf, February 1996. However this did not take away from its historical significance, in fact the opposite occurred. As

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<sup>399</sup> Peter Hepple, ‘Quality Rather than Quantity’, *The Stage and Television Today*, 11 August 1995.

<sup>400</sup> Ann Donald, ‘Theatre’, *The List*, 25 August 1995.

<sup>401</sup> Sara Villiers, ‘Facing the Ghosts of the Guns’, *The Herald*, 7 August 1995.

<sup>402</sup> *Observe the Sons of Ulster* 1996: 6-16 March 1996 London; 26-30 March 1996 Liverpool; 30 April – 04 May 1996 Galway; 7-11 May 1996 Belfast; 21-15 May 1996 Paris; 6-8 June Brussels; 13-14 June 1996 Bonn, Germany.

Ian Shuttleworth noted: 'Patrick Mason's excellent Abbey Theatre revival of Frank McGuinness's 1985 play comes to London just as hopes of a renewed Irish ceasefire are, it seems, finally buried.'<sup>403</sup> Benedict Nightingale wrote that the play voiced feelings that transcended any sectarian divide: 'I admired his revival hugely last year and feel even more enthusiastic about it now.'<sup>404</sup> While Nicholas De Jongh and Robert Gore-Langton thought its relevance greater than before: 'now that the ceasefire has been broken, [*Observe the Sons*] seems as depressingly timely as it was 10 years ago, when it was first performed.'<sup>405</sup> The Abbey Theatre's judgment, for a change, was not being heavily criticised.

It was generally thought that in the intervening year some fine-tuning had been lost (as is often the case), but by and large the majority of reviews were very positive.<sup>406</sup> The status of the play and this production had been established, and critical acclaim continued when *Observe the Sons* was taken from London to the Theatre Royal Liverpool from 26-30 March, 1996. The recently refurbished theatre, once a major touring house with a very high reputation outside the West End, had not been opened in 17 years.<sup>407</sup> The re-opening was to be marked by the Abbey Theatre's visit, a major theatre event with profound international commemorative relevance. From there, the play returned to Ireland for a brief national tour.<sup>408</sup>

There was a sense that it was incumbent upon the Abbey Theatre to bring the play to Ulster, the province that is itself a central character in the play. Because of the localised story the play told while in Belfast, as opposed to the

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<sup>403</sup> Ian Shuttleworth, 'Irish Theatre in London: Hate The Sin but Love the Sinners', *Financial Times*, 12 March 1996.

<sup>404</sup> Benedict Nightingale, 'An Example of Prod or Pape', *The Times*, 8 March 1996.

<sup>405</sup> Robert Gore-Langton, 'Beyond any Creed', *The Daily Telegraph*, 12 March 1996; Nicholas De Jongh, 'Powerful Topicality Proves so Haunting', *Evening Standard*, 7 March 1996.

<sup>406</sup> While the *Independent* reiterated the play's *Silver Tassie* credentials, *The Independent on Sunday* doubted its role as a modern classic, arguing that 'this emblematic writing, though remarkably intense in its specific detail, has a stark, predictable quality. In Patrick Mason's fraught production it feels stiff and inert.' This review was not representative of the majority. Robert Butler, 'Theatre', *Independent on Sunday*, 10 March 1996.

<sup>407</sup> Lynne Greenwood, 'Quality Cue Given to Theatre as Doors Open Again', *The Daily Telegraph*, 25 March 1996.

<sup>408</sup> Playing the Town Hall Theatre, Galway from 30 April to 4 May, then to the Belfast Opera House from 7-11 May.



international story it told in Edinburgh, the audience and critics had a more proprietary take on the play and its authenticity.<sup>409</sup> Mason later wrote:

The management arranged for a veteran of the Ulster Division to attend the first night. After the show he was asked for his reaction. He did not hesitate: 'There were no fruits at the Somme.'<sup>410</sup>

A remark such as this is not so shocking coming from an elderly conservative, and reporting it does not challenge the truthfulness of McGuinness's play; rather it reflects still-held views of homosexuality. McGuinness was by and large congratulated for working outside the heteronormative paradigm.

*Observe the Sons* transferred to the Théâtre de l'Odéon, Paris, from 21-25 May 1996, where it was to open at *L'imaginaire irlandais* festival. The 1994 production of *The Well of the Saints*, which had toured Edinburgh and Australia in 1995, opened the following week. *L'Imaginaire* was a six-month-long cultural festival throughout France, during which writers, artists musicians and other performers were invited to France to host various events of Irish culture, the point of which, Minister Michael D Higgins said, was to open up 'new avenues of communication between Irish theatres, galleries and artists.'<sup>411</sup> (See Fig. 3.7 for poster). In addition, exhibitions remained throughout the year, six Irish plays were chosen by la Société des Auteurs et Compositeurs Dramatiques (SACD) to be translated and published. They include *The Mai*, *Someone Who'll Watch Over Me*, *Bailegangaire*, *The Steward of Christendom*, *Dancing at Lughnasa* and *Pentecost*.<sup>412</sup>

Other exhibitions at the festival included Louis le Brocquy, Anne Madden at the Gallerie Maeght, Nigel Rolfe and Willie Doherty at the Musée d'Art Moderne, Felim Egan and Elizabeth McGill at le Monde de l'Art. There were also readings of

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<sup>409</sup> In the *Belfast Telegraph* Grania McFadden gave the play a positive notice, but criticised the southern accents she heard: 'We've waited a long time for the Abbey to bring this play home and it's stirring stuff. Director Patrick Mason's highly dramatic production is marred only by the intrusion (and it is an intrusion) of southern accents in a piece which demands voices from the North. It is after all, Northern Ireland's story.' Grania McFadden, 'Southern Discomfort on the Road to the Somme', *Belfast Telegraph*, 10 May 1996.

<sup>410</sup> Patrick Mason, 'Theatre: Love Is Sweeping The Country', *The Independent*, 10 May 2000.

<sup>411</sup> Victoria White, 'Paris Imagining Ireland', *The Irish Times*, 23 May 1996.

<sup>412</sup> 'Le theatre d'irlande en France', *Le Monde*, 24 May 1996.



contemporary Irish plays, in translation: including Sebastian Barry's *The Steward of Christendom*, and Marina Carr's *The Mai*. One of the most publicised events was the group exhibition at the *École des Beaux Arts*. Notable prominent Irish figures such as Seamus Heaney and President Mary Robinson attended the festival, as was comprehensively reported in the Irish media.<sup>413</sup>

*Observe the Sons* opened at the Théâtre de l'Odéon's much smaller, more intimate stage (in comparison to the Abbey's or the King's), and the play was sur-titled. The gala opening was attended by Mary Robinson and Michael D Higgins and the play opened to a rapturous reception, 'with loud applause and sustained acclaim by the largely French audience,'<sup>414</sup> numerous curtain calls, and Frank McGuinness's being brought onstage.

*Observe the Sons of Ulster* and *The Well of the Saints* was covered in a special feature in *Le Monde* ahead of the performance, which may have contributed to very positive word-of-mouth for *Observe the Sons* before it had opened.<sup>415</sup> It was a substantial double-page spread, designed as a guide for the uninitiated, and as such is a useful précis of how the Abbey was understood in France at that point, that is, as specialising primarily in the 'Irish repertoire', and for its production of the work of new writers, as well as contemporary work like Kushner's *Angels in America* the previous year.<sup>416</sup> Ireland was described as a country in which writers and poets are 'les vedettes populaires'/popular celebrities. Frank McGuinness was introduced as a young writer from 'a desolate, North-West region', Donegal. He was said to be unknown in France while his work was regularly staged in Ireland, the UK and the US. Synge on the other hand, was 'well-known to the French public as the playwright of *The Playboy of the Western World*.'<sup>417</sup>

Interviewing McGuinness, Catherine Bédarida described the playwright in almost fairy-tale terms: his 'tignasse' – mop – of red hair, his pursuit of the mythical to work through present conflicts. The Ireland he represented also said

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<sup>413</sup> Cobb, Elaine, 'Mary the Toast of Paris', *The Evening Herald*, 22 May 1996.

<sup>414</sup> Tony Hayes, 'Tony Hero of Late Night Metro Drama', *Evening Herald*, 23 May 1996.

<sup>415</sup> Brian Fallon, 'Picturing Ireland in Paris', *The Irish Times*, 28 May 1996.

<sup>416</sup> 'Culture', *Le Monde*, 24 May 1996.

<sup>417</sup> *Ibid*.

to be extremely isolated, but an 'accoucheuse d'écrivains' – literary midwife – nonetheless.<sup>418</sup> Happily for the Abbey, there the Marina-Carr-style image of theatrical Ireland ends. Returning to McGuinness's Catholicism, Bédarida located his writing career as having begun with Ireland's joining the EEC, and beginning to leave behind its post-colonial isolation and poverty. This phase in Irish art, as she saw it, was a 'bouillonnement créative', a creative fermentation, and not merely the perpetuation of a stereotype. In the same feature Oliver Schmitt described Paris's Irish community as 'six thousand souls forged in the bogs,' but also designated the occasion of *Observe the Sons* as 'the renewal of Irish theatre'.<sup>419</sup>

The Irish media was critical of the festival, deemed to be 'unimaginative, diffuse and even irrelevant' and it was accused of over-stretching the £3 million budget across six months (in fact the festival did then continue past those initial planned months, arguably offering better value for money in terms of cultural exchange).<sup>420</sup> There seemed to be an anxiety over the perceived 'bringing coals to Newcastle' effect of exporting art to Paris. But the reviews for *Observe the Sons* were universally positive: 'The Abbey's production of *Behold the Sons of Ulsters* [sic], it was unanimously agreed, was glorious.'<sup>421</sup> The French response to the festival in general was more positive. The *Sunday Business Post* reported that, given the 'frosty reception this festival has received from sectors of the Irish media, the reception it has attracted here in France came as something of a surprise.'<sup>422</sup> There were positive notices in *Le Figaro*, and 'at least half a dozen literary and cultural magazines, which had *l'imaginaire* splashed over their front pages.'<sup>423</sup> Jocelyn Clarke wrote that 'for McGuinness, the National Theatre Society and *l'imaginaire irlandais*, *Observe the Sons* was an extraordinary theatrical and

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<sup>418</sup> Catherine Bédarida and Oliver Schmitt, 'Les Plaies de la Guerre au Coeur de Théâtre de Frank McGuinness', *Le Monde*, 24 May 1996.

<sup>419</sup> Ibid.

<sup>420</sup> Marion McKeone, 'Irish Culture Just Packs in the French', *The Sunday Business Post*, 26 May 1996.

<sup>421</sup> Angela Phelan, 'They'll Always Have Paris', *Irish Independent*, 25 May 1996.

<sup>422</sup> McKeone, 1996.

<sup>423</sup> Ibid.

cultural coup de success,' because the play had become a act of collective remembering, 'not only of the sons of Ulster, but also the sons of France.'<sup>424</sup>

*Observe the Sons* transferred to the Royal National Flemish Theatre in Brussels, from 6-8 June 1996 in a visit sponsored by the Irish and Belgian governments as well as private sponsors. The visit was suggested by the Abbey's PR and Marketing director, Dorothea Melvin, and was arranged by a group of ex-pats: the Northern Ireland Group, which was composed of cross community people from Northern Ireland living in Belgium; 'a brave and costly venture from a group which must tread a careful political line.'<sup>425</sup> Nearby at the European Commission, Belgian director Henri Ronce was directing his production of Synge's *Deirdre of the Sorrows/Deirdre des Chagrins*.

According to *Morning Ireland* it was the first Abbey visit to Brussels in 23 years.<sup>426</sup> The Abbey cast performed in oppressive June heat in full military costume, and packed the Royal Flemish Theatre to enthusiastic audiences, which included leading EU figures of the time, such as Neil Kinnock and his wife, on the three nights of its run. At the same, the peace talks in NI were generating a lot of media attention across Europe. RTÉ's Richard Crowley, in his report on the play noted that, the morning of the play's opening, most European papers had front page stories on the peace talks in Belfast; 'Mainland Europe is reacting to Patrick Mason's production of Frank McGuinness's play.'<sup>427</sup> Interviewing the audience coming out from the play Crowley was told by one member of the public that the different dialects bore similarity to the Belgian dialects of Walonia and Flanders. According to the report, almost two thousand people saw the Abbey production of *Observe the Sons* in the Belgian capital over the weekend. In Germany the heavily attended Bonn festival was no less a site of the play's continued critical success. 26 plays from 20 countries, from Turkey to Iceland, were featured, and despite fudging the remit of 'new' drama, *Observe the Sons* was well-reviewed

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<sup>424</sup> Jocelyn Clarke, 'Irish Eyes are Smiling after a *Tour de Force*', *The Tribune Magazine*, 26 May 1996.

<sup>425</sup> Patrick Smyth, 'Stage Drama Provides Relief from the Beef War', *Irish Times*, 14 June 1996.

<sup>426</sup> Radio interview: RTÉ Radio 1, *Morning Ireland*, 10 June 1996, 7.30am; 'Observe the Sons of Ulster European Tour.'

<sup>427</sup> Ibid.



and earned 'rapturous applause' at the Godesberger Kammerspiele (Godesberg Chamber Theatre).<sup>428</sup>

*Observe the Sons* found a different performance context with each leg of the European tour. While the Dublin revival to complement talks of IRA ceasefire happily coincided with the Loyalist ceasefire, the production was regarded as an event of shared optimism and celebration. The London production during the commemoration of WWII and the breakdown of the ceasefire served to cast the play in terms of its commemorative significance and to offer a view on seemingly endless war. By the last leg of the tour the Northern Group's participation in the Belgian production and their demonstration of cross-border communality during the peace talks offered another emphasis. Across all the reviews and the occasional audience feedback, the play was consistently deemed appropriate and illuminating in every city.

Four years after the European tour of *Observe the Sons of Ulster*, Mason and McGuinness collaborated again on a play that treated Ireland during war, neutrality and sexuality; McGuinness's new play *Dolly West's Kitchen* (1999) (see Fig. 3.5). It premiered on the Abbey main stage, and was considered to have been the hit of the Dublin Theatre Festival by the London *Independent*<sup>429</sup>, but 'half-baked' by *The Irish Times*<sup>430</sup> in a piece that also criticises the literary department for Friel's *Give me Your Answer, Do!* (1997) and Sebastian Barry's *Lizzie Finn* (1995) as also requiring further drafts. *Dolly West* transferred to the Old Vic, London from 9 May-29 July. Directed by Mason, and designed by Joe Vanek,

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<sup>428</sup> 'Rapturous Applause for Irish Death Dance' *Express*, 15 June 1996. See also E.E. Tschapke, 'Bonn Biannual Theatre Festival '96: 15000 Besuchten Biennale', *Express*, 17 June, 1996. 'Actors worth watching in a psycho-socio-drama'. 'Koestlicher Essig', *Kölner Stadt-Anzeiger*, 15 June 1996; 'One of the 'better' shows in the festival: 'Last Der Repraesentanz', *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, 19 June, 1996; 'A big theme, which is representative of the country and of national interest, is not just being "dealt with", but convincingly acted out on stage.' Andreas Rossmann, 'Veterans Meeting In The Afterworld', *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, 15 June 1996; Proof that 'contemporary Irish theatre thrives on the linguistic art of its dramatists and on the elocution of its actors.' Dietmar Kanthak, 'Die Lust Am Eigenen Untergang', *General-Anzeiger*, 15 June 1996 and Dietmar Kanthak, 'Feuilleton', *General-Anzeiger*, 29 May, 1996. [Translated by Ute Mittermaier].

<sup>429</sup> Patrick Mason, 'Theatre: Love Is Sweeping The Country', *The Independent (London)*, 10 May 2000.

<sup>430</sup> 'Patrick's Days', *The Irish Times*, 5 January 2000.

opening in London, the play was bringing many elements of the winning teams behind *Dancing at Lughnasa* and *Observe the Sons*.

The play transferred to the Old Vic (see Fig. 3.6) while Conor McPherson's *The Weir* was finishing its three-year London and Broadway run, and after McGuinness's *Mutabilitie* had been very poorly received at the National the previous year. *Dolly West's Kitchen* is set in Donegal during the Second World War. The West family live in Bunrana, technically the neutral Free State of de Valera's Ireland, while across the border the Allied forces prepare for the Normandy invasions. Justin, a young officer in the neutral Irish army, returns to the West home in Bunrana to find that his mother has invited two American GIs into the house along with their old family friend Alec, now a captain in the British army. Ultimately Justin is forced to face his own homosexuality. *Dolly West* is a play about neutrality and the difficulty of remaining neutral. Set in the past, like *Observe the Sons*, the play speaks very much of contemporary Ireland, especially in Marco's line:

All I want from the Catholic Church is an apology – a long apology. And I hope they will understand when I refuse to accept it.<sup>431</sup>

It is a play about Ireland on the brink of destruction or salvation, and that sense of imminent change replicated the Ireland during which it was written: there was a sense of the end of church authority; rigid rural conservatism was giving way to a dynamic, wealthy society.

In the reviews for this production McGuinness was cast both as a celebrity playwright – interviewed alongside Marianne Faithfull in a long piece by Victoria Greenhalgh in *The Independent on Sunday*<sup>432</sup> – and as a stereotypically unpredictable wild Irish writer. He was described in *The Guardian* as having won a Tony award for *A Doll's House* (1997), but primarily as 'a reeling bulk of red hair'. He was a 'manky drunk' and 'a feckless Viking', but said to possess 'a certain odd decorum about him, and a curious vulnerability' that led the journalist to compare him to Bert Lahr, (who played the lion in the first film

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<sup>431</sup> Frank McGuinness, *Plays Two* (London: Faber and Faber, 2002), p. 239.

<sup>432</sup> Victoria Greenhalgh, 'How We Met', *The Independent on Sunday*, 14 May 2000.



adaptation of *The Wizard of Oz*). Fiachra Gibbons also conceded the duality of this public image, writing that in his opinion McGuinness was 'worse dressed than a tramp', but that for this interview he is wearing a 'shockingly stylish coat' that must be the influence of Kate Moss, whom he met through Marianne Faithfull.<sup>433</sup> The convergence of the mid-twentieth-century wild drunken Irishman image with that of the stylish celebrity-adjacent McGuinness goes some way towards illuminating the perceptions of Ireland in the late 1990s and how the country's sudden cosmopolitanism was awkwardly assimilated by the Irish and received with confusion elsewhere.

When not reviewing the personnel associated with the production, the UK reviews were at first very positive. The previously prudish Nicholas De Jongh, advised that people who remember WWII Ireland may not recognise the 'atmosphere of sexual saturnalia', but wrote that the largely far-fetched piece rang true and that 'Second World war Ireland comes into fresh, fascinating view'.<sup>434</sup>

Sheridan Morley was even more enthusiastic: 'What is happening this week at the Old Vic is a kind of Irish miracle. In all the last fifteen years, when there has undoubtedly been the greatest rebirth in Irish writing since the time of O'Casey and the original Abbey, I have never yet found a truly great play.' He goes on to say Brian Friel came close, but for him no play has matched the promise of O'Casey; 'Now I believe we have the first real Irish classic since those long-lost 1920s,' and goes on to commend McGuinness for treating a moment in Irish history that has been ignored.<sup>435</sup> *The Daily Telegraph* also took *Dolly West* for the newest Irish masterpiece: 'His finest play to date that stands comparison with Brian Friel's *Dancing at Lughnasa* and Conor McPherson's *The Weir*. [...] Heaven knows what they are putting into the Guinness in Ireland, but the great plays just keep on coming.'<sup>436</sup>

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<sup>433</sup> Fiachra Gibbons, 'All About My Mother', *The Guardian*, 17 May 2000.

<sup>434</sup> Nicholas De Jongh, 'Oh What a Lovely Tale of Ireland's Wartime Manners', *Evening Standard*, 18 May 2000.

<sup>435</sup> Sheridan Morley, 'Dolly West's Kitchen', *International Herald Tribune and the Sentinel*, 18 May 2000.

<sup>436</sup> Charles Spencer, 'One More in a Line of Irish Greats', *The Daily Telegraph*, 19 May 2000



It is difficult to tell if Lyn Gardner's review is of the play or of McGuinness:

A bruiser [...] solid and old-fashioned in that great Irish tradition that mixes sentimentality with punch and is both engrossing and blissfully funny. [...] Works upon the consciousness like a singing kettle in a warm kitchen.<sup>437</sup>

She is not as quick to be seen to write up the occasion of the birth of a masterpiece however, and as with many of the reviews, argued that the inherent lack of commitment in McGuinness's treatment of the characters was itself another form of neutrality.<sup>438</sup>

Benedict Nightingale found the play more emotional than political,<sup>439</sup> and Paul Taylor commended the play's treatment of the predicament of Irish neutrality and its 'psychological penalties', comparing the play to *Three Sisters*, but also found it too preoccupied with broad themes and lacking in nuance:

*Dolly West's Kitchen* may be a play about the cost of neutrality, but in its warm even-handedness, it ironically advertises all the virtues of not taking sides.<sup>440</sup>

Nonetheless Pauline Flanagan was nominated for an Olivier award for her part as Rima in 2001 and won.<sup>441</sup>

### **Family Secrets: *Portia Coughlan*; *Love in the Title*; *The Secret Fall of Conatnce Wilde***

As well as the observable confrontation with given histories, the Abbey tours during this period show a trend in new playwriting that engages with the family in Irish society. While the plays in the last section show an overt engagement with politics, albeit retrospectively, in the following plays, the writers approach

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<sup>437</sup> Lyn Gardner, 'Donegal at War', *The Guardian*, 19 May 2000

<sup>438</sup> See also 'Dolly West's Kitchen', *The Independent on Sunday*, 21 May 2000

<sup>439</sup> Benedict Nightingale, 'Slipping into Neutral', *The Times*, 19 May 2000

<sup>440</sup> Paul Taylor, 'Ireland 1939-45: Don't Mention the War', *The Independent*, 19 May 2000

<sup>441</sup> David Lister, 'Julie Walters Upstages Rivals with Olivier Award', 24 February 2001, John Ezad, 'Giantkillers and Veterans take Oliviers', *The Guardian*, 24 February 2001

the Irish family at an angle, querying different Irish families through formally non-naturalistic devices. Each play represents different Irish women working with or against their families. *Portia Coughlan* and *Love in the Title* offer fictional women against the backdrop of rural Ireland, and in Thomas Kilroy's *The Secret Fall of Constance Wilde*, a symbolic representation of Constance Wilde is used to look at the unexplored aspects of lives that were lived in the public eye.

According to Fintan O'Toole, Irish theatre after the 1950s was characterised by the convergence of traditional and modern Ireland, represented in the splitting of character:

Playwrights such as Friel and Murphy started to place their characters in two different Irelands at the same time, creating two opposed moral and psychological worlds – a traditional one and a modern one – in which their characters have to live. Doomed to live by old values in a new world, they can literally do nothing right, for what they perceive to be right is no longer, by the lights of the new world, so. The split personality takes over. Gar O'Donnell in *Philadelphia, Here I Come!* divides between a public and a private self. Hugh Leonard's Charlie in *Da*, and the entire cast of characters in *A Life* split into past and present selves. In a slightly different configuration, Tom Murphy in almost all of his plays, divides the self between two characters, often brothers, sometimes friends or mortal enemies, who appear to be separate but who emerge as two halves of the one whole.<sup>442</sup>

The co-presence of traditional Ireland with the hastily-evolved globalised society is one contributing factor to this split personality disorder in Irish theatre. Additionally, the revelations of recent years of the suppressed trauma in Irish society and the failure to harmonise past and present led to an exploration by contemporary playwrights of double lives/selves laid bare. In *Portia Coughlan*, Portia is a half of the self she formed with her twin brother. His absence becomes an imposing presence and Portia is eventually compelled to join him by drowning herself. Constance Wilde is the conventional half of a famous couple,

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<sup>442</sup> Fintan O'Toole, 'Play for Ireland', *The Irish Times*, 12 February 2000.

tartly noted to have been aptly named; in Kilroy's play she is revealed to be a more complex and compassionate figure than generally represented, and her own family circumstances are revealed to have established precedents for her marriage to Oscar Wilde. In *Love in the Title*, the three women are three generations of the same family, but also represent three parts of one self: the innocent young girl who accepts authority even if it is cruel, the repressed woman who strives to maintain appearances and the independent self who is free to be creative and solitary.

The clash of past and present necessitated an unconventional formal approach for all of these plays: *Portia Coughlan* appears to follow a naturalistic form, then the narrative is fragmented and doubles back on itself in order to represent Portia's incomplete self. Constance's story is told through narrative, but the crucial events in her story are treated with imposing visual cues, movement-based gesture and puppetry, and *Love in the Title* presents three generations of the same family in a place of temporal suspension, the grandmother being the youngest and granddaughter being the eldest. All three offer incomplete pictures as the writers dramatise incomplete fragments of their stories.

### ***Portia Coughlan*: Spilt Personalities**

Marina Carr's *Portia Coughlan* (1996) was commissioned by the National Maternity Hospital. The play was intended for production by Garry Hynes during her time as AD but was postponed due to financial cutbacks. The project was taken up again in March 1996 and the play was directed by Hynes with Derbhle Crotty in the title role (see Fig. 3.8). Crotty had played the role of Millie in *The Mai*, which premiered at the Peacock in 1994, and was Carr's first play at the Abbey Theatre. The play transferred to the UK's Royal Court Theatre on 14 May 1996.

The play concerns Portia Coughlan on her 30<sup>th</sup> birthday. Obsessed with the death of her brother fifteen years previously in an unfulfilled suicide pact, she is haunted by his ghost, drinks heavily and eventually commits suicide. In many ways, *Portia Coughlan* is a very traditional Irish play, with kitchen set pieces,



rural fatalism and the tyranny of the matriarch. The recovery of Portia's body from the water after her suicide takes place in the second act, and then the final act sees Portia act out her final days.

The reviews for the Irish production were very positive, and so too were London reviews, with strong box office business for the run, though many critics felt compelled to comment on Marion O'Dwyer's mini-skirt (see Fig. 3.9). The judgement of Portia is also harsh; she is a 'viper-tongued slattern' and a 'slut', the reviews show a variety of misogynistic language in describing her.<sup>443</sup>

Michael Billington, having expected a 'warm hymn to Irish motherhood' because of its sponsorship from the National Maternity Hospital, refers to the 'highly-promising' play's questioning of 'not just the sanctity of family but even the very concept of inherent maternal love.'<sup>444</sup> Generally he approves of Carr's portrait of small-town Irish life, which he considers 'scathingly accurate', and dislikes the narrative device of having Acts II and III in reverse chronological order. Most reviews prefer to discuss the authenticity of the Ireland Carr offers, using phrases that sounds as if they were borrowed from the 1976 reviews of *Plough and the Stars* in New York: 'Like many fine Irish writers (one thinks particularly of O'Casey), Carr has a knack of combining piercing pain with shafts of outrageous humour,' 'The Irish brogue is so thick you sometimes lose the meaning.'<sup>445</sup>; 'Set in an Ireland far beyond mere Celtic twilight, Portia Coughlan's tragedy concerns the darkest midnight of the soul.' '[The play is] very Irish in language and detail, universal when it comes to emotion.'<sup>446</sup>; 'Rural ennui', 'endemic inbreeding', O'Neill, 'at his most relentless', 'a case-study in obsession and depression, a demystification of rustic Ireland, and a piece of updated folklore'.<sup>447</sup> *The Independent on Sunday* commended the 'raw Irish emotionalism' and 'rich individual dialect.'<sup>448</sup> And despite Portia's slatternly character, Irving Wardle nonetheless found it to be 'the finest Irish company to appear on an

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<sup>443</sup> Irving Wardle, 'Theatre', *The Sunday Telegraph*, 19 May 1996.

<sup>444</sup> Michael Billington, 'Theatre: Portia Coughlan', *The Guardian*, 18 May 1996.

<sup>445</sup> Charles Spencer, 'This is Unbearable – in the Best Sense', *Daily Telegraph*, 16 May 1996.

<sup>446</sup> Shaun Usher, 'A Riveting Mixture of Doom, Gloom and Ribaldry', *The Daily Mail*, 15 May 1996.

<sup>447</sup> Benedict Nightingale, 'Mother in an Irish Stew', *The Times*, 16 May 1996.

<sup>448</sup> *Independent on Sunday*, 19 May 1996.

English stage since Joe Dowling's *Juno and the Paycock*; and Derbhle Crotty's Portia is the performance of a lifetime.'<sup>449</sup>

Nicholas De Jongh saw the play in less thematically Irish terms, comparing it to Edward Albee's *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf* in terms of how it reveals 'the horror of some family lives, bound together by ties of shared pain and mutual resentment.'<sup>450</sup> For Michael Coveney, Carr was 'a truly wonderful new writer [...] fulfilling the promise of *The Mai* at the Dublin Theatre Festival a couple of years ago.' Comparing Portia's relationship with Gabriel to 'a weird mixture of Viola and Sebastian in *Twelfth Night*, and of the secretive, conspiratorial siblings in *The Turn of the Screw*', Coveney found Carr's text to be 'a poetic repository of natural speech aerated with swinging idiom, vigorous scatology and heavily aspirated consonantal patterns.'<sup>451</sup>

Back in Dublin, the Irish press reported that the first night had been very well received and according to Derbhle Crotty: 'I haven't heard one negative thing about the play in Ireland, and the really strong houses we're getting here suggest the same reaction.'<sup>452</sup> The same *Sunday Independent* piece described the play's reception as reminiscent of that of *The Steward of Christendom* the previous year in London.

### ***The Secret Fall of Constance Wilde: Secrets Revealed***

A year later in October 1997 *The Secret Fall of Constance Wilde* premiered at the Abbey, with Jane Brennan in the title role, and Robert O'Mahoney as Oscar Wilde. The production team included Patrick Mason and Joe Vanek as director and designer. The production could offer an audience both the prospect of the acclaimed Mason/Kilroy dynamic of *Talbot's Box*, as well as the more widely known Mason/Vanek partnership of *Dancing at Lughnasa*.

In October 1998, *The Secret Fall of Constance Wilde* toured to Australia, where it was staged at the Playhouse Theatre at the Victorian Arts Centre from 28

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<sup>449</sup> Irving Wardle, 'Theatre', *The Sunday Telegraph*, 19 May 1996.

<sup>450</sup> Nicholas De Jongh, 'Humour and Poetry fill Dark Picture of Family', *Evening Standard*, 15 May 1996.

<sup>451</sup> Michael Coveney, 'Theatre', *The Observer*, 19 May 1996.

<sup>452</sup> 'First Night Goes a Bang for Derbhle', *Sunday Independent*, 19 May 1996.



October to 1 November as part of the Melbourne International Festival. In 2000 the play transferred to the UK as part of the BITE:00 Barbican International Theatre event at the Barbican Theatre, London. Set against Oscar Wilde's notorious court case, Constance Wilde's inner life, as well as the dynamic between herself, her husband and Lord Alfred Douglas, was explored through the use of masked figures, puppetry, fact, conjecture and unconventional dramaturgy.

Patrick Mason had originally commissioned Thomas Kilroy to adapt *The Picture of Dorian Gray* for the stage to coincide with the centenary of Wilde's release from Reading Gaol, and Kilroy's research had led him to find concealed aspects of Constance Wilde's life that encouraged scrutiny.<sup>453</sup> Set on a bare stage with minimal props, sliding vertical and horizontal panels for the backdrop and a clearly outlined white circle in the centre for the opening scene with Constance and Oscar, *The Secret Fall of Constance Wilde*, was an Abbey play about an Irish family without even vestigial indicators of the Abbey kitchen set. Chairs came and went with precise choreography and timing, as did the large portable staircase that was the centrepiece of Kilroy's story, but there was no kitchen, and no metonym for domestic life in the traditional Irish theatrical way.

In *Constance Wilde* Kilroy suggested that Constance Wilde, in the wake of her husband's public disgrace, was unfairly judged. Constance had forbidden Oscar access to their children, then changed the family name after his trial and had been, up to this point, treated as an uncharitable and peripheral figure in biographical narratives. Kilroy's aim was to represent Constance as he had found her: pragmatic but sympathetic. Constance had visited Oscar in prison so that she might tell him in person of his mother's death. Her decision to change the family name (to Holland) was not a rejection of her husband, but a measure of protection for the benefit of their children. Furthermore it is suggested in the play (though no actual evidence exists) that Constance's father, once arrested for publicly exposing himself, had in some way molested or sexually abused the young Constance, leading to an overarching protectiveness of her children

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<sup>453</sup> Stephanie Bunbury, 'Another Wilde Side', *The Age*, 18 July 1998.



(against the influence of Bosie) in her later behaviour. What Kilroy did find in his research was that Constance Wilde had suffered from a bad domestic accident: falling down the stairs of her house led to serious back pain and a paralysing condition that resulted in her early death (see Fig. 3.10 for the theatrical depiction). Kilroy aligned Constance's injury to the 'progressive paralysis' caused by the burden of keeping family secrets to maintain a façade and her anxiety at her own collusion.

The play drew attention to the public nature of Oscar and Constance Wilde's lives, Jane Brennan and Robert O'Mahoney as the statuesque and formal Constance and Oscar were led onstage by puppet-like figures: actual actors dressed in black with white, wearing masks (similar to white fencing masks) that made them appear like menacing dolls. With the progression of the play, the central characters would be observed by these figures who performed applause-like gestures intermittently. As such, the domestic life of Constance and Oscar was presented as a public space in which they both performed, while the characters talk in terms of playacting and invention:

Constance: [...] Never again will I be invented as the good woman. [...] I want myself restored to me now.<sup>454</sup>

The action was highly ritualised: scene changes were initiated by the attendants' clapping their hands, and musical punctuations were effected by a Japanese Kabuki drumstick, as well as some other sounds. Recreating the Wildes' living space was unnecessary, given that the play shows the unreliability of any signifiers of authenticity when dealing with double lives: a copy of the Wildes' home at 16, Tite Street would give no more insight than the bare space with anonymous attendants and puppets representing their children (although there are references in the play to the house's symbolising Constance's newfound happiness with Oscar) and a large, menacing puppet to represent the judge (see Fig. 3.11). In press interviews, Jane Brennan added a personal connection to the original figure she played by recounting the story of how Merlin Holland, grandson of Constance and Oscar Wilde, had given her Constance Wilde's

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<sup>454</sup>Thomas Kilroy, *The Secret Fall of Constance Wilde*, (Oldcastle: Gallery Press, 1997) p.13.

wedding ring for the duration of the production. She also frequently cited the research reading she had undertaken for the role, legitimating the project further.<sup>455</sup>

The premiere of the play was eagerly anticipated in Ireland.<sup>456</sup> *Constance Wilde* played at the 40<sup>th</sup> Dublin Theatre Festival and Gallery Press published the play script to coincide with this first production. Meanwhile at the Murphy's Cork Film Festival the contentious film *Wilde* was to be screened. In Merlin Holland's criticism of the film (for focussing excessively on Wilde's sexuality and not enough on his literary career, according to Holland), *Constance Wilde* was by contrast the officially endorsed Wilde project. A survey of the Irish newspaper and radio reviews suggests that people were divided on the play, finding difficulty with the unusual theatrical devices used and the unfamiliar sight of puppets and masked attendants in a play that, bearing the Wilde brand, might fairly have been presumed to include an accessible drawing-room setting and deft epigrammatic dialogue. A review by David Nowlan in the early days of the production, 'Lives Drily Explored on Sterile Stage', described the play as academically near perfect, but a dry exploration with 'virtually no emotional magnet in the evening to attract the full engagement of the audience.'<sup>457</sup> The same day, John Boland in the *Irish Independent* was complimentary of the recovery of a repressed life, but critical of the 'overblown' production.<sup>458</sup> Mary Carr at the *Evening Herald* deemed Oscar to have overshadowed Constance yet again even in this play and complains about the stylising of a 'naturalistic text'.<sup>459</sup> The following day the high-profile radio and television presenter Gay Byrne, reviewing the play on RTÉ Radio 1 focussed on *The Irish Times* review ('David Nowlan thinks today in *The Irish Times*; that it is a bit sterile as far as emotional content is concerned. Wouldn't quite go along with him on that ...'), encouraging

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<sup>455</sup> Bob Crimeen, 'Buzz Before Fall', *Sunday Herald Sun*, 4 October 1998

<sup>456</sup> 'The high points of the 40<sup>th</sup> Dublin Theatre Festival promise to be the Abbey Theatre's production of a new play by Thomas Kilroy, *The Secret Fall of Constance Wilde*, the arrival in Dublin at last of Martin McDonagh's *Leenane Trilogy* and two productions by Silviu Purcारेte.' Michael Ross, 'The Best of the Fest', *Irish Times*, 5 October 1997.

<sup>457</sup> David Nowlan, 'Lives Drily Explored on Sterile Stage', *The Irish Times*, 9 October 1997

<sup>458</sup> John Boland, 'Lyrical Constance Ends Up Falling Short', *Irish Independent*, 9 October 1997

<sup>459</sup> Mary Carr, 'Oscar Bravo for Moving Piece of Three-Hander Work', *Evening Herald*, 9 October 1997.



his listeners to attend what he considered to be 'a beautiful piece of work', though warning that 'there's a sort of Greek chorus of fellows in funny hats and things'.<sup>460</sup> By that Sunday, *The Sunday Business Post*, *Sunday Times* and *Sunday Independent* reviewed the play with reserved praise, while *The Sunday Tribune's* review by Jocelyn Clarke used terms such as 'bunraku', 'kabuki' and 'European minimalism' as positive characteristics, and not as bywords for pretentious trickery.<sup>461</sup> Reviewing the production in *The Guardian*, Michael Billington wrote about prosperity and Irish 'national self-confidence' as the source for the upsurge in Irish drama and was generally distrustful of the documentary fictionalisations by Kilroy and his apparent manipulation of the characters in *Constance Wilde*.<sup>462</sup> Hugh Leonard in *Irish Independent*<sup>463</sup> sprang to the defence of the play, there were a number of letters to *The Irish Times*<sup>464</sup> to which former artistic director Christopher Fitz-Simon contributed, and a debate ensued across major Irish media outlets about the validity of Nowlan's review and the quality of theatre reviews in Dublin.<sup>465</sup>

The set and stylised form of *Constance Wilde* was a distraction to reviewers who were reluctant to promote the play, possibly at risk of seeming pretentious. This led to the further distraction of the Irish media's self-confidence crisis derived from a national anxiety about lacking the vocabulary to respond to post-kitchen Irish drama. It diverted discussion from what was a contemporaneously apposite, albeit subtle and intellectually sophisticated and not easily accessible play. *Constance*, *Oscar* and *Bosie* all struggle with the effects of destructive paternity. Kilroy's play of abusive fathers came during a period of revelation in Ireland, when Church scandals and stories of institutional abuse proliferated. The failure of the father and the family was the failure of the state and of the paradigm of traditional Ireland, and Kilroy sought to reclaim one individual's

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<sup>460</sup> 'Review of *Constance Wilde*', RTÉ Radio 1 *The Gay Byrne Show*, 9 October 1997.

<sup>461</sup> Marion McKeone, *Sunday Business Post*, 12 October 1997, Emer O'Kelly, 'A Wilde Triumph for Kilroy', *Sunday Independent*, 12 October 1997, Michael Ross, 'The Secret Fall of *Constance Wilde*', *The Sunday Times*, 12 October 1997.

<sup>462</sup> Michael Billington, 'Glitter Band', *The Guardian*, 15 October 1997.

<sup>463</sup> Hugh Leonard, 'A Log', *Sunday Independent*, 12 October 1997.

<sup>464</sup> 'Wilde Play at the Abbey', Letters to *The Irish Times*, 15 October 1997, and 29 October 1997.

<sup>465</sup> Victoria White, 'Critics Live to Write Another Day', *The Irish Times*, 16 October 1997, Pat Kenny, RTÉ Radio 1 *Today*, 15 October 1997.



story and, in doing so, to provide a platform for discussion that was built on a new non-traditional theatrical format.

If the Irish audiences had trouble with the atypical dramaturgy, the Australian critics were more receptive to the play. After the Dublin Theatre Festival, *Constance Wilde* was taken to Melbourne where the non-naturalism of the play encouraged comparisons to Kabuki and Bunraku theatre,<sup>466</sup> which in turn redirected many reviewers from debating the authenticity of the Irishness of the play. The Abbey was heralded as a world-class company and their previous visits with *Lughnasa* in 1992<sup>467</sup> and with *Well of the Saints* in 1996 indicated the continued good name the Abbey was enjoying internationally.<sup>468</sup>

International reviews of the Abbey often fall into predictable patterns: patronising essentialists, or writers with Irish roots (or who have spoken to a diasporic authority during the interval) that charge in with notes on authenticity of certain details. Though a famous Irishman, Wilde is not subject to the usual national stereotypes and so the Abbey was unlikely to be taken to task over costume choices, as with *The Plough and the Stars* in 1976. There are reviewers that demonstrate a passivity with regard to the Abbey (advising the audience to go along with 'pregnant pauses' in *Faith Healer* as they are a 'European' convention, for instance, or consoling readers that yes, they probably will not understand the Irish accents, but to take it as comparable to attuning one's ear to Shakespeare). Though ostensibly better than a negative review, these lukewarm remarks often cast the Abbey as irrelevant and worthwhile but boring. It was perhaps the unconventional Irish subject of Oscar Wilde that allowed for a more assertive collection of preview notices in Melbourne. Many of the Australian critics who previewed and reviewed the play cited their previous understanding of Constance Wilde as being derived from Richard Ellmann's *The Artist as Critic*, Ann Clark-Amor's *Mrs Oscar Wilde*, the Brian Gilbert film *Wilde*, David Hare's *The Judas Kiss* and Vyvyan Holland's writing<sup>469</sup>. Noting for instance that Constance

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<sup>466</sup> John Ryan, 'Go On, take a Walk on the Wilde Side', *The Melbourne Times*, 7 October 1998.

<sup>467</sup> Helen Thompson, 'An Unengaging Tale', *The Age*, 30 October 1998.

<sup>468</sup> Ron Banks, 'Dance Gets Festival into Swing', *West Australian*, 22 October 1998.

<sup>469</sup> Jason Steger, 'The Secret Fall of Constance Wilde', *The Sunday Age*, 1 November 1998, Adam, Zwar, 'The Secret Fall of Constance Wilde', *Sunday Herald Sun*, 1 November 1998.

Wilde was remembered as 'the harpy who refused to let him see his own children', and that playwright David Hare 'dismisses' her in *The Judas Kiss*, 'as a vindictive witch',<sup>470</sup> reviewers like the auspiciously named Stephanie Bunbury were anxious to show their understanding of Constance as a victim of Wilde's double life, who was 'no fool; she was a radical and a feminist in the terms of her time'.

In a lengthy interview with Mason, he offers Constance Wilde as one who was not vindictive, but rather, as Patrick Mason states in the interview, 'travelled across Europe to Reading jail to tell Oscar his mother had died, because she didn't want him to hear it from anyone else. There was an extraordinary courage there.'<sup>471</sup> In the same interview Jane Brennan commented on letters being written to the papers in response to the play:

A lot of people brought a lot of baggage to the play. They saw what Constance did as very politically incorrect and couldn't accept that she wasn't a more modern woman.

Brennan argued that there was a gender divide in responses, with women 'more inclined to listen to the play's argument', a provocative remark that invited participation. Moreover, *Constance Wilde* was one of a handful of plays dealing with similar universal themes, giving further credence to its relevance; reviewing *Constance Wilde* in *The Australian* alongside *Shakespeare's Women & Jane Eyre* by Claire Bloom, *Odyssey* by Andreas Litras, performed by Anthos Theatre, and *Red*, by Red Fish Theatre Company, Lee Christophis pointed out the pattern of plays about 'identity, home, lives crushed and regained' which consolidated the 1998 Melbourne Festival's theatre programme.<sup>472</sup>

Bryce Hallett compared *Constance Wilde* to Nicholas Hytner's *Xerxes* for the English National Opera,<sup>473</sup> and describing the play as 'slick', with 'international

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<sup>470</sup> Stephanie Bunbury, 'Another Wilde Side', *The Age*, 18 July 1998.

<sup>471</sup> Ibid.

<sup>472</sup> Lee Christophis, 'Blooming Good Time, and Wild', *The Australian*, 30 October 1998.

<sup>473</sup> Bryce Hallett, 'Melbourne Keeps Integrity Intact', *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 31 October 1998.

origins but universal appeal'; for Rob Gravestocks at *The Melbourne Times* Constance Wilde was:

The model for the type of show The Melbourne Theatre Company should be doing. It is an imaginatively presented, high-quality drama, performed beautifully by a small ensemble.<sup>474</sup>

In interviews the Abbey actors were eager to deny the documentary accuracy of the piece, which ultimately cautions against a reading of literal authenticity but encourages the audience to question given histories: 'The play does take dramatic licence and is not absolutely accurate in its depiction of what happened. But it is true to the spirit of all the characters'.<sup>475</sup> Patrick Mason, with a characteristic sense of the historical, cast Wilde's story as having 'Every personal, political, gender issue; the whole relationship of society to the individual is encapsulated in it. So we tell it to ourselves over and over again, always finding something new in it.'<sup>476</sup>

While the Australian press had no trouble reading the play in an international context with the guidance of Abbey personnel interviews, Mason also undertook a parallel exercise of setting the play in terms of its commentary on contemporary Irish life, citing Ireland's rapid development from an uptight, rural Catholic country to 'European powerhouse' which had only recently replaced the same laws about sexuality under which Wilde was prosecuted ('In terms of legislation about gays and lesbians, we went from 1888 to 1999'), and casting the Abbey rehabilitation of Constance Wilde's memory in terms of Yeats's intentions for the national theatre:

Yeats is a constant kind of conscience for this theatre. When he was asked about why it was here, he said: 'We are here to speak the deeper thoughts and emotions of Ireland.' Our writers take that very seriously.<sup>477</sup>

Overall, the Australian reviews were positive:

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<sup>474</sup> Rob Gravestocks, 'Constantly Seeking a Wilde Time', *The Melbourne Times*, 4 November 1998.

<sup>475</sup> Bob Crimeen, 'Buzz Before Fall', *Sunday Herald Sun*, 4 October 1998.

<sup>476</sup> Stephanie Bunbury, 'Another Wilde Side', *The Age*, 18 July 1998.

<sup>477</sup> Ibid.



Perhaps the biggest drawcard at the Melbourne Festival this year will be the Australian debut of the new Irish play, *the Secret Fall of Constance Wilde*, produced by Ireland's legendary Abbey Theatre.<sup>478</sup>

The big overseas theatre company this year is Ireland's Abbey Theatre.<sup>479</sup>

Kilroy was commended for having 'redressed' the injustice of Constance Wilde's obscurity,<sup>480</sup> and for introducing 'a more assertive Constance than the quietly accepting character in Brian Gilbert's film *Wilde*,<sup>481</sup> and Mason for creating 'a deceptively simple, gloriously theatrical production blending visual, mimetic and textual elements with exceptional finesse.'<sup>482</sup>

The Playhouse is a large theatre space with a seating capacity of 849.<sup>483</sup> In previous productions that moved to a larger space (such as *Observe the Sons of Ulster* at the King's in Edinburgh) the change to a larger space diminished the action and in some cases adversely affected the acoustics. In the Playhouse, the bigger space suited the play:

Mason has used the vast depths of the Playhouse to accentuate the smallness of these lives by overwhelming them with enormous puppet figures representing the magistrate who convicts Oscar and Constance's disreputable father.<sup>484</sup>

A minority of critics were unsatisfied because the play did not live up to the expectations created by *Dancing at Lughnasa*. Helen Thompson thought the play failed 'to rise to moments of insight or great drama,<sup>485</sup> while Lee Christofis

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<sup>478</sup> John Ryan, 'Go On, take a Walk on the Wilde Side', *The Melbourne Times*, 7 October 1998.

<sup>479</sup> Ron Banks, 'Dance Gets Festival into Swing', *West Australian*, 22 October 1998.

<sup>480</sup> Kate Herbert, 'The Wilde Woman', *Herald Sun*, 30 October 1998.

<sup>481</sup> Adam Zwar, 'The Secret Fall of Constance Wilde', *Sunday Herald Sun*, 1 November 1998.

<sup>482</sup> Kate Herbert, 'The Wilde Woman', *Herald Sun*, 30 October 1998.

<sup>483</sup> *The Arts Centre: Technical Specifications: Playhouse*, The Victorian Arts Centre Trust. Playhouse, 6 November 2009.

<sup>484</sup> Kate Herbert, 'The Wilde Woman', *Herald Sun*, 30 October 1998.

<sup>485</sup> Helen Thompson, 'An Unengaging Tale', *The Age*, 30 October 1998.

thought Kilroy's Oscar too broadly drawn to be believable.<sup>486</sup> But by and large the play was critically successful, as conceded in *The Irish Times*.<sup>487</sup>

Revived in 2000 *Constance Wilde* was taken to the Barbican BITE festival in London from 27 September to 7 October 2000, the third year of BITE, an annual five-month season of international theatre, music theatre and dance in the UK. Patrick Mason had resigned as Artistic Director and had been succeeded by Ben Barnes. Many projects undertaken by Mason continued into Barnes's first season; Hugh Leonard's *Love in the Title* was visiting the San Jose Repertory Theatre in California; *Dolly West* was playing in London; *Dancing at Lughnasa* was playing at home in the Abbey, and *Constance Wilde* would now tour to London, coinciding with Barnes's ambitious and very controversial *Barbaric Comedies*, a co-production with the Edinburgh International Festival, discussed in the next chapter. Put out by the perceived imposition of Mason's directorship on his new season, Barnes decided that instead of interrupting Hugh Leonard's *A Life* at the Abbey Theatre, where he believed *Constance Wilde* had 'found and exhausted its audience pretty quickly during its first outing',<sup>488</sup> *Constance Wilde* was to be taken to An Grianan in Donegal first, then to London. Barnes was later persuaded to have *Constance Wilde* play at the Abbey in September to coincide with the Wilde centenary celebrations (which included Kilroy's *My Scandalous Life*, commissioned by the Oscar Wilde Centre in Trinity College to mark the 'Wilde Legacy' conference) and to attract cultural tourists.

*Constance Wilde* opened at the Barbican on 27 September, and on Friday 28 September the show was recorded for the BBC Discovery channel.<sup>489</sup> Initially the reviews were good, but the better-known critics for large-circulation papers,

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<sup>486</sup> Lee Christofis, 'Blooming Good Time, and Wild', *The Australian*, 30 October 1998.

<sup>487</sup> '[*Constance Wilde*] divided critical opinion here when it played at the Dublin Theatre Festival last year has met with a warm welcome at the Melbourne Festival'. 'Constance's Ascent', *The Irish Times*, 12 November 1998.

<sup>488</sup> Ben Barnes, *Plays and Controversies*, p. 14. Barnes wrote 'I will make every reasonable effort to see it off the premises while at the same time ensuring that it is adequately prepared for its showcase appearance at the Barbican later in the year.' Barnes supported the 'baggage' and his feelings were not publicly aired until 2008 with the publication of *Plays and Controversies*.

<sup>489</sup> Richard Halliburton, 'Wilde's Bittersweet Love', *Evening Standard*, 29 September 2000.

Benedict Nightingale, Lyn Gardner and Charles Spencer, censured the play.<sup>490</sup> The play's concern was with the gulf between performance and truth, however in *The Times* Benedict Nightingale thought this created a further distance between the audience and the Wildes, quipping that there was probably a good play to be written on Constance Wilde but that:

Unfortunately the usually reliable Thomas Kilroy seems determined not to write it, Dublin's estimable Abbey Theatre not to present it, and Patrick Mason, gifted director of Brian Friel's brilliant *Dancing at Lughnasa*, not to stage it.<sup>491</sup>

Lyn Gardner in *The Guardian* noted the influence of Japanese theatre, but thought the play was overpriced 'tosh' in a review that also condemned Wilde for 'sodomising little boys'. Kilroy's play did not contribute to Constance Wilde's story, Gardner argued, as much as to the Wilde 'industry' as Constance is defined by the men in her life.<sup>492</sup> For *The Daily Telegraph*, Charles Spencer was nonplussed by the puppetry, which he found pretentious and 'ridiculously tricky'.<sup>493</sup> Recalling the tour, Thomas Kilroy had the impression that Irishness was still a strong element in the reception of *Constance Wilde* at the Barbican and that resistance to the play was possibly also grounded in its having stepped outside this expectation:

The use of puppets bothered some people, but if the show had come from Romania or Poland this would never have been an issue.

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<sup>490</sup> Nightingale, Benedict, 'Clunky Play Takes the Wit out of Wilde', *The Times*, 30 September 2000; Thaxter, John, 'The Secret Fall of Constance Wilde', *The Stage*, 05 October 2000; O'Riordan, John, 'The Secret Fall of Constance Wilde', *Public Sector Times*, October 2000; Gardner, Lyn, 'The Secret Fall of Constance Wilde', *The Guardian*, 02 October 2000 and Spencer, Charles, 'Spoilt by Parade of Puppets', *The Daily Telegraph*, 02 October 2000.

<sup>491</sup> Benedict Nightingale, 'Clunky Play Takes the Wit out of Wilde', *The Times*, 30 September 2000, John Thaxter, 'The Secret Fall of Constance Wilde', *The Stage*, 5 October 2000, John O'Riordan, 'The Secret Fall of Constance Wilde', *Public Sector Times*, October 2000.

<sup>492</sup> Lyn Gardner, 'The Secret Fall of Constance Wilde', *The Guardian*, 2 October 2000.

<sup>493</sup> Charles Spencer, 'Spoilt by Parade of Puppets', *The Daily Telegraph*, 2 October 2000.



By contrast the recent production of the play at the Guthrie in Minneapolis [June, 2008] did not label it 'Irish'. It was a very American production (by Chilean-American director Marcela Lorca).<sup>494</sup>

*Constance Wilde* was a new Irish play in 1997, but one which dealt with an Irish family and the gap between performance and truth, arguably a very typical theme for an Abbey play. Nonetheless in *Constance Wilde* Thomas Kilroy seemed to be writing a play that engaged with universal themes and engaged in an international discourse, (and which did not reach out to the diaspora), while Patrick Mason and Joe Vanek styled it as minimalist, using notably uncommon puppetry, without drawing upon the Irish kitchen metonym (though bestowing an authority on the production in the eyes of the media with the Holland heirloom ring). Unlike the first American tour of *The Playboy*, the problem was not a perceived misrepresentation of an idea of Ireland, rather the incongruity of the representation of an internationally known figure through the use of stylised theatrical devices. Of course the use of traditional Japanese theatre as a medium through which to express an Irish story in a manner that was outward-looking and mindful of its place in an international context, was very close to the Abbey Theatre of Yeats.

### ***Love in the Title: The Three Kates***

Running an almost parallel tour with *Constance Wilde*, Hugh Leonard's *Love in the Title* premiered at the Abbey in March 1999, directed by Patrick Mason (Mason's tenure as AD then ended in December of 1999). The play was taken to the non-profit San Jose Repertory Theatre in California in 1999, then to Singapore for the Singapore Arts Festival, 2000. *Love in the Title*, also a new play, shared with *Constance Wilde* an interest in recovering family histories and a reparation of the damage to the Irish family caused by empty rectitude. Also a three-hander, in *Love in the Title*, the characters of Cat, Kate and Triona were played by Karen Ardiffe, Ingrid Craigie and Catherine Walsh. In this play, contemporary Ireland in the guise of the granddaughter, engages with two past generations of Irish women, in her mother and grandmother. Meeting in a

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<sup>494</sup> Interview with Thomas Kilroy, 2008.

liminal, rural space with a large rock (see Fig. 3.12), the women, aged chronologically in reverse, talk about their lives, usually colliding at a comical impasse when one's social propriety is contrasted with another's. Their experiences and values are based on the very different Irelands that they embody: from naive, devout and oppressive, to bourgeois and uptight, to apparently liberal but isolated. It was a very effective device of Leonard's to show the rapid social changes that Ireland had undergone, especially as far as women were concerned (and the naming of the characters, often referred to by Leonard in his journalism as 'the three Kates', is redolent of another famous Cathleen on the Irish stage). Setting the play in what might have been a field, with a large rock in the middle afforded the audience a pastoral scene, while Karen Ardiff's simple yellow dress and playful naivety offered a reverberation of the Mundy sisters. Ingrid Craigie's Kate was a proxy for contemporary Irish women, or indeed any woman that identified herself as the modern, enlightened product of a repressed socially conservative mother such as Catherine Walsh's Triona.

Complimenting the performances, *The Irish Times* was critical of the play's temporal contrivances, concluding nonetheless that 'Mr Leonard has made a most welcome return to the Dublin stage.'<sup>495</sup> Reviewing the Irish production for *Variety*, Karen Fricker wrote that while Leonard's *A Life* and *Da* had been important forces in putting the 'contemporary Irish memory play on the map', *Love in the Title* was 'undermined by sentimentality and inconsistent conventions'.<sup>496</sup> *Love in the Title* played at the Lyric Theatre, Belfast in May, 1999, during a season which included Brian Friel's *Give Me Your Answer, Do!* and Marie Jones's *Stones in his Pockets*. Ian Hill of *The Belfast Newsletter* wrote first that the play was 'subject to microscopic examination by Dublin's critics who admitted grudgingly that it was a fine work' as it opened at the Lyric, then that

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<sup>495</sup> David Nowlan, 'Love in the Title', *Irish Times* 11 March 1999.

<sup>496</sup> Karen Fricker, 'Love in the Title', *Variety*, 22 March 1999.

he, 'like many, slipped away for the first night of Hugh Leonard's so forgettable *Love in the Title*, Yawn. Yawn.'<sup>497</sup>

After a national tour, *Love in the Title* was redesigned slightly (mostly to fit the stage in the next venue, but additional photographs of well-known historical figures were added to the set) and taken to San Jose Repertory Theatre (see Fig. 3.13 for the programme cover). The San José/Dublin Sister City relationship was established in 1986 by then Mayor of San José, Tom McEnery and Bertie Ahern, then Lord Mayor of Dublin. The committee mounts an 'Irish Week' annually, in March.<sup>498</sup> Between the establishment of the city link in 1986 to the tour of *Love in the Title* in 2000, more than 80 Silicon Valley companies had based their European headquarters in Dublin, while approximately 40 Irish high-tech firms were known to have set up in San Francisco's Bay Area.<sup>499</sup> The trade connections in this instance were the catalyst for the co-production, which saw the Abbey, which had not visited the west coast in over 50 years represent a wealthy, modern nation known for (recent) excellence in international theatre.<sup>500</sup> Timothy Near, Artistic Director of the San Jose Repertory Theatre [SJR] invited the Abbey to perform in March of 2000 to extend what was mostly a business partnership into cultural events that included education and community outreach.<sup>501</sup> Mason and Near agreed on a new play for the partnership, and the American premiere of *Love in the Title* was performed from 11 March to 9 April 2000 in the Sobrato Auditorium, (which was similar in size to the Abbey's main auditorium) in 2000. 17 March, St Patrick's Day, was the gala opening night and half the audience reportedly wore green to mark the occasion.<sup>502</sup> Fundraising was not as easily found as might have been expected; despite the large Irish connection, the high-tech business community, Near said in a later interview, was 'not easily drawn into supporting the arts'. The fundraising goals were met

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<sup>497</sup> Ian Hill, 'Leonard Winner Visits the Lyric', *Belfast News Letter*, 24 May 1999 and Ian Hill, 'Star Turn Out at Parker's Awards', *Belfast News Letter*, 31 May 1999.

<sup>498</sup> <http://www.sanjosedublin.org/index.html>

<sup>499</sup> Mark De La Vina, 'Irish Ayes', *San Jose Mercury News*, 10-16 March 2000.

<sup>500</sup> Timothy Near, 'Notes from the Artistic Director', *Love in the Title* San Jose Programme, San Jose Repertory Theatre 2000.

<sup>501</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>502</sup> David L. Beck, 'Actresses' Strengths Bring Depths to Finely Crafted Irish Drama', *San Jose Mercury News*, 20 March 2000.



as a result of individual donations, funds from the California Arts Council and the California-based Packard Foundation which provides grants to not-for-profit organisations.<sup>503</sup>

The audience attending the SJR were not made up of Irish Americans in the same way as the audiences for the 1976 *Plough and the Stars*, which had been directly marketed to Irish-American audiences through organisations like The Georgian Society and the Ireland Fund. The audience of SJR, broadly speaking, consists of upper income middle class educated locals as well as students (from high-school to middle school), and not made up of any one dominant diasporic identity. The SJR is known for its productions of new plays, produced around six annually between September and June. The subscription-based system means that the majority of marketing is focussed on the beginning of the season, where the programme as a whole is pitched. In 2000 the addition of the Abbey Theatre to the programme was the focal point in the marketing, as it was considered strong leverage.<sup>504</sup>

The programme for the American premiere of *Love in the Title* included a glossary of 'Relevant Historical Facts' to assist an audience member for whom references to the Black and Tans, the Eucharistic Congress of 1932, Patrick Kavanagh and Michael Collins, among others, would be assumed to require explication. This included a further elaboration on the photographs onstage in the set of Eamon de Valera, John F. Kennedy and Mary Robinson as icons of recent Irish history, written from the point of view of what 'an American student visiting her relatives in 1955 should not have been startled to find in the living room.'<sup>505</sup> The programme attempted therefore to contextualise the three Irelands on stage for an audience it also sought to include in the action. The San Jose audience (neither as demonstrably Irish American as, for example, the one attending BAM in 1976, nor the Skirball Center in 2004), were cast in the role of visitors who, far from being outsiders, were returning relatives, coached on the

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<sup>503</sup> Jean Schiffman, 'International Affair', *Back Stage West*, 16 March 2000.

<sup>504</sup> Interview Bruce Elsperger, Literary Manager of SJR, December 2009.

<sup>505</sup> 'Face on the Set', *Love in the Title* San Jose Programme, San Jose Repertory Theatre, 2000.

latest idiosyncrasies. If a diasporic connection did not exist, the promotional texts nonetheless encouraged a familial approach to the play.

The background reading that made up the press package distributed by the SJR included the programme (with the usual background material on the Abbey Theatre, detailing the directors' ambition to stage 'certain Celtic and Irish plays' in the spring of every year<sup>506</sup>) and a press release explaining that this exchange between Dublin and San Jose was 'a coup for regional theatres everywhere,' offering an 'unforgettable experience for Silicon Valley audiences' in a piece that made numerous references to *Dancing at Lughansa*.<sup>507</sup> Hugh Leonard was relatively well-known in America for his Tony-award-winning play *Da*, which had been made into a film with Martin Sheen and Barnard Hughes in 1988, while Mason was known for the Tony he won for *Lughnasa*, by now the play most cited in preview features on the Abbey Theatre wherever they toured.

A feature in the local press the day before the gala opening detailed how Leonard wrote the play upon receiving word a friend had died, a woman he used to go walking with at Carrigogunnell in Limerick around some ruins and a standing stone, as incorporated in the set design of *Love in the Title*. The woman was, Leonard said, in the play in the form of Cat, the grandmother figure.<sup>508</sup> Leonard made it clear that he was engaged in a recovery of women in Irish theatre: *Love in the Title* was, 'expressly for women'. In arguing that there were rarely good roles for women in Irish drama except in the plays of Sean O'Casey, Leonard cast himself as connected to one of the most well-known Abbey writers of the repertoire, overcoming the dominion of men in Irish drama, while also reflecting 'some of the new attitudes in Ireland.' In adding that no changes had been made to the script in its transfer, he also suggested that the audience were taking part in an authentic experience.<sup>509</sup> However Patrick Mason reported that it was concern over how the 'specifically Irish play' would resonate for Bay Area

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<sup>506</sup> 'Background Reading', Press Package *Love in the Title*, SJR archive 1999.

<sup>507</sup> Press release, San José Repertory Theatre, 2000, SJR archive.

<sup>508</sup> Writing three months later of his wife who died in 2000, Leonard evoked the three Kates in California and how successful the play was and that one of the evening's performances dedicated to her. Hugh Leonard, 'Friday', *Sunday Independent*, 11 June 2000.

<sup>509</sup> Chad Jones, 'A Letter Inspires Labour of Love', *News Choice*, 16 March 2000.



audiences that led to the decision to rework the play 'to more clearly illuminate for American audiences the historical chain of events alluded to in the play.' This meant images and explanatory notes hung in the lobby, as well as additional images in the auditorium. After the first few previews, Mason said, the cast was 'hard at work [...] to fine-tune the accents, a little too authentic for American ears, without losing the color of the piece'.<sup>510</sup> Despite the cast's accents being neutralised for the better understanding of the audience, some individuals nonetheless expressed difficulty in understanding them during the post-show questions and answers sessions.<sup>511</sup> The reviewer for *The Monterey County Herald* thought the audience had 'to scramble to catch every detail in the dialogue'. Writing that they 'often founder[ed],' she wrote that the Irish cultural elements were probably lost in translation, although Irish the play speaks to universal issues.<sup>512</sup>

Perceived idiosyncratic localisation notwithstanding, the Abbey were mostly treated well in the Californian press, ('The kind of world-class production the rep has long envisioned'),<sup>513</sup> though its merits were not incontrovertible. The *San Francisco Chronicle* was complimentary of performances that had to overcome a 'pompous set design', the added images in the auditorium and lobby, which imposed 'an unnecessary historical frame on a frame that treats time so whimsically.'<sup>514</sup> Similarly the *San Jose Mercury News* liked the performances and the play: 'We think, stereotypically, that everyone in Ireland speaks poetry. In Leonard's play they really do', but not the set: 'Specificity is not what we're after here, and the faces require explanation in the program and the lobby.'<sup>515</sup> Back in

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<sup>510</sup> Jean Schiffman, 'International Affair', *Back Stage West*, 16 March 2000.

<sup>511</sup> Interview Bruce Elspenger, Literary Manager of SJR, December 2009.

<sup>512</sup> Barbara Rose Shuler, 'Fascinating Irish Play Speaks With a Universal Human Heart', *The Monterey County Herald*, 23-29 March 2000.

<sup>513</sup> Mark De La Vina, 'San Jose Rep Presents its First US Debut of a World-Class Production', *The Monterey County Herald*, 16-22 March 2000.

<sup>514</sup> Steven Winn, 'Love, Family and Time in an Irish Meadow', *San Francisco Chronicle*, March 2000.

<sup>515</sup> David L. Beck, 'Actresses' Strengths Bring Depths to Finely Crafted Irish Drama', *San Jose Mercury News*, 20 March 2000.



Ireland, Hugh Leonard gave interviews about the 'resounding success' of his new play,<sup>516</sup> a box office success in California.<sup>517</sup>

In 2000 the Abbey had a multifaceted international presence: *Living Quarters*, *Dolly West's Kitchen* and *The Secret Fall of Constance Wilde* continued to tour, while the co-production of *The Barbaric Comedies* with the Edinburgh International Festival was underway. Amid these, the Abbey took *Love in the Title* to Singapore three months after their US tour, making a brief visit to the 2000 Arts Festival from 7-8 June at the Victoria Theatre with support from the Irish Government through the Cultural Relations Committee of the Department of Foreign Affairs. The festival covered three weeks in June and over 300 performances of dance, music and theatre.

As with the San Jose programme, a glossary was provided, this time with 'Vocabulary and Phrases Spoken by the Women of Love in the Title', which included the following: 'Teeth as bockety as that stone = crooked; A bake of a nose = beak; Get stitched = shut your mouth; Learning Irish was a hoor = a pain, and annoyance; Feck off = no kidding or cut it out' (see Fig. 3.14 for the San Jose version).<sup>518</sup> The reviews were very positive, particularly on how the play 'encourages us to confront the legacy we leave for the future in the shape of our children,' and the small, personal discoveries treated in the play.<sup>519</sup> Leonard's emphasis on the play's recovery of women in Irish drama was misconstrued by at least one critic, as 'warnings that the Irish theatre company Abbey Theatre's production would be a "chick-flick" or only catered specifically to "women"', who nonetheless found such concerns unfounded and the 'Irish brogue' enjoyable. He also warned that the 'half Singaporeans (*sic*) and half Caucasian' audience might have difficulty understanding it.<sup>520</sup>

While plays such as *Portia Coughlan*, *Constance Wilde* and *Love in the Title* at the Abbey Theatre attempted to address contemporary Ireland through

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<sup>516</sup>Mary Rose Doorly, 'Leonard's Love for Women', *The Irish Herald*, March 2000.

<sup>517</sup> Interview Bruce Elsperger, Literary Manager of SJR, December 2009.

<sup>518</sup> 'Vocabulary and Phrases Spoken by the Women of Love in the Title', Programme for *Love in the Title*, Singapore Arts Festival, 2000.

<sup>519</sup> Patrick Nayar, 'A Jaunt in the Twilight Zone', *The Business Times*, 9 June 2000.

<sup>520</sup> Joshua Lye, 'Not a Chick Flick', *The Straits Times*, 9 June 2000.

unconventional form, something else had been happening in Irish theatre. Martin McDonagh, a London-Irish playwright working with Druid Theatre Company in Galway, gained mainstream notoriety for his *Leenane Trilogy*, which commenced with *The Beauty Queen of Leenane* in 1996 and *A Skull in Connemara* and *The Lonesome West* in 1997. All of these plays of McDonagh were set around the West of Ireland where he spent time in his childhood, and all were heavily reliant on preceding Irish theatre as a foundation on which to create his pastiche versions, placing contemporary Irish theatre firmly back in the kitchen. The plays were presented at the Galway Arts Festival, on the West End, in commercial theatres in Dublin, before they transferred to Broadway in 1998 to great acclaim. McDonagh did not receive universal acclaim for plays that were accessible and funny for some, but excessively violent and derivative for others. McDonagh's use of violence did not occur in a vacuum: the 'In-Yer-Face' new Brutalism of writers like Sarah Kane and Mark Ravenhill had already shown audiences violence on a par with Jacobean theatre throughout the 1990s. Nor was McDonagh alone in revisiting the problematic stage Irishman; as the centenary of the Irish national theatre approached, here was a figure due reconsideration.

### **1997-1999: An Uneasy Sentiment**

The great triumph of Martin McDonagh's [sic] in London and New York has not exactly been mirrored in Dublin and Galway. The very mixed reaction may be because audiences are coming from somewhere much closer to the world he claims to be writing about. Patrick Mason.<sup>521</sup>

Druid's success with the *Leenane Trilogy* preceded the Abbey's production of two plays also concerned with representations of the stage Irishman or the Irish peasant: *Tarry Flynn* by Patrick Kavanagh and adapted by the director Conall Morrison, and *The Colleen Bawn* by Dion Boucicault, also directed by Morrison, which both transferred to the National Theatre's Lyttelton stage in London in 1998 and 1999.. While the Abbey would not take up Martin McDonagh (the response from the literary department and from the readers was, generally

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<sup>521</sup>Laura Hitchcock, 'Dublin's Abbey Theatre Becomes Silicon Valley Sibling', *Curtain Up*, 28 March 2000.



speaking, that McDonagh's early submissions read like derivative and reductive Irish theatre cliché<sup>522</sup>), the controversial success of his plays created a space in which comical stage Irishry could be explored on the Irish stage by audiences who could now view it as a valued part of Irish theatre history. Martin McDonagh's *Leenane Trilogy* shared with Brian Friel's *Dancing at Lughnasa* unprecedented commercial success, parlayed into long West End and Broadway residencies and awards. They increased the profile of Irish theatre, but thereafter imposed on it the burden of achieving massive commercial success. As it was, the Abbey was (perennially) trying to maintain the financial wherewithal to run a 12-month season, national touring and increasing international tours. Managing to fill the theatre for eight weeks during the summer was always a concern for the Artistic Director, and in 1997 Patrick Mason, having considered a revival of *The Great Hunger*, decided instead to revive *Tarry Flynn*, on the basis that when it had last been staged at the Abbey in an adaptation by PJ O'Connor in 1966 (with Donal McCann in the title role) it had been a box office success, and was due a revival.<sup>523</sup> Mason approached Morrison to direct, and Morrison expressed an interest in writing the adaptation himself. Meanwhile, the director of the National Theatre in London, Trevor Nunn, contacted Mason with an interest in reviving a connection between the two theatres which had once been very strong. As with many of Mason's tours during this period, he was asked to bring whatever work was in hand, and in this case it was *Tarry Flynn* and afterwards *The Colleen Bawn*. Conall Morrison's adaptation of *Tarry Flynn* (1997) for the Abbey transferred to the Lyttelton in 1998.

What is interesting about Morrison's projects with Irish classics is that in its Dublin debut *Tarry Flynn*, a play about traditional provincial Irish themes of comical bachelorhood and creeping social fatalism, overlapped with a production at the Lyttelton of Martin McDonagh's *Cripple of Inishmaan* (1996).<sup>524</sup>

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<sup>522</sup> Interview with Patrick Mason, August 2010.

<sup>523</sup> Interview with Patrick Mason, August 2010.

<sup>524</sup> This led to a direct comparison in Michael C. O'Neill's review in *Theatre Journal* Michael C. O'Neill's, 'Shakespeare and Theatrical Modernisms', *Theatre Journal*, Vol. 50, No. 2, (1998), pp. 257-260.



McDonagh's career from 1996 onwards, when *Beauty Queen* was debuted by Druid, was an enormous commercial success. The comical pastiche nature of his work and its cartoonish violence and (probably) deliberately inauthentic 'Irishness' has meant that his work has remained outside of the canon of Irish theatre. However in rewriting *Tarry Flynn* for the stage and in reviving the controversial work of Boucicault, the Abbey offered their audience an alternative portrait of ambivalent stage Ireland. In 1997, Conall Morrison was something of a rising star in the Abbey when he undertook the Boucicault/Kavanagh plays. Shortly after directing the premiere of Gary Mitchell's *As The Beast Sleeps* at the Peacock, he began working on *Tarry Flynn* and then the overlapping *The Colleen Bawn*. So in demand was he that, because *The Colleen Bawn* was playing at the Abbey, Morrison had to hand over rehearsals of *Tarry Flynn* for the first week to Jason Byrne before taking it up again.

Set in Cavan in the 1930s, *Tarry Flynn*, like *The Great Hunger*, follows a farmer. Unlike *The Great Hunger*, *Tarry Flynn* is a more accessible comedy, and Tarry is a poet and therefore articulate in ways Paddy Maguire failed to be. The lineage from *The Great Hunger* was apparent in the main actor, James Kennedy's, interview with *What's On*. Kennedy had played Mark in the 1996 premiere of the controversial *Shopping and Fucking* by Mark Ravenhill at the Royal Court, but in this interview he drew a parallel with Kavanagh (they were both artists from a farming background), and told Sam Marlowe that 'Coincidentally, it was a production of Kavanagh's *The Great Hunger* that first aroused [my] interest in physical theatre.'<sup>525</sup> Francis O'Connor's surreal set for Morrison's production made use of some familiar signifiers, around a large switchback green path which wound upstage. Visually the most obvious theatrical affinity in this production was with Théâtre de Complicité; known for their ensemble work and for their use of stylised acting, movement-based productions, music, and visual art, Complicité also devise new texts, but include reinterpretations of classic texts (see Figs. 3.15 and 3.16 for production shots of *Tarry Flynn*). In *Tarry Flynn*, Morrison made use of character doubling (the unusually large cast of 29 played multiple characters and animals with great energy and physicality), movement-

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<sup>525</sup> Sam Marlowe, 'Curtain Call', *What's On*, 19 August 1998.

led instead of speech-driven scenes and stylised devices to frame a classic text of rural Ireland, traditionally the site of naturalistic Irish theatre. Karen Ardoff (later to play in *Love in the Title*) played the role of May Callan, with Kathleen Barrington (who played Molly Brady in the 1966 production) as Maggie Finnegan, Pauline Flanagan as the ominously-titled though relatively more animate Mother, Don Wycherley as Eusebius, and James Kennedy in the title role of Tarry, to great critical and audience responses in Dublin. The production was so successful that, in February 1998, Morrison won The Irish Times/ESB Irish Theatre Award for Best Director for *Tarry Flynn*. In a feature on Morrison, *The Irish Times*'s Eileen Battersby, writing on Irish theatre's 'exciting rebirths' saw the international success of Conor McPherson and Martin McDonagh as 'being overshadowed by the triumphant rise of the director Conall Morrison,' touted as a possible replacement Artistic Director when Patrick Mason left the position (Morrison was associate Director at the Abbey) and endorsed by Rough Magic's artistic director, Lynne Parker, and by playwright Tom Murphy as 'the most exciting new force in Irish theatre.'<sup>526</sup>

This acclaim followed Morrison outside Dublin with his 'barnstorming',<sup>527</sup> 'barnyard epic'.<sup>528</sup> *Tarry* transferred to the Lyttelton from the Abbey for 13 performances from 19 August for two weeks while *The Colleen Bawn* played at the Abbey. The UK press reported that it was acclaimed and had garnered ecstatic reviews in Dublin: 'The vastly more substantial adaptation of Patrick Kavanagh's Irish novel which the Abbey Theatre, Dublin, has imported to the National in London for a brief but very welcome summer stay'.<sup>529</sup> While the actors (and James Kennedy in particular) were the subject of the usual various small features, Conall Morrison, 'bringing his dynamism to London', was the star of the show and two large features were written in *The Times* and *The Guardian*.<sup>530</sup> Morrison was described as 'probably the brightest talent in a very starry new wave of Irish theatre. The name, I know, doesn't yet trip off the

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<sup>526</sup>Eileen Battersby, 'An Actor's Director with the Necessary Fire and Passion', *The Irish Times*, 15 August 1998.

<sup>527</sup>Mic Moroney, 'Conall the Conqueror', *The Guardian*, 19 August 1998.

<sup>528</sup>Luke Clancy, 'Dublin's Mr Schizophrenia', *The Times*, 19 August 1998.

<sup>529</sup>Michael Billington, 'Whimsy in a Brief Summer Stay', *Guardian*, 21 August 1998.

<sup>530</sup>Luke Clancy, 'Dublin's Mr Schizophrenia', *The Times*, 19 August 1998.



tongue as easily as McDonagh or McPherson. But just you wait.'<sup>531</sup> Further references to McDonagh proliferated in observations of, for example; 'Tarry's acerbic sister, very like a Martin McDonagh character',<sup>532</sup> and in positive contrast: 'If the production is ingratiating at times, at least the piece is free of the cynicism and Post-modern knowingness in the plays, also set in the Irish past, of Martin McDonagh.'<sup>533</sup> Some comparisons were more auspicious than others: 'Irish theatre has up until recently been notoriously dialogue-driven, its actors as stiff in their movements as Irish dancers from the waist up. But the tide is turning, thanks to plays like Brian Friel's *Dancing at Lughnasa*, (the film version of which Bolger has choreographed) and, of course, the *Riverdance* phenomenon;<sup>534</sup> 'Almost as if the spirit of *Riverdance*, albeit muddier and rougher, had slipped in under the canvas.'<sup>535</sup>

Overall, *Tarry Flynn* was reviewed in the UK as both the next wave in movement-based Irish theatre emerging from theatrical paralysis, ('A tremendous re-assertion of old ensemble values. [It] teems with the kind of company vigour only seen these days on the South Bank in connection with musicals'<sup>536</sup>) and, to a lesser extent, as 'Oirish' 'blarney', trading on the good brand of Irish theatre, in which 'the blarneying quaintness is laid on a little too thickly.'<sup>537</sup> To the *Evening Standard* it was 'Morrison's acclaimed adaptation',<sup>538</sup> while in *The Express* it had elevated the status of the Abbey to 'glorious'.<sup>539</sup> *The Guardian* reported it as 'a rural-absurdist Theatre of the Image', which had been a 'huge box office last year on the notoriously difficult Abbey main stage, [...] typical of the high-blown energy and intelligence of Morrison's work. It's a busy, breathless, surprise-laden show with plenty of knowing, slapdash humour played by a cast big enough to

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<sup>531</sup> Mic Moroney, 'Conall the Conqueror', *The Guardian*, 19 August 1998.

<sup>532</sup> Michael Billington, 'Whimsy in a Brief Summer Stay', *Guardian*, 21 August 1998.

<sup>533</sup> Kate Kellaway, 'If You Were The Only Gull In The World, She'd Be Out Of Business', *The Observer*, 23 August 1998.

<sup>534</sup> Martin Doyle, 'Tarry Ho to the National', *The Irish Post*, 22 August 1998.

<sup>535</sup> Carole Woddis, 'Theatre', *The Herald*, 25 August 1998.

<sup>536</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>537</sup> Nick Curtis, 'Coming of a Celtic Age', *Evening Standard*, 21 August 1998.

<sup>538</sup> Nicholas De Jongh, 'Opening this Week', *Evening Standard*, 13 August 1998.

<sup>539</sup> Gilbert, Stephen W, *The Express*, 14 August 1998.



staff a small hospital.<sup>540</sup> Sheridan Morley of *The Spectator* called it the production of the year,<sup>541</sup> and compared it not to McDonagh, but to *Martin Guerre* (1996), a two-act musical by Claude-Michel Schönberg and Alain Boublil, based on one of the characters from *Les Misérables*. Both plays involve forgotten village communities and the importance of the land, but then again, so does most Irish theatre of the twentieth century. Nonetheless, the comparisons to *Martin Guerre* recurred, and, on the strength of the production's epic, ensemble-based qualities, Morrison and David Bolger, the production's highly celebrated choreographer, were invited to mount a production of *Martin Guerre* for Cameron Macintosh, which they took up the following autumn at the West Yorkshire Playhouse and subsequently took on tour. Morrison was, therefore, able to bring the current Abbey Theatre aesthetic to bear on a large-scale musical (with new songs and a refined narrative structure), for an international audience. Morrison deliberately brought out the 'collective psychosis' of a self-destructive, community, drawing on his experience of 'how ferocious the conflict between Protestants and Catholics can become.<sup>542</sup> *Martin Guerre* was another success, with critics favourably identifying similarities between it and *Tarry*.<sup>543</sup>

Overlapping with *Tarry Flynn* was Morrison's production, again with choreography by David Bolger, of Boucicault's 1860 melodrama *The Colleen Bawn*. As with *Tarry Flynn*, *The Colleen Bawn* had not been seen at the Abbey in a number of years (and never in English), despite being a reliable play at the box office. Hugh Hunt's 1967 revival of *The Shaughraun* had been both a critical and commercial success, and it had gone some way towards the renewal of Boucicault's reputation in Irish theatre, and in that same year there was an Irish language version of *The Colleen Bawn*, *An Cailín Bán* also staged at the Abbey and taken on a 'Gaeltacht' tour.

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<sup>540</sup> Mic Moroney, 'Conall the Conqueror', *The Guardian*, 19 August 1998. See also Paul Taylor, 'A tableau Vivant of the Irish Past', *Independent*, 24 August 1998, Jeremy Kingston, 'Rolling in the Emerald Aisles', *Times*, 24 August 1998.

<sup>541</sup> Sheridan Morley, 'Village People', *The Spectator*, 27 August 1998.

<sup>542</sup> Dominic Cavendish, 'Theatre: Third time of asking; Conall Morrison is Ireland's hottest young director. But can he turn *Martin Guerre* into a success?', *The Independent*, 25 November 1998.

<sup>543</sup> Cavendish, 25 November 1998.

The problem remained that the play had become, over time, something of an anachronistic piece of kitsch, and was difficult to produce in a conventional manner, especially for the Abbey Theatre, frequently under attack already from the press during this period for producing irrelevant, old plays. The solution was to embrace the now outdated practice of through-scoring: a live band sat upstage left, playing recognisable phrases of melodramatic music. In a contemporary context the scoring suggests a silent film of similar theme, (although it is from melodrama that silent film drew the practice), particularly when used in conjunction with the actors, in historical costume, frozen in tableaux at the beginning of each scene. Each tableau represented the crucial event of that upcoming action, and the accents and comical villainy were not downplayed. The result was a pastiche of sorts that retained the crowd-pleasing quality of the play, while representing it, affectionately, as a thing of the past but nonetheless something the Abbey valued as a part of its progress as a theatre. It successfully complemented Morrison's work on the sectarian violence of the Gary Mitchell *As the Beast Sleeps*. Morrison rehearsed the Mitchell play by day, while auditioning for *The Colleen Bawn* at night, an inadvertent metaphor for the complexity of contemporary Irish identity:

During the day it would be 'We hate them and they hate us' and incredible levels of sectarian abuse. And then in the evening it was all 'Eily, Eily sing for Ireland. Let the waters of the Shannon flow through you...' And I was just thinking, 'What in the name of God is going on?'<sup>544</sup>

Audiences were very receptive to Morrison, and to 'his big, ironic Abbey production of Boucicault's hoary old Irish chestnut'.<sup>545</sup>

The play ran at the Abbey during the summer at the Abbey, and then transferred to the Lyttleton stage on 18 March 1999. Previews started, perhaps fittingly, on St. Patrick's Day (and the play was recommended, at least in one tabloid, as a more high-brow way to celebrate Irishness on the day).<sup>546</sup> At that time

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<sup>544</sup> Luke Clancy, 'Dublin's Mr Schizophrenia', *The Times*, 19 August 1998.

<sup>545</sup> Mic Moroney, 'Conall the Conqueror', *The Guardian*, 19 August 1998.

<sup>546</sup> 'For those who wish to rise above the normal round of lunatic fiddle solos and insane stout-drinking [...] you can steep yourself in culture rather than Guinness at one of several Irish plays



Boucicault was rarely performed in London. At the beginning of the decade Howard Davies had mounted a production of *The Shaughraun*, but audiences had not seen *The Colleen Bawn* in even longer.<sup>547</sup> Reviews were affectionate, complimenting the self-referential nature of the play, and commending the warmth of this version.<sup>548</sup> (See Figs. 3.16 and 3.17 below).

Fortunately for *The Colleen Bawn*, the Abbey was not castigated for its choice of an allegedly old-fashioned play from the repertoire in the same way as it was for the production and tour of *The Well of the Saints*. While *The Colleen Bawn* was a 'neglected play'<sup>549</sup> rescued by the company, it was also sold to readers by some newspapers in populist terms, compared this time not to McDonagh and only once to *Riverdance*,<sup>550</sup> but to the comedy series *Father Ted*: 'If you like *Father Ted*, you will appreciate similar absurdities in this'.<sup>551</sup> Elizabeth Kuti, who played the Colleen Bawn, discussed the importance of the Abbey's being able to poke fun at its past, then went on to compare the play to *Father Ted*.<sup>552</sup> *The Daily Mail* thought it 'a spirited revival of a notorious 19<sup>th</sup>-century melodrama' in which Des Keogh (as Father Tom) has 'more than a passing resemblance to Father Ted';<sup>553</sup> and *The Daily Express* thought it an 'unashamed piece of rural Irish blarney. [...] Imagine one of those old silent movie melodramas and add a spot of *Father Ted*'.<sup>554</sup> Generally *The Colleen Bawn* was admired for its 'pleasurable preposterousness'.<sup>555</sup>

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on in the capital. The Colleen Bawn by Dion Boucicault is a tale of love and intrigue across the classes in 19<sup>th</sup> century Ireland. If that kind of blarney appeals, previews start on St Patrick's Day. Hyde, Marina, 'Stout of this World', *The Sun*, 12 March 1999.

<sup>547</sup>Michael Quinn, 'Fair Girl in the Fair City', *What's On*, 17 March 1999, see also Maddy Costa, 'Raise a Pint for St Patrick', *Evening Standard*, 17 March 1999.

<sup>548</sup>Nicholas De Jongh, 'Hot Tickets', *Evening Standard*, 11 March 1999.

<sup>549</sup>Michael Quinn, 'Fair Girl in the Fair City', *What's On*, 17 March 1999, see also Maddy Costa, 'Raise a Pint for St Patrick', *Evening Standard*, 17 March 1999.

<sup>550</sup>Janes Edwardes, 'The Colleen Bawn', *Timeout*, 23 March 1999.

<sup>551</sup>Michael Quinn, 'Fair Girl in the Fair City', *What's On*, 17 March 1999.

<sup>552</sup>Kuti also said that, because she is English, she was waiting for letters of complaint to *The Irish Times*. Michael Quinn, 'Fair Girl in the Fair City', *What's On*, 17 March 1999.

<sup>553</sup>Michael Coveney, 'At Last Night's First Night', *Daily Mail*, 19 March 1999.

<sup>554</sup>Robert Gore-Langton, 'Naked Passion with a Touch of the Old Blarney', *Daily Express*, 19 March 1999.

<sup>555</sup>David Benedict, 'The Right Sort of Melodrama', *The Independent*, 20 March 1999, see also Michael Billington, 'Marriage Can be Murder', *The Guardian*, 20 March 1999, John Gross, 'A Difficult Play Thrillingly Done', *Sunday Telegraph*, 21 March 1999 and Susannah Clapp, 'A Play with a Plot...Well, It Makes a Nice Change', *The Observer*, 21 March 1999.



Writing in *The Evening Standard*, Field Day founder and film star in his own right, Stephen Rea attempted a rehabilitation of the irregularly performed Boucicault, invoking the authority of 'this old woman' who had written to him after his role in *The Shaughraun* at the National to say: "This is what theatre was before the intellectuals got hold of it."<sup>556</sup> Rea went on to write about the vitality of the play, and about seeing the audience arriving after work looking tired and weary, but leaving 'completely transformed':

Boucicault is pure theatre. His plays may not be about the most important things in the world, although in some cases they are (there's a lot of quiet politics going on in the background – such as taking the tradition of the stage Irishman which defamed him as the stupidest man in the world, and subverting that by making the stage Irishman the smartest man on the stage), but everything in them is perfectly achieved. They are often called melodramas. I think they're better than that.<sup>557</sup>

What Rea's article reflects is how, in post-kitchen Irish drama, there is now an expectation to be entertained, as though theatre had gone from being entertainment (which it has to an extent) to being appropriated by 'intellectuals' determined to make it an unpleasant experience for the average person. In fact the opposite had recently happened; Irish theatre, for a long time regarded at a distance as serious and necessarily incomprehensible, had been elevated to entertainment status by the commercial success of Friel and McDonagh.

### **Conclusion: Reinventions and renewals**

It is easy in one sense to view the international tours during this period as thematic; aside from the driving impulses behind the texts themselves, the tours and the cities visited appear retrospectively to reflect a 'master plan', which Mason identifies more as planned happenstance; the connections of individuals seeking to revive a theatrical network.

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<sup>556</sup> Stephen Rea, 'Stephen Rea on The Colleen Bawn', *Evening Standard*, 11 March 1999.

<sup>557</sup> Stephen Rea, 11 March 1999.

The relationships between individuals precipitated the many tours that took place, where directors such as Brian McMaster at EIF and Trevor Nunn at the National Theatre in London were keen to remake connections with the Abbey Theatre that had fallen away in the intervening years. In these relationship-led arrangements, Mason was generally not given directive invitations (such as 1976 and 1985, where the Abbey's guarantees upon which they were very dependent, were based on specific play requests). Instead Mason was, as he recalls, usually asked 'What have you got?' The value of this confidence led to the Abbey bringing international audiences a range of plays that, far from showcasing their museum piece theatre, showed the Abbey as it reflected a rapidly changing Ireland.

These considerations of the Abbey's production and touring of the plays in this chapter, as well as their subsequent reception, demonstrate that Patrick Mason's approach to the National Theatre's programming (and, consequently, what toured) at that time was driven by social and political intent; drawing upon the repertoire of plays available to the Abbey to not just pay homage and follow precedent, but to reanimate the material, supporting or commissioning complementary plays that reflected the changing social and economic circumstances in Ireland at the time. It is therefore argued that 1994 to 2000 was one of the Abbey's most overtly political periods as an international theatre, and also one of its most commercially successful.

When Patrick Mason's six years as Artistic Director ended, there was a new generation of writers and actors in place, the Abbey had cleared its deficit which exceeded IRE500,000, even making a surplus of approximately IRE133,000. In a retrospective interview in 2001, ahead of his Edinburgh production of *Too Late for Logic* by Tom Murphy at the King's Theatre, Mason cited these figures, adding; 'I like to tell business people that, to prove that theatre folk are not entirely useless'.<sup>558</sup> Mason's unprecedented commercial success previously with Brian Friel's *Dancing at Lughnasa* (which followed from a great deal of critical appreciation for plays such as *The Great Hunger*), allowed for calculated risks

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<sup>558</sup> Jackie McGlone, 'Festival Theatre', Scotland on Sunday, 12 August 2001.

such as the revival of *The Well of the Saints*, during a period when Synge's profile was being raised by Druid theatre company in Galway, taking from the Abbey the cultural capital of being associated with Synge. Druid would not in fact produce their version of *Well* until 2004, but their frequent productions of *The Playboy of the Western World* were toured internationally throughout the 1980s to great acclaim. *Well of the Saints* was deemed dated and irrelevant by Irish critics who failed to foresee the surge in popularity for the writer who, Hynes and Mason showed, was as relevant as ever in late-twentieth-century Ireland. Bypassing the Irish critics' disdain and bringing the play to an international audience, awards and an extended tour, was hardly a first for Mason, nor was the ongoing truculence of Irish critics to concede it had not been an aesthetic mistake. Internationally, however, Mason was highly esteemed.

Mason's hastened revival of *Observe the Sons of Ulster Marching Towards the Somme* allowed the Abbey to participate in a moment of international commemoration, where the peace process in Northern Ireland could be related to the participation of Loyalist Unionist soldiers in the First World War and the commemoration of the end of the Second World War. Not an overtly political decision, the pattern of the play's tour venues simply fell into place based on Mason's active interest in reviving the Abbey's connection with European audiences.<sup>559</sup> Coincidentally, the tour then became a document of the changing peace process. With each development, positive and negative, the play took on a different significance in each town visited, and so the historical, commemorative aspect of the tour dovetailed with a fortuitous demonstration of the consolatory ability of theatre to interpret and engage with contemporary events. It was the success of *Observe the Sons* and the developing discourse on the role of Irish soldiers in past conflicts despite Ireland's politically neutral stance that created an audience for McGuinness's *Dolly West's Kitchen*. The positive reactions in the UK press to the transfer of *Dolly West's Kitchen* reflect perhaps an anxiety on the part of various writers to be the first to discover McGuinness's next hit, and an openness in general to plays that furthered a discussion of what had been closed subjects.

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<sup>559</sup> Interview with Patrick Mason, August 2010.



As concepts of Irishness evolved very dramatically over a very short period of significant economic growth and the decline of the Catholic Church as a monolithic power amid revelations of abuse, the Abbey Theatre made pointed decisions in the plays it chose to present internationally to reflect those changes. In *Portia Coughlan* the concept of the Irish family is oppressive and deranged, and suicide is presented as the only viable option for the title character. Ireland's national theatre staged for international audiences a country coming to terms with the destructive influence of secrets kept at all costs, but they were not exclusively inward-looking. Thomas Kilroy's *The Secret Fall of Constance Wilde* was commissioned with the Wilde centenary in mind, and played to an international audience au fait with the Oscar Wilde of hybrid nationality. It was in one sense a characteristically Irish play, dealing as many others did at the time with the destabilisation of the traditional family unit, and uncovering destructive secrets sustained by social mores now rejected by a knowing audience. It also bore more resemblance to the theatrical aspirations and experimentation of Yeats than the more successful *Dancing at Lughnasa*, though this was largely overlooked. Kilroy however, did not write the play for an Irish audience in an Irish context (the use of puppetry, music and the emphasis on physical gesture meant that the play was more comprehensible to a non-English-speaking audience). Nonetheless its lack of success was, I would argue, a result of its having been judged in terms of a national theatrical aesthetic: that is, the rejection by critics and audience members (cited in reviews) of the 'lack of warmth' in the characters shows an expectation of the National Theatre to deliver likeable Irish characters. The objection to the use of puppetry, particularly in the British press, was not a hostility to the use of such devices in theatre in general (where such use is rarely deemed 'pretentious'), but derived from a position where puppetry, much like the physical and non-verbal methods in *The Great Hunger*, has no place in cordially lyrical Irish theatre. Representing a negative view of the tyranny of middle class morality succeeded when smuggled under the old-fashioned guise of the cheerful *Love in the Title*, which deftly mixed whimsical dialogue and a pastoral setting to allude to Ireland's recent rejection of children born outside of marriage and the inhumane treatment of those who gave birth to them.

Chapter 3 images:



Fig. 3.1 Poster for the McCann-Dowling version of *Faith Healer* at the Abbey in 1980.





Fig. 3.2 *The Well of the Saints* at the Abbey Theatre: Pat Leavy and Derry Power as Mary and Martin Doul, and Stuart Graham as the Saint.



Fig. 3.3 *The Well of the Saints*: Pat Laffan as Timmy the blacksmith, Derbhle Crotty as Molly Byrne and Bríd Ní Neachtain as Bride.





Fig. 3.4 *Observe the Sons of Ulster Marching Towards the Somme*, Abbey Theatre, 1994.



Fig. 3.5 *Dolly West's Kitchen* at the Abbey Theatre, 1999.

The Abbey Theatre Dublin production of

# DOLLY WEST'S KITCHEN

A new play by

FRANK McGUINNESS

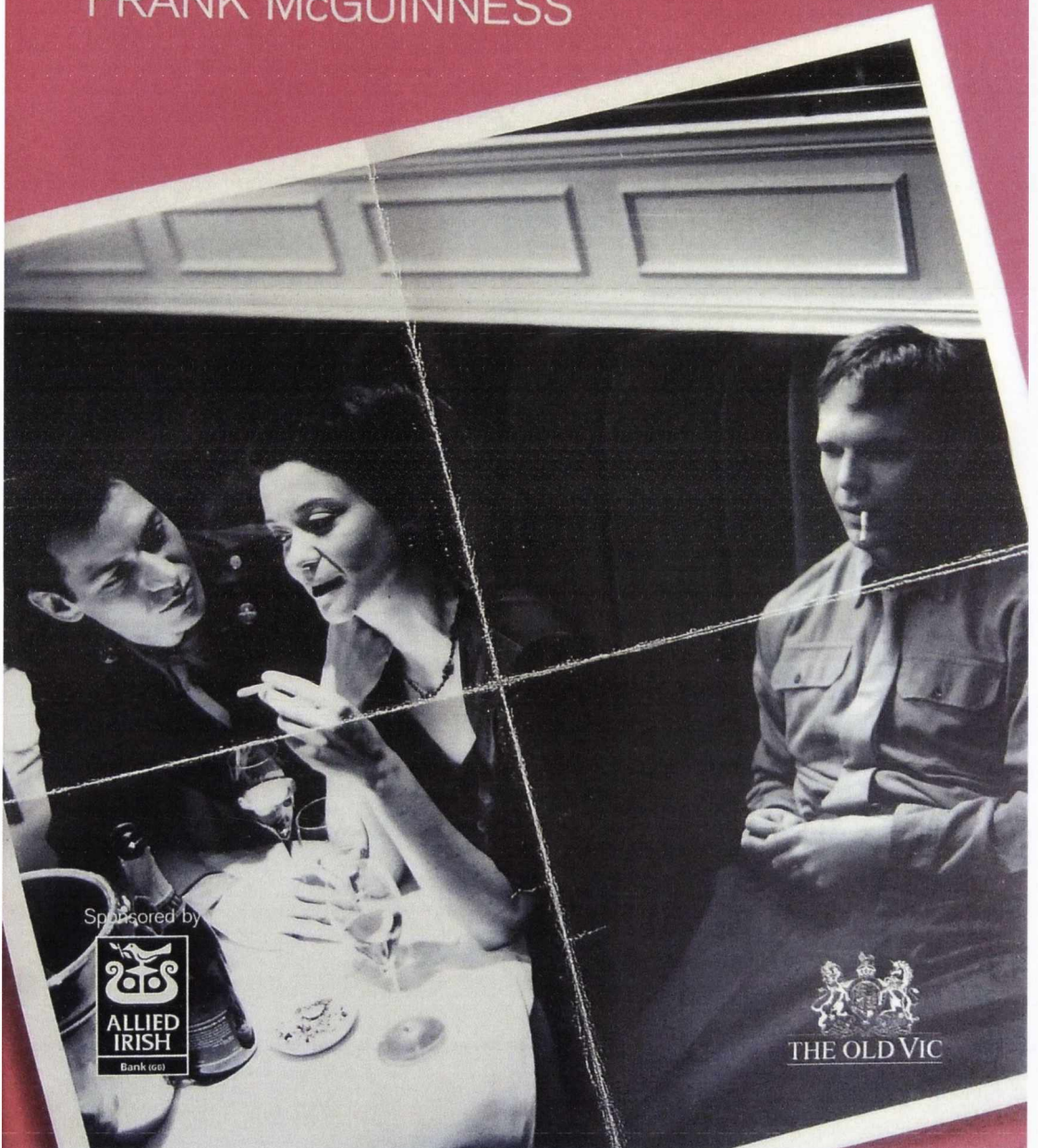


Fig. 3.6 Programme for *Dolly West's Kitchen* at The Old Vic, London, 2000.



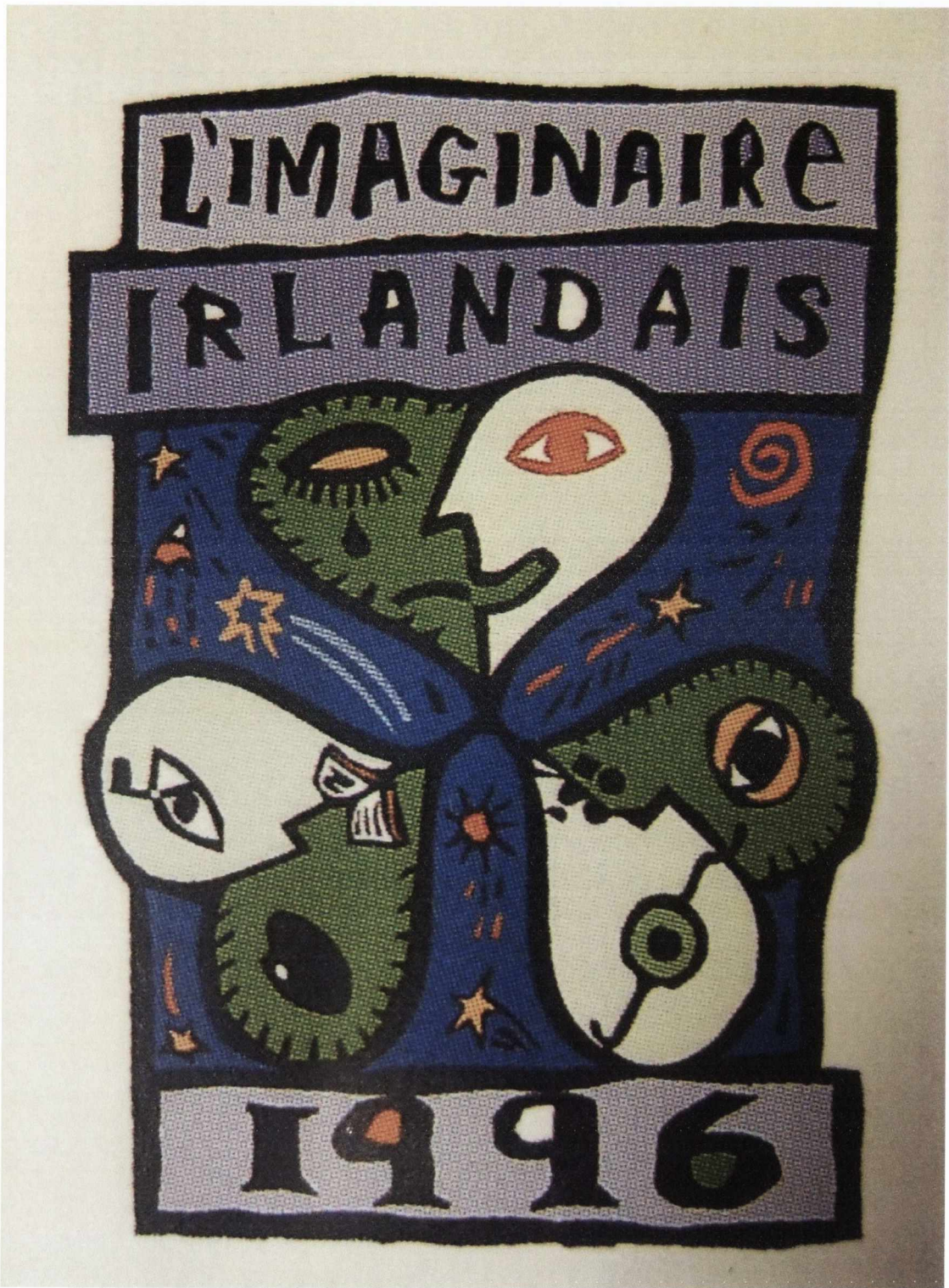


Fig. 3.7 Poster for *l'imaginaire irlandais* festival, France, 1996.





Fig. 3.8 Derbhle Crotty in *Portia Coughlan* at the Peacock Theatre, 1996.



Fig. 3.9 Bronagh Gallagher as Stacia, and Marion O'Dwyer as Maggie May Doorley in *Portia Coughlan*, 1996, at the Peacock.



Fig. 3.10 Jane Brennan as Constance in *The Secret Fall of Constance Wilde* during the titular scene, held aloft by the Attendant figures. Abbey Theatre 1997.



Fig. 3.11 Robert O'Mahoney as Oscar Wilde confronting the judge in *The Secret Fall of Constance Wilde*.



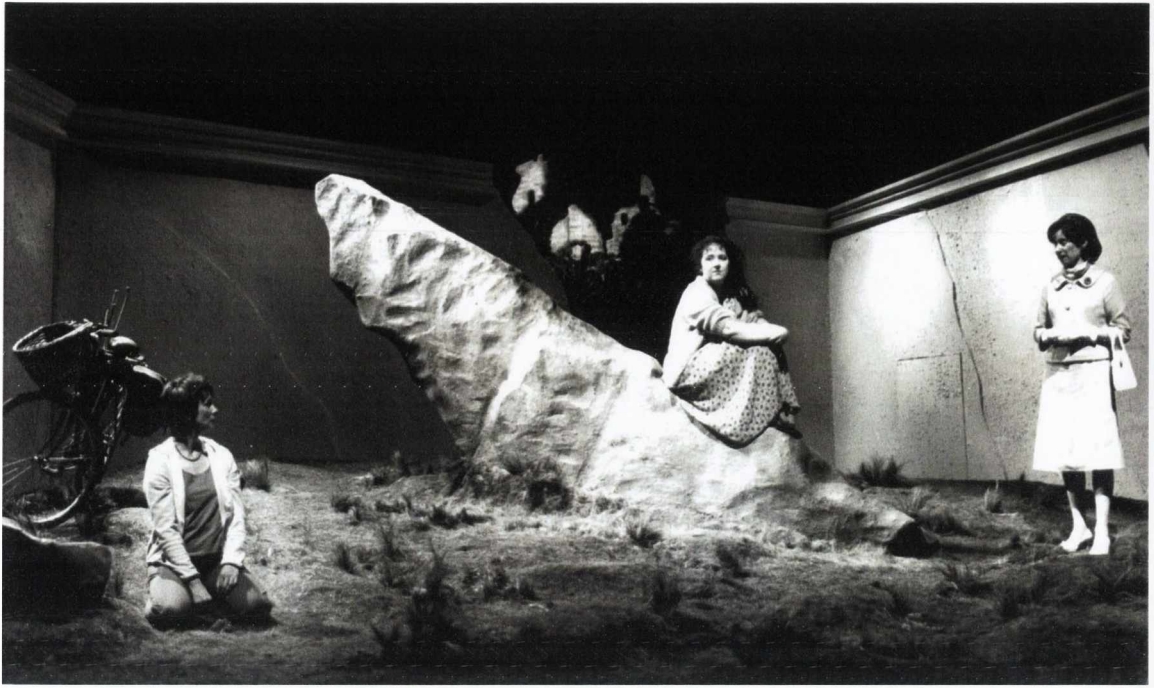


Fig. 3.12 The three Kates: Ingrid Craigie as Kate, Karen Ardiffe as Cat, and Catherine Walsh as Triona in *Love in the Title* at the Abbey Theatre, 1999.

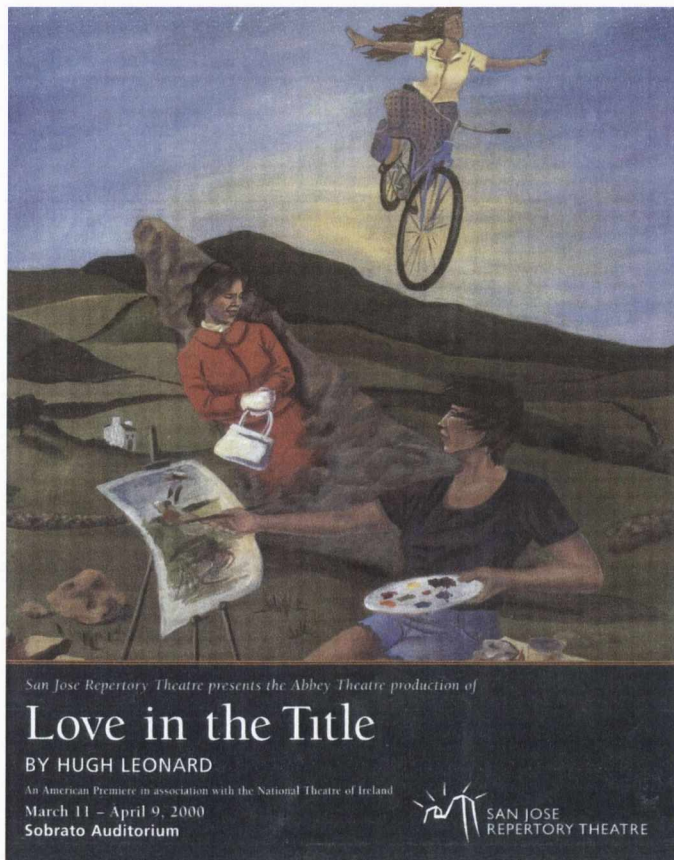


Fig. 3.13 Programme for San Jose Repertory Theatre transfer of *Love in the Title*, 2000.



# Glossary of Relevant Historical Facts

**The Black and Tans:** Mercenary soldiers, most directly from the trenches of WWI, hired by the English to serve as a police force protecting England's interests in Ireland. Named for their mismatched uniforms during the War of Independence (1919-1921).

**The Eucharistic Congress of 1932:** The Pope sent a 'papal legate', his ambassador, to Ireland to represent him as the leader of the Church in a show of faith and loyalty to Roman Catholicism. The occasion marked 1500 years since St. Patrick brought the concept of Christianity to Ireland (in 432)

**A.S.M. Hutchinson (1879-1971):** Wrote a popular novel titled "If Winter Comes," published in Ireland in 1920; in 1948, MGM made it into a film with actors Walter Pidgeon, Janet Leigh and Deborah Kerr.

**O'Connell Bridge:** Named after Daniel O'Connell, a politician who was at the center of the fight for Catholic Emancipation from English interference in the early 1800s and in 1829 obtained the right for Catholic men to hold office.

**Michael Collins (1890-1922):** Born in Ireland in 1890, Collins worked in London, where he became a leader in the London branch of the Irish Republican Brotherhood. In 1915 he returned home to help fight for home rule; he fought in the Easter Rising of 1916, was imprisoned after the doomed rebellion resulted in the execution of more than a dozen republican leaders. By 1917 he achieved positions of power in Sinn Feinn and the IRB, the political and militaristic arms of the rebels. Collins signed a treaty for the new republic, believing it had imperfect terms—including giving up the six Northern Counties. Collins led pro-treaty forces in the Civil War that broke out in response to the treaty. Collins was murdered in 1922 while pursuing an end to civil strife. Mystery surrounds his death, but certainly he gave his life to the cause of a free Ireland.

**Arthur Griffith:** Founder-editor of the separatist paper *The United Irishman*, he joined with members of the Gaelic League and a womens' group, *Daughter of Erin*, to found the group called Sinn Fein in 1908. A conservative republican, he sought peace through ratification of the Treaty rather than continued war.

**Paddy Kavanagh (1904-1967):** This poet is commemorated by a bronze statue seated on a bench along the bank of the Grand Canal in Dublin, as he wished in his poem, *Canal Bank Walk*. *Love in the Title's* Triona and her husband recited this poem to each other in their courtship days.

**Fionn MacComhail/Finn Mac Cool:** One of the towering heroes of Irish legend, among whose exploits are attributed the creation, often during battle or adventure, of Giants' Causeway, the Irish Isle of Man, and the legendary Fingal's Cave.

**John Francis McCormack (1884-1945):** McCormack has been called one of the greatest singers of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. A *bel canto* tenor, he enjoyed immense success, both in popularity and financial terms, as a performer in opera, concert stages and with recording sales.

**Standing Stone:** One of several rock formations placed by pre-Christian nomadic tribes; possibly marking grave sites, they are arranged either as single poles or in groupings which may be in a line or circle, possibly oriented according to the seasons, or positions of the sun, moon and stars.

**Queenstown:** Now Cobh, a small town on the seaside of County Cork. From 1900 it was the first and last European stopping point for the big transatlantic liners (including *The Titanic*).

Fig. 3.14 The glossary from the San Jose programme for *Love in the Title*, 2000.

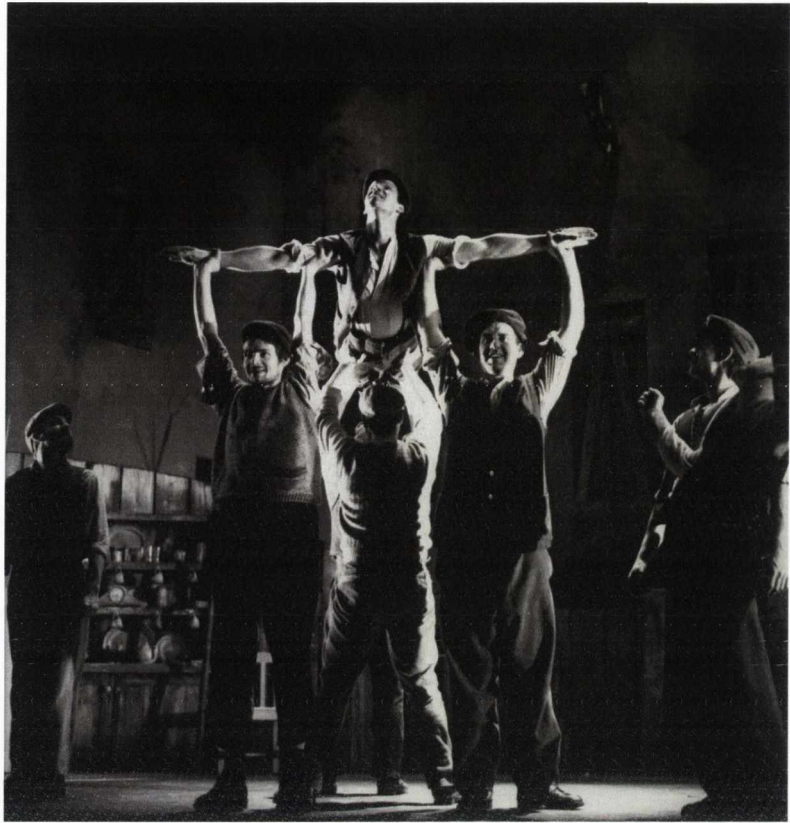


Fig. 3.15 James Kennedy (held aloft) in *Tarry Flynn* at the Abbey, 1997.

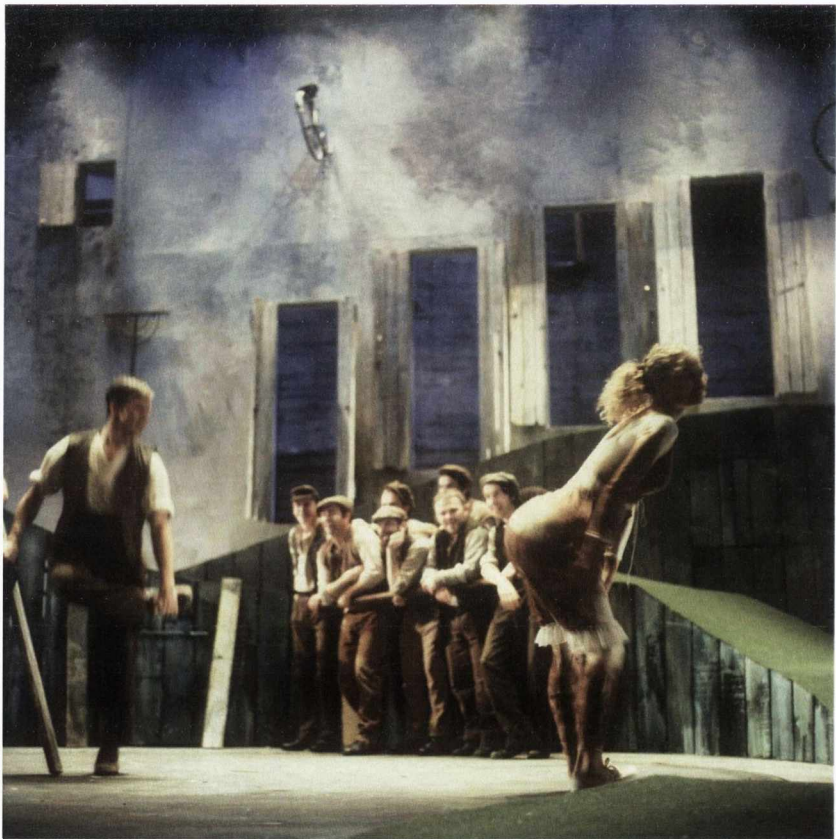


Fig. 3.16 *Tarry Flynn* at the Abbey Theatre, 1997.



Fig. 3.17 Elizabeth Kuti as Eily O'Conner in *The Colleen Bawn* at the Abbey Theatre, 1998.



Fig. 3.18 The cast of *The Colleen Bawn*, 1998.



Although modern theatrical devices were treated with suspicion by theatre critics and often consequently audiences, the Abbey nonetheless pursued a contemporary interpretation of Irish identity and politics on stage, and in Conall Morrison's interpretation of *Tarry Flynn* and *The Colleen Bawn*, they also presented a contemporary interpretation of Irish theatre. When Druid Theatre Company won numerous awards and toured internationally with the *Leenane Trilogy* of Martin McDonagh, they extended the debate of McDonagh's authenticity as an Irish writer, whether his deliberately anachronistic, pastiche texts were in fact postmodern or merely derivative, a topic much debated. Rather than entering the debate by denouncing or (ever) producing a McDonagh play, the Abbey's adaptation of an anti-pastoral text by Patrick Kavanagh was produced in such a way as to point to contemporary French theatre while also reminding audiences of the 1980s anti-pastoral, postmodern and controversial *The Great Hunger*. Shortly after, the theatre revived the controversial figure of Dion Boucicault to perform his *Colleen Bawn*, (a reliable box office play on the one hand, but arguably the quintessential anti-Abbey play on the other), in a knowing, explicitly postmodern manner.

## Chapter Four:

### The Centenary Approaches: 2000-2003

Tours and transfers during this period:

*Barbaric Comedies* (co-production, Edinburgh 2000); *The Secret Fall of Constance Wilde* (UK, 2000); *Dolly West's Kitchen* (UK, 2000); *Love in the Title* (US, 2000; Singapore, 2001); *Translations* (US, Spain, France, Germany, Czech Republic, Hungary, 2001-2); *Medea* (UK, 2001, US, 2002; France, 2005), *Hinterland* (co-production, UK 2002); *Eden* (UK, 2002).<sup>560</sup>

#### **Introduction: Performing Celtic Tiger Ireland on international stages**

This chapter considers how the Abbey Theatre internalised the recent global success of Irish theatre to negotiate cultural identity during an unprecedented change in the country's fortunes. The commercial hits of Friel, McDonagh, McColgan, Jones and McPherson from the mid-1990s and into the 2000s had reset the tone for Irish theatre and performance on international stages, while in Ireland the economy had entered into an unprecedented period of wealth and poorly-regulated lending. The Ireland represented by the national theatre was now profoundly rebranded in terms of politics (in relation to the Northern peace process, if not domestically), sex, popular culture and attitudes to religion. The challenge for the Abbey was to accommodate Ireland's powerful new global reputation in offering their newly-acquired or newly-openminded audiences the best of the repertoire and of new writing within the new national paradigm of success.

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<sup>560</sup> *The Secret Fall of Constance Wilde* also features in this list as there is an overlap between this period and the last, due to projects established by the outgoing Artistic Director being continued by the replacement AD.

Looking at the plays toured to non-Irish audiences in this period offers an insight into how the Abbey attempted to reconcile the rhetoric of spiritual, political and economic poverty in the repertoire with the country's newfound reputation for dynamic, popular theatre. In fact one of the biggest challenges was not to represent modern Ireland on stage literally but to follow the lead set by McPherson and McDonagh in representing young, vibrant writers and their interpretation of the past through the prism of the country's newest manifestations of Irishness. That is, it was now acceptable for an Irish theatre to stage that most clichéd of sets, an early-twentieth-century farm kitchen, just so long as the accompanying narrative of the performance included a young writer, ideally in the case of McDonagh, with a publicised rock'n'roll lifestyle. The Abbey tours in this period included five new plays and two contemporary translations of older texts. However the tours under consideration here (*Barbaric Comedies*, *Hinterland* and *Medea*) disclose a difficulty the theatre had in matters of questioning Irish identity either through the past, or especially in a contemporary setting. What a survey of each play, its performance and critical context, shows is how the Abbey struggled to avoid what Homi K. Bhabha calls 'recalling the past as social cause or aesthetic precedent', where art should rather 'renew the past' and refigure it.<sup>561</sup>

Ben Barnes took over as Artistic Director from Patrick Mason in January 2000, after a period in which the theatre's commercial and artistic success was often dogged by criticism from a highly critical and often belligerent Irish media. The most common accusation levelled against Mason at the time was that he was 'lofty'.<sup>562</sup> Barnes, on the contrary, generally had a more accessible public persona. If Mason's time as AD was characterised by commercial and critical success and the renewal of international connections, Barnes's time saw the Abbey try to capitalise on those connections and to recast the Abbey as a site of the best of European theatre, moving away from its traditional rural associations. It was that driving impulse to reshape the Abbey's vision of itself through co-productions, expensive projects and the debate over moving to a new

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<sup>561</sup> Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, (London, New York: Routledge, 1994), p. 10.

<sup>562</sup> In, for example, Victoria White, 'Patrick's Days', *The Irish Times*, 5 January, 2000.



building in time for the centenary that caused more sustained and heated mainstream discussion around the Abbey and national self-representation than the immediately preceding years. This chapter will include an analysis of Barnes's tenure as AD overall, while the next chapter is given to separately analysing the centenary programme.

The former Gaiety theatre director, founder of Opera Theatre Company and the independent theatre company Groundwork, Ben Barnes had had some success in bringing the plays of John B. Keane to the Abbey and the Gate, as well as admired productions of O'Casey. Among his Abbey Theatre projects, he had toured with *Endgame* to Greece in 1985 and then with *The Field* to Russia in 1988. Bringing Keane's work to mainstream theatre from amateur stages was a contributing factor to Barnes's reputation as a lightweight director catering to middlebrow audiences, but before becoming the Abbey's AD, this was not a problem raised in the press. It was after all Barnes who had directed John Banville's adaptation of Kleist's *The Broken Jug* in 1994 in the Peacock, prompting Irish critics to argue it better deserved the mainstage than Mason's *Well of the Saints*.

Barnes was Artistic Director from 2000 to 2005. He resigned after mounting pressure from the board following several controversies that sprang from the centenary programme in 2004. In 2008 Barnes published his diaries from the period: *Plays and Controversies: Abbey Theatre Diaries 2000 – 2005*.<sup>563</sup> This memoir of Barnes, a necessarily subjective attempt to make known his side of the story, offers considerably more information into this period than we might otherwise have had access to, and it sheds some light on the intentions behind the international projects of the Abbey from 2000-2005.

The Abbey's presence on international stages under Barnes included several of Mason's continuing projects (*Constance Wilde*, *Dolly West*, and *Love in the Title*), a US and European tour of Friel's *Translations*, a UK and US transfer of *Medea*, two co-productions, one of which Barnes had also inherited from Mason in its developing stage, and the international touring season of the Abbey during its

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<sup>563</sup> Ben Barnes, *Plays and Controversies*, (Dublin: Carysfort Press, 2008). The memoir is named after WB Yeats's 1924 book.

centenary celebrations. What the tours, transfer and co-productions in this period display is a theatre in good reputational health and apparent financial stability, attempting in its international projects to capitalise upon the recent critical and commercial successes in order to cast the Abbey as a major international, large-scale theatrical institution on a par with the Czech or Russian national theatres, with a new building to match.

Many Irish-based projects for the Abbey during this period show an attempt to get to grips with a rapidly changing Ireland, one that had become wealthy and in which a fixation with new buildings was not limited to the Abbey's AD. Marina Carr's *Ariel* (2002) staged a Haughey-like figure that Sebastian Barry also tried to make sense of in *Hinterland* (a co-production with the British National Theatre). Elsewhere, Carr's confrontational *On Raftery's Hill* (2000) (commissioned by Druid) addressed child abuse, while other Irish playwrights such as Mark O'Rowe and Eugene O'Brien looked to the monologue format in representing contemporary Ireland.

In its international exchanges, the Abbey was, under Barnes, touring with the well-known (and very well-received) *Translations* (1980) by Brian Friel and later *Plough and the Stars* by Sean O'Casey, but in versions that demonstrated large, expensive sets that were designed to point up faded imperial grandeur. In *Barbaric Comedies* and *Hinterland*, Barnes defended two co-productions that caused outrage among audience and critics. *Barbaric Comedies* was notorious for its blasphemous, violent and overtly sexual content that took place over a gruelling four hours, in an Edinburgh Festival that was simultaneously fielding criticism for elitist follies in the programming. *Hinterland*, though a co-production, caused outrage only in Ireland, and a bemused response in the UK from critics and audience members for whom the figure of Charles Haughey was practically meaningless. It was in the Deborah Warner and Fiona Shaw production of *Medea* that the Abbey most effectively showed international audiences something of the psyche of contemporary Ireland, but as the archives show, the effectiveness of the production, its critical and commercial success, were detached from the Abbey.



On becoming AD in 2000, Ben Barnes was described by Victoria White and Kitty Holland in *The Irish Times* as 'conservative', and as a 'safe pair of hands' for the Abbey role.<sup>564</sup> The theatre Patrick Mason was leaving behind was, according to White, 'not in crisis, but short of new writing.'<sup>565</sup> Reviewing the legacy of his six years as director, White criticised Mason's tone in official publications as being too elevated, and therefore likely to alienate the average Irish person. Nonetheless, White conceded, Mason was handing over the theatre in 'better shape than ever'. Mason had improved the AD's relationship with the board, increased the number of shareholders and reorganised the managerial structure, giving greater internal stability. He had established the Outreach department in 1995, and had an archivist appointed in 1996. In 1995 the theatre had reported an accumulated deficit of £304,000 and an accumulated deficit on capital expenditure of £336,000, but by 2000 the theatre had broken even.<sup>566</sup>

When Barnes became AD, it was after a number of years of significant international success for Irish theatre. Plays like Friel's *Dancing at Lughnasa*, McDonagh's *The Leenane Trilogy*, and Sebastian Barry's *The Steward of Christendom* fed into the subsequent popularity of new Irish writing in London. This posed a problem for the Abbey: if all the young, popular playwrights were debuting in London, then the Abbey was left with what was considered old-fashioned and irrelevant.<sup>567</sup> As Patrick Mason has said, the unprecedented success of *Lughnasa* on Broadway was undoubtedly a good thing: lifting the Abbey from financial shortfall to international acclaim and commercial success. However it was also to be a gilded cage for the Abbey: both for the follow-up production of Friel's *Wonderful Tennessee*, which failed to replicate *Lughnasa* for an expectant Broadway audience, and also for Irish theatre thereafter. The success of *Lughnasa*, Marie Jones's *Stones in His Pockets* and *The Leenane Trilogy* drew attention to Irish theatre globally, but also established the precedent that Irish theatre should be a bankable commodity. Formerly it was enough for a play to earn good reviews and decent box office receipts, now an expectation had

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<sup>564</sup> Victoria White, 'A New Stage for the Abbey', *The Irish Times*, 17 February 2000 and Kitty Holland, 'Saturday Profile: Ben Barnes', *The Irish Times*, 31 July 1999.

<sup>565</sup> Victoria White, 'Patrick's Days', *The Irish Times*, 5 January 2000.

<sup>566</sup> Victoria White, 'Patrick's Days', *The Irish Times*, 5 January 2000.

<sup>567</sup> See also Fintan O'Toole, 'Irish Plays And English Audiences', *The Irish Times*, 29 May 1996.



been put in place that a new Irish play would be exciting, pack houses, earn money, win international awards and transfer to the West End and Broadway. As such it was easy to see anything that failed to transfer to the West End as failing to live up to the potential of McDonagh, Jones or Friel. A survey of the feedback for the plays under consideration in the form of newspaper and radio reviews, interviews and the recollections of those involved demonstrates that tension, with each production held up for comparison with those recent successes. The Abbey's anxiety of influence discussed in the opening chapters, was finally supplanted, however; instead of failing to live up to the promise of *Playboy*, the Abbey now failed to live up to another set of inadvertently tyrannical rural Irish characters.

While there was now also an international audience newly receptive to brand new Irish plays, on the other hand, Irish writers relied less and less on the Abbey as a launching pad to international success, if they ever had to begin with. For example, Conor McPherson's *This Lime-Tree Bower* was submitted to the Abbey, and meetings were held, but ultimately it was rejected.<sup>568</sup> It was instead staged in co-production with *Fly-By Night/Iomhá Ildánach*, leading to McPherson's writing for the Royal Court theatre in London. By 2000 his very successful *The Weir* (1997) was concluding its three-year run, and on the day that Barnes gave his first public interview as AD, McPherson's *Dublin Carol* (2000) was opening at the Royal Court. If the Abbey wanted a hit, then McPherson's work was a missed opportunity. It is important to note that the point of the Abbey Theatre is not to be a commercial success.<sup>569</sup> Nonetheless, as McPherson's writing achieved a middlebrow appeal, it appeared that the Abbey were missing out on relevant new Irish writing. The popularity of Irish theatre in London and New York posed another problem for the Abbey on tour. If the theatre were to represent the nation on stage, its authority to do so was diminished when undercut by popular young writers. This was further exacerbated by decisions to market the Abbey as an elite European-opera-house style theatre, which condemned the theatre to

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<sup>568</sup> Victoria White, 'Patrick's Days', *The Irish Times*, 5 January 2000.

<sup>569</sup> However the Abbey is not above staging strategic productions of popular writers. When McPherson's *The Seafarer* (2006, also originating in London) featured on the Abbey mainstage in April 2008, the success led to its being revived the following year, where it dominated the Abbey's Christmas season.

the status of elitist and irrelevant at a time when it should have been engaging with the increased international interest in Irish theatre.

In his first press interview as new Artistic Director, Barnes asserted his credentials, citing a non-naturalist production of Keane's *Sharon's Grave* at the Gate Theatre, his 1998 production of *Juno and the Paycock* at the Abbey, his having directed 20 premieres of new Irish plays, 28 from the repertoire, and his work on the plays of Pinter and Stoppard. Barnes dismissed the idea of fulfilling a 'notional quota' of new Irish work, encouraging instead, he argued, new plays, wherever they may be from, in order to attract more people to the theatre.<sup>570</sup> Barnes wanted to engage theatre that would comment on the state of the nation at the beginning of the new century. He told Victoria White that he was talking to Thomas Kilroy about an adaptation of Wedekind's *Spring Awakening* set in the Ireland of Kilroy's youth and refracted 'through what we know now of those times'. Barnes did, on the other hand, work to promote new Irish theatre in his encouragement of smaller companies by establishing the Peacock Partnership, in which the Abbey Theatre resources would be made available to Irish companies for a season, to develop co-productions and develop the theatre network in Ireland, or at the very least to connect the Abbey to the rest of the country.<sup>571</sup>

This move left the risk-taking of producing new writing to these smaller companies, and the fruits of this project remained in Ireland while Barnes began talks with European theatres to develop production exchanges and co-productions of a notably European character. He signalled his intention to put new British, American and continental work on the Peacock stage, as well as classic plays, planning, for instance, to work with Conall Morrison on producing Shakespeare in Irish.<sup>572</sup> He dismantled the resident director scheme, signing up instead a large number of prestigious 'associate' directors, such as Garry Hynes

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<sup>570</sup> Victoria White, 'A New Stage for the Abbey', *The Irish Times*, 17 February 2000. This assertion is significant because a later criticism of Barnes's tenure as AD, and in particular when the centenary programme was announced, was the lack of new Irish writing promoted by him.

<sup>571</sup> Attempting to engage with the remit of the theatre as 'national', Barnes wrote that it was important to build links with the freelance community, casting the national theatre as an 'amalgamation of the best writing, directing, designing and acting talent available in the country.' Ben Barnes, *Plays and Controversies*, p. 11.

<sup>572</sup> Victoria White, 'A New Stage for the Abbey', *The Irish Times*, 17 February 2000.



and Deborah Warner. Wanting to take advantage of the extra disposable income in Ireland at the time, Barnes indicated that he was considering raising ticket prices at the weekend.<sup>573</sup>

Barnes was active in developing contacts as soon as he took up the post as Artistic Director, but made it known that he felt that the Abbey had become 'overly obsessed with recognition and success in London,' not because the Abbey needed to refocus on national networks, but because he saw a need to develop relationships with European theatres and said in a radio interview the Abbey had become too 'Anglo-centric'.<sup>574</sup> The Abbey, he argued, should be focussing instead on developing:

Production exchange between ourselves and theatres of commensurate scale and status in other parts of Europe; that we commit to producing contemporary European drama in English translation at our studio theatre (The Peacock) and that on our mainstage we perform the canonical works of the European theatre in new versions and adaptations by leading Irish writers, [...], and which can be more easily accessed by our audiences.<sup>575</sup>

Barnes was therefore interested in the international profile of the Abbey, but wanted to look to Europe to engage more with that theatrical network: to develop connections such as those between the Royal Court in London and the Schaubühne am Lehniner Platz theatre in Berlin, to highlight shared origins and to draw on the Abbey's reputation. Retrospectively he wrote of his 'determination to bring the Abbey to Europe and Europe to the Abbey.'<sup>576</sup> His memoirs detail how, in the first few months as AD, Barnes travelled extensively around Europe meeting with theatre directors to try to establish an ambitious programme of European exchange. He found support, though it was rarely the much-needed financial kind. Barnes had hoped that the development of an 'active European policy' as he termed it, would result in a European season of

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<sup>573</sup> Ibid.

<sup>574</sup> Ben Barnes, *Plays and Controversies*, p. 15.

<sup>575</sup> Ibid, p. 16.

<sup>576</sup> Ibid, p. 31.



visiting companies as part of the 2004 centenary programme to complement the translations and adaptations of European texts by Irish writers. This included meeting with the director of the National Theatre of Catalunya to discuss the possibility of an Irish play by an Irish director being presented there in Spanish translation.<sup>577</sup>

In addition Barnes made forays to the US, trying to maintain connections, for example with the San José Repertory Theatre, while working to capitalise on new funding opportunities in the US.<sup>578</sup> Barnes was also behind the mounting, in Dublin, of the retrospective of six plays of Tom Murphy's *2001: A Whistle in the Dark*, *The Morning after Optimism*, *The Sanctuary Lamp*, *Bailegangaire*, and the production of *The Gigli Concert* with Owen Roe and Mark Lambert that was later to be revived to tour as part of the centenary programme.

These various projects, while not concerned with new Irish writing, seem grounded in an attempt to cast the Abbey as something of an upscale venue offering prestige events (a move that would go some way toward justifying an increase in ticket prices) including two contributions to the Wilde centenary, and as such a draw for cultural tourists. In March 2000 Barnes visited Stephen Joyce to attempt to secure the rights for a 2004 of *Ulysses* adaptation (the centenary of the date on which the book is set) at the Abbey. Barnes wanted Tom Stoppard to adapt *Ulysses* and Harold Pinter to direct *Exiles* at the Peacock, so his vocal wariness of an 'Anglo-centric' theatre was not strictly true. The concurrent celebrations connect somewhat tenuously, as Joyce has not been connected to the Abbey in the same way as other renowned Irish writers, although adaptations of his work have been staged there over the years. The chronological dovetailing was convenient both for the neat presentation of commemorative events of two major Irish institutions, but also *Ulysses*, a major draw for cultural tourists, would bring additional capital, cultural and financial, to what would

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<sup>577</sup> Barnes, p. 33.

<sup>578</sup> The Abbey's main sources of funding for mounting a US tour were the Cultural Relations Committee and the Ireland Funds, an international organisation that funds charitable work as well as cultural events. As well as private sponsorship, funding was also available from major universities, such as the University of Michigan at Ann Arbor, working to bring cultural organisations to regional areas. Barnes, p. 89.

come to be called the *abbeyonehundred* programme. Joyce agreed in their initial meeting but later withdrew the rights.

As well as the centenary controversy, Barnes will be remembered for his fixation with the new Abbey building. At the time of his taking over, the Abbey had not been significantly refurbished since the addition of the redesigned façade, foyer and bar improvements and extended portico in 1989 under Vincent Dowling. In 2000 the Abbey's historic site was considered inadequate and in need of either extensive renovation or replacement. This has been well documented elsewhere, but should be borne in mind when considering the outcomes of the 2002-2005 period,<sup>579</sup> since the exchequer was then 'awash with tax revenues' and the Taoiseach at the time had promised £41 billion nationally for infrastructure.<sup>580</sup> Barnes was anxious that the much-needed replacement venue would be established during his time as Director and in time for the centenary. The ensuing controversy both detracted from the work done at the theatre at the time while adding to the growing criticism of Barnes. The beginning of this criticism can probably be attributed to a co-production which Barnes inherited from his predecessor.

### **Unholy Row: *Barbaric Comedies***

Despite Barnes's announcements, interviews and policy documents for the future of the Abbey and its international reputation, when he took over, the Abbey, Peacock and touring programme had been 'substantially put in place' by Mason. *Dolly West's Kitchen* was about to transfer to the West End, *Love in Title* was due to transfer to San José and then Singapore, *Dancing at Lughnasa* was being revived at the Abbey and *The Secret Fall of Constance Wilde* was due a brief national tour before returning to the Abbey, to the chagrin of Barnes, who believed it had 'found and exhausted its audience'.<sup>581</sup> Though Barnes preferred

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<sup>579</sup> See Frank McDonald, 'To Move or Not to Move', *The Irish Times*, 3 February 2001, and Patrick O'Donnell, 'Whither the Abbey?': Renovating Ireland's National Theatre', *New Hibernia Review*, Vol. 5, No. 4 (2001), pp. 135-143.

<sup>580</sup> Barnes, p. 41.

<sup>581</sup> Ben Barnes, p. 14



*Constance Wilde* not to return to the Abbey before its London tour, it was a standard practice by Mason to do so in order to prepare for a tour or transfer.<sup>582</sup>

The secularising, anti-clerical, iconoclastic *Barbaric Comedies* co-production with the Edinburgh Festival (See Figs. 4.1 and 4.2) was in many ways characteristic of the Mason period. Barnes had inherited the co-production and first controversy of his tenure as AD opened as the centerpiece of the Edinburgh International Festival before opening at the Dublin Theatre Festival. *Barbaric Comedies* was subject to more British press than a usual Abbey Theatre tour or transfer, and when it opened in Dublin the high-pitched negative response was waiting. A project conceived between the EIF's Brian McMaster and Mason after their resurrection of the Abbey-EIF connection in 1994, *Barbaric Comedies* was to be the centerpiece of the 2000 festival. Frank McGuinness's translation of three connected plays (*Silver Face*, *Rampant Eagle* and *Wolves' Romance*) by Galician author, Ramon del Valle-Inclán, was directed by the Catalan theatre and opera director Calixto Bieito. The plays were originally published between 1907 and 1922, and were never staged in Valle-Inclán's lifetime.<sup>583</sup> Collectively the plays were an epic, surreal tragi-comedy and a criticism of Spanish political and religious tradition. The main character, Don Juan Manuel Montenegro, is a Lear-like figure striving to protect his power and wealth from the church, the peasantry and his six illegitimate sons (his is a family of thieves and rapists, and his wife has left because of his infidelity). The play involved numerous scenes of sex, murder, masturbation, the desecration of the host, a parody of the last supper performed by beggars in a wealthy man's house, rape, the boiling of a corpse and other willfully overstated acts to illustrate the hypocrisy Inclán condemned. In McGuinness's translation, the play was set in 1930s Galicia in north-western Spain, but the dialogue was given in Hiberno-English. This device drew attention to the parallels between that Spain and Ireland at the time, in which the power and influence of the Catholic Church had crumbled. It was assumed that Irish audiences would make a connection with the shared clash of paganism and Catholicism, obsession with the land, and disillusionment with

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<sup>582</sup> Interview with Patrick Mason, August 2010.

<sup>583</sup> There was a celebrated revival of the trilogy in Madrid in 1991 as well as at the London Gate Theatre, also in the 1990s, but the plays largely remain neglected.



inherited traditions and morality.<sup>584</sup> But despite the preceding AD's groundwork, the play did not find a sympathetic audience.

Tom Hickey was originally designated for the lead role, but the Abbey learned in March 2000 that he had elected to play the father in Marina Carr's *On Raftery's Hill* (2000) for Druid, and so was unavailable. Further problems emerged late in the process with director Bieito making only sporadic visits to the Dublin theatre where rehearsals took place, as he was reluctant to fly. The casting of 21 actors playing more than 30 roles was completed just two days before rehearsals began, with Mark Lambert chosen as the main character Don Juan Manuel Montenegro at a late stage.<sup>585</sup>

The play was both very physical and included long, poetic speeches, which themselves were very physically demanding for the cast. So extreme were the on-stage depictions of sex, violence and blasphemy, it was not unreasonable to assume that audiences were 'going to be shocked by the basic, primal quality of it,'<sup>586</sup> but also that, since the pastiche of Martin McDonagh was widely known to theatre audiences, the exaggerated depravity probably would not be taken seriously.<sup>587</sup>

The set, designed by Alfons Flores involved a large wrought-iron grill suspended over the stage, from which a crucifix was suspended upside-down, which served as prison bars separating the characters from heaven. The main space was relatively sparse but designed to allow for rain in the final third of the play. As such, it was known at the outset that it was a very expensive design.<sup>588</sup> There was

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<sup>584</sup> 'Irish audiences will recognise a lot of this [...] It could be the story of Ireland in the past 50 years'. Eamon Morrissey, interviewed by Helen Meany, 'Four Hours of Peasants, Pain and Passion', *The Irish Times*, 8 August 2000.

<sup>585</sup> Barnes, *Plays and Controversies*, p 64.

<sup>586</sup> Mark Lambert, interviewed by Helen Meany, 'Four Hours of Peasants, Pain and Passion', *The Irish Times*, 8 August 2000.

<sup>587</sup> "Or maybe it will send them running for the door at the interval," Eamon Morrissey says, "at this stage, we just can't tell." Helen Meany, 'Four Hours of Peasants, Pain and Passion', *The Irish Times*, 8 August 2000.

<sup>588</sup> Barnes, *Plays and Controversies*, p 55.

significant financial backing from the EIF,<sup>589</sup> nevertheless the Abbey were at a financial disadvantage mounting the production.<sup>590</sup>

In pre-press notices, *Barbaric Comedies* was the anticipated highlight of the ambitious Festival programme, which included seven performances by the New York City Ballet at the Edinburgh Playhouse and a complete cycle of the Mozart piano concertos performed over seven nights in Usher Hall. These three productions would play to a possible 61,000 people.<sup>591</sup> McMaster had also invited the Scottish Opera to undertake Wagner's *Ring* cycle over four years. Calixto Bieito had had a big hit at the EIF in 1998 with Calderon's *Life is a Dream* (c. 1635) and was generally considered an up-and-coming director. There were great expectations for the highly-publicised production, as evidenced in Thom Dibdon's description of the play as 'unperformable'<sup>592</sup>, and Lyn Gardner's guarded remarks: 'A classic of 20<sup>th</sup>-century Spanish literature, directed by one of Europe's most interesting directors, adapted by one of Ireland's greatest writers and realised by the superb Abbey Theatre. It can't fail, can it?'<sup>593</sup> Prior to its opening, Benedict Nightingale wrote in *The Guardian* that *BC* was 'a must see',<sup>594</sup> while Catherine Cooper wrote in *The Stage* that it stood out as 'an impressive undertaking', adding a note of caution:

Time will tell if the combined pulling power of the Abbey Theatre and a Frank McGuinness adaptation is a big enough draw for an Edinburgh Festival audience to fill the King's Theatre for almost the whole length of

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<sup>589</sup> It was reported in the Irish press that the Abbey was granted £300,000 to stage the play. Sarah Caden, 'Abbey Defends 'Barbaric' Play on Charges of Sex and Boredom', *The Sunday Independent*, 1 October 2000.

<sup>590</sup> Barnes, *Plays and Controversies*, p 32.

<sup>591</sup> 'Seven performances by the New York City Ballet, in the 3,000-seater Edinburgh Playhouse. Thirteen performances of the four-hour Spanish epic *Barbaric Comedies* in the 1,300 seater King's Theatre. And a complete cycle of the Mozart piano concertos performed over seven nights in the newly refurbished 2,200 seater Usher Hall.' Thom Dibdin, 'It's a Sort of Humdinger', *The Stage*, 3 August 2000. Font size: keeps changing – see 33 below also.

<sup>592</sup> Thom Dibdin, 'Hold on for an epic Ride', *Evening News*, 15 August 2000.

<sup>593</sup> Lyn Gardner, 'Theatre', *The Guardian*, 12 August 2000.

<sup>594</sup> Benedict Nightingale, 'Theatre', *The Guardian*, 16 June 2000.

the festival, especially with a running time of around four and a half hours.<sup>595</sup>

Discussing the upcoming 'ambitious production' of *BC*, EIF director Brian McMaster conceded that 'you may not have heard of [*Barbaric Comedies*], but it is a massive theatre piece that will talk to everybody'. It was 'one evening of three plays in four-and-a-half hours,' and 'Ireland's national theatre would not normally be able to undertake anything on this scale', were it not for the co-production.<sup>596</sup> McMaster saw his role as a 'populariser, rather than a populist'. His 'staunchly unrepentant' confidence in what he saw as an increasingly highbrow festival was perhaps the bait for the press when *BC* faltered.<sup>597</sup>

*Barbaric Comedies* previewed and opened at King's Theatre Edinburgh where it played from 14-28 August, 2000 for 13 performances (more performances than usual by EIF standards). The play would then run from 1-21 October as the first production of the eircom-sponsored Dublin Theatre Festival. At four hours and a half long with only one interval (for which the audience had to wait two and a half hours), it was anticipated that audiences would be challenged by the play, but a second interval was not added at this point. Unsurprisingly, given the sheer length of the play, there were walk-outs during the previews.<sup>598</sup> The negative reaction in the British press was robust: journalists responded with outrage to the content, the length and the expense of the flagship production by a director thought to have made an ill-judged and arrogant gamble, the technical faults of the play, as well as the missed opportunity in the EIF's working with the Abbey. Well before the play even opened in Dublin there was a stream of letters and petitions to the Abbey, characterised by Catholic conservatism and a criticism of the national theatre's use of public money.

*Barbaric Comedies* generated an enormous amount of newspaper coverage in Edinburgh. It was reported in *Stage* that EIF director McMaster had claimed he

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<sup>595</sup> Cooper, Catherine, 'The World at your Feet', *The Stage*, 3 August 2000.

<sup>596</sup> David Benedict, 'McMaster of all he Surveys', *The Observer*, 16 July 2000.

<sup>597</sup> Thom Dibdin, 'It's a Sort of Humdinger', *The Stage*, 3 August 2000.

<sup>598</sup> Ben Barnes, *Plays and Controversies*, p. 76.



was 'aiming to attract the event's biggest-ever audience' for the co-production: 'this will produce a major and spectacular piece of theatre. We are going for the biggest audience we have ever had.' Given that the EIF was said to be in a financial crisis at the time, McMaster attracted criticism with this ambitious project.<sup>599</sup> Ticket sales for the Festival in general were reportedly up 16 per cent on the previous year's and City of Edinburgh Council had cleared the Festival's deficit of £218,000, but the Festival organisers have budgeted to sell an extra 25 per cent seats more that year.<sup>600</sup>

Unfortunately the desired ticket sales did not materialise, especially once the reviews appeared. There was some discounting of tickets for *Barbaric Comedies*, but generally sales were not good. While the reception of *BC* latterly was coloured by the shrill debates in Ireland over blasphemy, censorship and the right of the Abbey to stage such profanity, it began with UK reviewers unconvinced by the conflation of 1930s Spain with twenty-first-century Ireland and the grotesque, physical characters as portrayed by actors normally judged outside of Ireland on their lyrical adroitness. In addition to the expensive set and lengthy run-time, the play took a gamble stylistically, as the actors were challenged to deliver their lines in a loud, non-naturalist fashion. While this may have been accepted as part of the format coming from another company, in the UK an Abbey production thought to lack lyricism was a further disappointment, as this remains one of its unique selling points. Furthermore while the UK reviews superficially decry the play's blasphemy, it was often a subterfuge for the mob-like censure of EIF director Brian McMaster's hubris in staging the play in the first place.

Joyce McMillan's review of the opening night condemned the play as 'dark, relentless, fashionable, but not a lot of fun'. The critic's implication was that,

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<sup>599</sup> *The Stage*, 30 March, 2000. The EIF's £6 million budget comprised £2m of public money from the city and the Scottish Arts Council, £1.6m in sponsorship. The festival depended on the box office takings for the rest. In addition, the Fringe Festival had recently been pushed back into August, causing a 'festival sprawl' that undermined audience numbers. (Source: David Benedict, 'McMaster of all he Surveys', *The Observer*, 16 July 2000).

<sup>600</sup> McMaster conceded it was 'fairly reckless'. Thom Dibdin, 'It's a Sort of Humdinger', *The Stage*, 3 August 2000.

although she had 'never seen a show which contained so many explicit and prolonged rape scenes, or which seemed so perilously close to enjoying them', the real insult to the audience was that the play attempted to be *fashionable*, suggesting a suspicion of the project as a cynical theatrical gimmick. Worse, she observed, was that the play was 'no fun at all'.<sup>601</sup> This sentiment was repeated by Charles Spencer in *The Daily Telegraph*, who asked in his review whether McMaster had 'gone completely bonkers' or whether he was 'taking the mick' at the expense of the sponsors and audience. He pointed out that 'there is usually a good reason why 'neglected masterpieces' are neglected.'<sup>602</sup> The shock factor of *Barbaric Comedies* was likely to have been exacerbated by the knowledge that, as one reviewer put it, 'this year's Edinburgh Festival drama programme has bet its shirt on *Barbaric Comedies*: and if the show fails, the artistic and financial consequences could be severe.'<sup>603</sup>

The following day, Michael Billington wrote in a more measured review that the play was a 'chaotic hybrid' and argued that 'drama is always translatable, but it is not always transposable'. He found the connection between Spain and Ireland too forced and the performances crude.<sup>604</sup> Many more reviewers argued that the Irish context and performances were unconvincing.<sup>605</sup> In a long review for *The Times*, also the day after the play's opening, Benedict Nightingale identified the play as 'bold but baffling' and 'the sort of scene that used to turn up regularly on the Fringe' (he was also referring to the sex-and-corpse-boiling scene).<sup>606</sup>

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<sup>601</sup> Joyce McMillan, 'Dark, Relentless, Fashionable, but not a lot of Fun', *The Scotsman*, 15 August 2000.

<sup>602</sup> Charles Spencer, 'Nasty, Brutish – But Not Short', *The Daily Telegraph*, 16 August 2000.

<sup>603</sup> Joyce McMillan, 'Dark, Relentless, Fashionable, but not a lot of Fun', *The Scotsman*, 15 August 2000.

<sup>604</sup> Michael Billington, 'One for the Barbarians', *The Guardian*, 16 August 2000.

<sup>605</sup> Paul Taylor spent a good deal of his review describing a scene in which a character has sex with a prostitute while a trainee priest boils a skeleton – and also masturbates – in preparation to selling it to a medical school. The scene is described in tongue-in-cheek prose, and contextualised with comparisons to Schiller's *The Robbers* 'refracted in a fairground mirror'. Complimentary of the lighting design, Taylor found the play technically wanting, the Irish connection tenuous, and professed that the 'whole thing whets your appetite to see Valle-Inclán performed by his compatriots'. Paul Taylor, 'The Pervert's Progress', *The Wednesday Review*, 16 August 2000.

<sup>606</sup> The review went on to list colourful details of the writer's life and the indignation of an audience member sitting behind him. So while Nightingale could make comparisons to Bunuel he has an accent over the 'n', I think and Genet, he was also able to convey the shocking aspects of the play without seeming prudish. Ultimately his criticism came down to the production's being



Dalya Alberge covered it under the heading 'Festival's Brutal Sex Shocker Empties Seats'.<sup>607</sup> Gradually the play was not reviewed so much as reported on as a public menace. For instance *The Times* wrote that:

A shockingly lurid production of one of the 20th century's classic pieces of literature is threatening the future of the official Edinburgh Festival, which until now has studiously avoided the vulgar antics and explicit language of its Fringe event. Seasoned observers say that the play could create significant financial difficulties for the festival. The opening production of the festival features such graphic depictions of rape and copulation, and even a scene involving masturbating monks, that dozens of people walked out of Monday night's premiere. Several left during the first half, but most left at the interval. The 1,300-seat King's Theatre was half full as the curtain rose and about a quarter full as it fell.<sup>608</sup>

The following day *The Independent* reported that the: 'Epic Tale of Perverted Priests has the Critics in a Frenzy', in an article that opened with the words 'Shocking!, Barking hysteria, bonkers'.<sup>609</sup> The reaction to *Barbaric Comedies* in its opening days in Scotland raised the question of whether the official Edinburgh Festival had become deliberately shocking and sensationalist, and it was taken to task by critics for being 'closer in tone' to the Fringe festival and for failing to suitably warn parents of the adult content of the play.<sup>610</sup> By 19 August the festival organisers were denying bankruptcy rumours based on the 'disastrous

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'a slog' and lacking comedy. Benedict Nightingale, 'The Best Possible Bad Taste', *The Times*, 16 August 2000.

<sup>607</sup> Dalya Alberge, 'Festival's Brutal Sex Shocker Empties Seats' (above you put a question mark after the headline), *The Times*, 16 August 2000.

<sup>608</sup> Ibid.

<sup>609</sup> Jojo Moyes, 'Epic Tale of Perverted Priests has the Critics in a Frenzy', *The Independent*, 17 August 2000. See also Alastair Macaulay, 'Sex, Violence and Ranting', *Financial Times*, 17 August 2000, Robert Gore-Langton, 'Violent Turn-off', *Daily Express*, 18 August 2000, Vanessa Thorpe, 'Welcome to the New Brutalism', *The Observer*, 20 August 2000, John Peter, 'Shock Full of Surprises?' *The Sunday Times*, 20 August 2000, Kate Bassett, 'Grand Guignol for Ghastly Galicians', *The Independent on Sunday*, 20 August 2000.

<sup>610</sup> Oliver Burkeman, 'Fringe Benefits', *The Guardian*, 17 August 2000.



run' of *Barbaric Comedies*. It had been running four days at that point, with another week to run and reportedly only a quarter of tickets sold.<sup>611</sup>

The report of the play's reception in Edinburgh quickly crossed over to tabloid newspapers. *The Sun* warned Irish readers that the 'sex shocker' play would transfer to Ireland uncensored,<sup>612</sup> and the *Daily Mail* called it 'monstrous'.<sup>613</sup> Back in Dublin in *The Irish Times* Victoria White, reviewing from Edinburgh after opening night, wrote that the play was 'thrilling' and 'highly impressive'. White's review focused on the synopsis, design, direction ('an extraordinary sureness of vision and of purpose'), and on the writer's preoccupation with representing corruption through a series of bleak images. The word 'impressive' occurs some four times in the review, which nonetheless concedes it is not an engaging trilogy and that the plays fail to maintain dramatic tension.<sup>614</sup>

There was a considerable gap in time between the EIF staging (in August) and the opening at the Dublin Theatre Festival (in October), with the controversy in the papers coming in between. As the controversy transferred to the Irish press any sympathy was short-lived, and the increasingly heated discussion transformed from accusations of sensationalism and wasted funding to one of morality and national character. The opprobrium for one Artistic Director's decision was transferred to another in the form of concerned morality. The following day the Abbey was being asked to defend the play in *The Irish Independent*.<sup>615</sup> On Irish mainstream radio, the culture programme *Rattlebag* played comments from audience members coming out of *Barbaric Comedies* in Edinburgh. The replies ranged from:

'I was absolutely bowled over by it'

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<sup>611</sup> Fiachra Gibbons, 'Festival Shrugs Off Bankruptcy Rumours As Fans Shun 'rotten' epic', *The Guardian*, 19 August 2000.

<sup>612</sup> Julia Mahony, 'Sex Shocker Play Uncut for Ireland', *The Sun*, 18 August 2000.

<sup>613</sup> Meanwhile the successful New York City Ballet production was absorbing the losses for the festival. Michael Coveney, 'Monstrous Men Behaving Badly', *The Daily Mail*, 18 August 2000.

<sup>614</sup> Victoria White, 'Bleak Vision Comes Thrillingly to Life', *The Irish Times*, 16 August 2000.

<sup>615</sup> Fergus Black, 'Abbey Stands Over 'Brutal Shocker'', *The Irish Independent*, 17 August 2000.

'Great show though. It's unlike anything the Abbey have ever done before and the performances from everybody concerned were outstanding.'

'One was just spellbound by it, I was all the time engaged, not judging them but I found myself having compassion even with the deeds which were not socially or morally acceptable. [...] I was brought up with Catholicism and I found it very difficult to watch the role that the church played in the drama. [...] It distressed me actually more than the sex and the violence. It engaged in all the stages of man and all man's moral dilemmas and all his physical and sexual dilemmas and he tried to cope with those as best he can and in the end, he looked for redemption because he thought he had failed and lost his soul.'

'It's very hard to describe. It's quite overwhelming and I mean you make comparison with Shakespeare maybe and Bunuel...but I just find it very hard to describe but you can see how moved I actually am by this...it's going to take me a long time to get to grips with actually the effect it has had, but these kind of experiences are quite life changing, I think and I've been quite privileged to have seen this play.'

'Black...but very entertaining.'

To:

'Quite frightening actually and...barbaric.'

'I thought the actors made a terrific effort and worked awfully hard for four hours. I think the play is pretty dreadful frankly. Not a neglected masterpiece.'

'I thought it was blasphemous. I don't like it at all. I thought it was quite unnecessary.'<sup>616</sup>

This short survey of audience reactions offers a glimpse into the type of response audiences were having, that is those that did not stay away for fear of being offended or bored were often positive. Nonetheless the *Irish Independent* warned readers 'of an Irish-adapted sex and violence marathon,'<sup>617</sup> while TD Deputy Martin Brady (FF), admitting to not having seen the play, called for *BC* to be banned lest it 'distress and traumatise audiences, particularly victims of rape and sexual abuse'. He also expressed concern that the play would encourage similar behaviour in audience members. Brady, claiming to have been approached by concerned constituents, urged against the staging of the play in Ireland in 'light of the recent scandals involving clerical abuse'.<sup>618</sup> Brady argued that 'taxpayers' money should not be spent by the Abbey Theatre creating a production that degrades human beings.' He appealed to Dublin Corporation and to the Arts Minister Síle de Valera, to urge that the production be banned and a watchdog body should be appointed to decide how the Abbey spent its grants.<sup>619</sup> Understandably this provoked a defense of the arts and a critique of censorship, with journalists relishing a 'moral rumpus' to help cast off its image of 'cosy elitism,' a criticism that had been leveled at the EIF's choice of staging the same play.<sup>620</sup>

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<sup>616</sup> From transcript of *The Yellow Mike on Rattlebag*, broadcast on RTÉ Radio 1 on Friday 18 August 2000. It was also reported in the Irish press that the Spanish reviews were positive, with *El País* calling the play 'bold'. Marcus Ordonez of *El País* was positive in his review, though he cautioned that the audience during the night he attended murmured with disapproval at the inverted crucifix and appeared to find the sex scenes unpalatable. He looked forward to seeing how an Irish audience would react to it. Marcus Ordonez, *El País*, August 2000. See also *The Irish Times*, 31 August 2000.

<sup>617</sup> Sarah Caden, 'Abbey Plays the Shock Tactic Card', *The Sunday Independent*, 20 August 2000.

<sup>618</sup> Anthony Garvey, 'Controversy Follows Barbaric Comedies', *The Stage*, 31 August 2000.

<sup>619</sup> O'Keeffe, Alan, 'Ban Rape, Sex Abuse Play from City Festival, TD Urges', *The Irish Independent*, 22 August 2000.

<sup>620</sup> Ronnie Bellew, 'Just the Ticket the Abbey Needs', *Ireland on Sunday*, 27 August 2000. See also Bruce Arnold, 'This Play Must Go On – For Art's Sake', *The Irish Independent*, 23 August 2000. Arnold qualified his argument by saying he had not yet seen the play and that McGuinness was a 'clumsy' and 'brutal' playwright.



The *Sunday Tribune* mounted a strong defense: Diarmuid Doyle argued that the media fuss and the calls for censorship were driven by ‘the prospect of gay, Irish playwrights doing well for themselves’. He also referred, tongue-in-cheek, to the play as ‘a sort of *Satanic Verses* for Catholics’.<sup>621</sup> Doyle’s article set up McGuinness’s play as a case of an artistic project under attack and he took the opportunity to side with the put-upon. The piece condemns the ‘spluttering, outraged contempt’ of the *Daily Mail* and Fianna Fáil as homophobic.

As for the Abbey, Doyle pointed out: ‘There is nothing like a little controversy to drum up ticket sales’ and that ‘the reaction to McGuinness’s latest work was not unwelcome,’ although the Abbey, now receiving anonymous hate mail, may have disagreed with that assertion.<sup>622</sup> (See Fig. 4.3).

Despite calls for censorship in Ireland, Anthony Garvey for *The Stage* reported that Ben Barnes insisted that the show would go on uncut; despite Brady’s appeal (which the Arts Minister and Corporation rejected in any case). Irish audiences should see it and make up their own minds, Barnes argued.<sup>623</sup> The controversy had raged in the UK for long enough to generate a backlash-type sympathy for the play in Dublin, especially once commentators began to assert that Anglo-Saxons didn’t ‘get’ the play and people were anxious to show their unique understanding. In the same edition of *The Stage* a letter was published by Gwynne Edwards, a translator of Spanish plays and a writer on Spanish theatre, comparing the reviews of the play to extreme mass violence: ‘English theatre critics share both the ignorance and the xenophobia concerning things foreign that is generally attributed to football hooligans.’ Edwards cited a number of reviews to emphasise her point, including the *Guardian*’s review of *Silver Face* at London’s Gate theatre (‘seemed rather foreign’). Edwards went on to point out that, in *The Observer*’s review the previous Sunday of *BC*, inaccurate facts about Valle-Inclán’s ‘eccentric lifestyle’ were listed. The fearful reporting and duplication of error had driven the tenor of the reviews, Edwards argued, and

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<sup>621</sup>Diarmuid Doyle, ‘From Buncrana to Barbaric’, *The Sunday Tribune*, 27 August 2000.

<sup>622</sup>Ibid.

<sup>623</sup>Anthony Garvey, ‘Controversy Follows *Barbaric Comedies*’, *The Stage*, 31 August 2000.

the British critics were 'unable to respond to a kind of writing and acting style which is direct and emotional, as is the case with Valle-Inclán and [...] part and parcel of the Spanish character, and thus of Spanish culture.'<sup>624</sup> Meanwhile Mark Lambert told the Irish press that there had been some standing ovations by the end of the Edinburgh run, as well as an increase in audience numbers.<sup>625</sup>

At the beginning of September, Hayden Murphy of *The Sunday Tribune* wrote of the 'complicated and complex' Edinburgh Festival and of the Abbey play that had resulted in Brian McMaster's being dubbed 'Barbaric McMaster' by a local paper.<sup>626</sup> There was little further on the play, though the Festival itself was referred to as difficult but ultimately 'a reward': a broad gesture that avoided engaging with the debate of *BC*, without compromising his own credibility by trying to endorse the play as a critic. By now the Abbey had publicly stated that, though the play would not be 'toned down' in any way, there would be a second interval for its Dublin run. On the issue of the content of the play, Ailbhe Smith, a lecturer in women's studies at UCD was questioned by *The Sunday Times*. Smith was in favour of the play going ahead: 'the Abbey needs to do more controversial, provocative and political theatre. Discussion about these issues is very important for Irish society.'<sup>627</sup>

Despite the changing mood, the Abbey was still inundated with complaints in the form of phone calls and angry letters by people who were, according to head of marketing Madeleine Boughton, 'appalled at the use of tax-payers' money, the reduction in moral standards, contributing to the decline in young people's morals, and the increase in rape and violence.' Dublin Theatre Festival director Fergus Linehan received letters of complaint written on toilet paper.<sup>628</sup> There were also threats to the Abbey, such as: 'We will do everything in our power to

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<sup>624</sup> Gwynne Edwards, 'Barbaric Reviews Show only Ignorance', *The Stage*, 31 August 2000.

<sup>625</sup> Sinead Grennan, 'The Abbey's New Barbaric Comedy is not one for the Squamish', *The Sunday Independent*, 10 September, 2000.

<sup>626</sup> Hayden Murphy, *The Sunday Tribune*, 3 September 2000.

<sup>627</sup> Jan Battles and Javier Aja, 'Dublin Row Over Rape and Cannibalism Play', *The Sunday Times*, 3 September 2000.

<sup>628</sup> Ben Quinn, 'It's a Comedy but not as we know it', *The Irish Independent*, 2 October 2000.



prevent this show going on.<sup>629</sup> Barnes took the attacks, letters and petitions as a sign that Celtic Tiger Ireland was still dominated by the 'Christian right'.<sup>630</sup>

By 16 September *The Irish Independent* reported the complaints in such a way as to suggest a riot was assured. Using the headline 'Irate Callers Stage Abbey Play Protest', and the single word 'RIOTS' in uppercase in the crosshead, the paper constructed an image of the theatre in terms of another *Playboy* or *Plough* debacle. The misleading crosshead in fact preceded a paragraph merely commenting on past riots. The smaller print reported that 'management does not foresee any serious trouble when the play opens,' nonetheless, 'all normal and prudent precautions were in place to ensure the security of the audience and cast'.<sup>631</sup> While there were threats to the Abbey that the show would not go on, no pickets or riots ensued.<sup>632</sup> This fear-driven narrative perpetuated by many press outlets became the subject for discussion, rather than the play.<sup>633</sup> In *The Irish Times*, Victoria White wrote that the controversy was the 'result of a media industry feeding on itself and getting sick'.<sup>634</sup> The alignment of *BC* with plays like *Playboy*, vindicated by history, was a further benefit to the co-production.

When *Barbaric Comedies* finally opened the Dublin Theatre Festival on 1 October 2000, Barnes later wrote that 'The applause was sustained and the enthusiasm, if not universal, was sufficient to shore up, for the time being, the daring of the enterprise.'<sup>635</sup> Nonetheless the considerable advance publicity had not resulted in particularly good box office take-up.<sup>636</sup>

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<sup>629</sup> Victoria White, 'Holy Show', *The Irish Times*, 28 September 2000.

<sup>630</sup> Barnes, *Plays*, p. 90.

<sup>631</sup> Alan O'Keeffe, 'Irate Callers Stage Abbey Play Protest', *The Irish Independent*, 16 September, 2000.

<sup>632</sup> Ben Quinn, 'It's a Comedy but not as we know it', *The Irish Independent*, 2 October 2000 and Anthony Garvey, 'More Barbaric Complaints', *The Stage*, 12 October 2000.

<sup>633</sup> *The Irish Times* printed a letter by an 18-year-old UCD student who was 'shocked and outraged', 'ashamed and embarrassed' that a play including scenes of rape, masturbation etc, was considered entertainment. Aisling Murray, Letters, *The Irish Times*, 20 October, 2000. Numerous letters ensued, ensuring the continuation of the debate in the *IT* letters page for some time.

<sup>634</sup> Victoria White, 'Cooking up a Controversy', *The Irish Times*, 23 September, 2000, see also Victoria White, 'Holy Show', *The Irish Times*, 28 September 2000.

<sup>635</sup> Barnes, *Plays*, p. 89.

<sup>636</sup> Sarah Caden, 'Abbey Defends 'Barbaric' Play on Charges of Sex and Boredom', *The Sunday Independent* 1 October 2000, Eugene Masterson, 'Rape and Nude Play Turn-off at the Abbey', *Ireland on Sunday*, 8 October 2000.



Changing tack somewhat after being accused of mass hysteria, some Irish reviewers conceded the play was 'bold' or 'daring', but were reluctant to wholeheartedly endorse it. Many criticised the play as 'boring'<sup>637</sup> and even not barbaric enough,<sup>638</sup> which, given its length, was a more damning criticism than alerting patrons to the immoral acts of sex, violence and blasphemy onstage. Historically, plays at the Abbey decried as indecent suffer less from indifference than from aggressive participation by members of the public. Cautioning audiences that it was long and tedious would do for *Barbaric Comedies* what was done to the premiere of *The Gigli Concert* in 1983. The *Evening Herald* thought *BC* a 'messy incoherent moribund elephant of a show' and an abuse of a paying audience.<sup>639</sup>

Bruce Arnold reviewed the play with faint praise under the headline 'Thirty Characters in Search of a Play.' Referring to the play's having been 'Irished' by McGuinness, he wrote that the play was 'distinguished by some fine acting, a great deal of energy, a great deal too much rape and violence, and some powerful stage events.'<sup>640</sup> The characteristically rebarbative Emer O'Kelly wrote that as she could find Inclán in neither the *Oxford Companion to Theatre*, nor the *Oxford Illustrated History of Theatre*, this 'would suggest that the claim of stature equal to Joyce's is predicated on Spanish national pride rather than on artistic reality.'<sup>641</sup> The *Irish Examiner*, on a more positive note, wrote that *BC* was 'unmissable', that this was 'the biggest Dublin Theatre Festival ever, and already 80% of the total tickets have sold.' A hardly-persuasive recommendation of Patrick Brennan was to advise the audience to go along despite their

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<sup>637</sup> For instance 'This is a shocking production. Shocking long, shocking dull and shocking tedious.'

Gerry McCarthy, 'Failed Shock Tactics Produce a Barbaric Bore', *The Sunday Times*, 8 October 2000 and Anthony Garvey, 'More Barbaric Complaints', *The Stage*, 12 October 2000. Psychiatrist Anthony Clare was solicited for his opinion: 'The Abbey Theatre's controversial production *Barbaric Comedies* was described last night as "a bore" by leading psychiatrist Dr Anthony Clare.' 'Controversial Play Labelled "a Bore"', *The Sunday Independent*, 15 October, 2000.

<sup>638</sup> Jocelyn Clarke, 'It Ain't Half Barbaric', *The Sunday Tribune*, 8 October 2000.

<sup>639</sup> Luke Clancy, 'A Barbaric Abuse of a Paying Audience', *Evening Herald*, 2 October 2000.

<sup>640</sup> Bruce Arnold, 'Thirty Characters in Search of a Play', *The Irish Independent*, 2 October 2000.

<sup>641</sup> Emer O'Kelly, 'A Barbaric Edge to Comedy', *The Sunday Independent*, 8 October 2000.

reservations, as they wouldn't 'notice time passing.'<sup>642</sup> Including a rough synopsis, *Culture Vulture's* review by Harvey O'Brien in some ways typified the preceding reviews in the unlikely combination of descriptions used for *BC*: the 'unstageable' trilogy was 'long misunderstood', it had been given 'a slight Irish twist', but in a 'strident adaptation'. Ultimately it was an 'epic production', a 'singular experience' and in fact needed 'to be seen more than once or read in text form before it delivers its full potential', but was nonetheless 'not recommended to all audiences (obviously)'.<sup>643</sup>

A new theme emerging in Irish reviews was of disappointment: reviewers warned readers that the play was boring. David Nowlan's review cautioned readers that any 'notion' that the play was 'indecent or sexually titillating' should be refuted.<sup>644</sup> Nowlan wrote, 'it is a serious-minded and major dramatic achievement of significant moral stature', despite its disturbing content. Jennifer O'Connell reported that on the night that she attended several audience members left, and that she joined them.<sup>645</sup> O'Connell described those walking out as 'disgruntled' but added that her leaving was not because 'the sex' or 'the brutality, or the fact that this epic lasts four and a half hours', or even the controversial corpse/masturbation/prostitute scene, rather 'It was when Jesus Christ appeared on stage, clad in a crown of thorns and what looked for all the world like a pair of ketchup-stained incontinence pants, that the urge to flee became overwhelming.'<sup>646</sup> The review goes on in similar vein to suggest McGuinness was taking advantage of the audience. This dichotomy in the responses to the play shows something of the contemporary Ireland that was on the one hand capable of great religious outrage, but on the other anxious to be viewed as sophisticated from the outside: modern but capable of still engaging

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<sup>642</sup> Patrick Brennan, 'Spanish Vice Gets Festival off to a Shock Start', *Irish Examiner*, 3 October 2000. See also Sophie Gorman, 'Eclectic Mix of the Daring and the Downright Naughty', *The Irish Independent*, 3 October 2000.

<sup>643</sup> Harvey O'Brien, 'Barbaric Comedies', *Culture Vulture*, [<http://www.culturevulture.net/Theater/BarbaricComedies.htm>], October 3, 2000.

<sup>644</sup> David Nowlan, 'Significant, Serious and Rare', *The Irish Times*, 3 October 2000.

<sup>645</sup> "A number of disgruntled patrons walked out of Frank McGuinness's new work, *Barbaric Comedies*, during last Sunday's opening night performance. I was one of them." Jennifer O'Connell, 'McGuinness Wasn't At All Good For Me', *The Sunday Business Post*, 8 October 2000.

<sup>646</sup> O'Connell, 8 October 2000.



with a meaningful emotional identity if they liked the play, smart enough to condemn it for being too tame if they didn't.

Dan Mulhall for the *Sunday Herald* wrote of the milder Irish reaction as indicative of how the country had overcome its conservative past, citing mainly the positive Irish notices the play had received, even asserting that was 'no evidence of any popular backlash against the play's controversial content'. Mulhall pointed out the clash between traditional and contemporary Ireland, caused by the social and economic changes Ireland had so recently undergone. Ireland was a wealthy, successful European country, Mulhall argued, but traditional values still had to compete 'with newer forces in a reshaped environment' that behoved the national theatre to tackle in the form of difficult plays.<sup>647</sup>

It was also suggested that, given recent revelations about sexual abuse committed and perpetuated by the Catholic Church in Ireland, continuing to address clerical hypocrisy was unnecessary and lurid:

In a society where Catholicism is respectable and above reproach, a production like this has real force. In today's Ireland, where revelations about paedophile priests and sexually active bishops have left the Church reeling, *Barbaric Comedies* seems to be kicking a man when he's down. [...] Even the most hardened anti-clerical atheist starts to feel a perverse sympathy for the victim.<sup>648</sup>

Ultimately the *Barbaric Comedies* did not sell out any night, although the production generated considerable media coverage.<sup>649</sup> While the Edinburgh audience criticised the director of the EIF for being overly ambitious and elitist, in Ireland responses to the content varied widely from outraged to bored. There was a conflict between reviewers anxious to be seen to be so modern as to be

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<sup>647</sup> Dan Mulhall, 'In Defense of the Barbaric', *Sunday Herald*, 8 October 2000.

<sup>648</sup> Jocelyn Clarke, 'It Ain't Half Barbaric', *The Sunday Tribune*, 8 October 2000.

<sup>649</sup> *Ireland on Sunday* understands that the show has been playing to less than half houses all week – on Wednesday night the theatre was less than one-third full.' Eugene Masterson, 'Rape and Nude Play Turn-off at the Abbey', *Ireland on Sunday*, 8 October 2000.



unfazed by the play that had shocked Edinburgh and those who remained outraged at the Abbey's endorsement of blasphemy and misogyny.

Barnes had inherited the *Barbaric Comedies*, but the play was to cut very short any honeymoon period he might have enjoyed as AD, and controversies proliferated. In 2001, a few months after *Barbaric Comedies*, the controversy around the new building grew as political support wavered and an opinion piece by Barnes in *The Irish Times* was, he argued, sub-edited in such a manner as to misrepresent the Abbey's stance.<sup>650</sup> Barnes's gesture was to cause more problems for the Abbey and the disintegration of their relationship with the Taoiseach.

Nonetheless Barnes had some early successes. While the debate surrounding the new building plans continued, and Barnes was running a theatre with 'sticking plaster maintenance', the Abbey won eight *The Irish Times* theatre awards that February.<sup>651</sup> Shortly after *BC*, the Abbey's US and European tour of Brian Friel's *Translations* (1980) directed by Barnes, was another such success.<sup>652</sup> The widespread critical success of *Translations* received comparably little media attention. Coming as it did after the notorious *Barbaric Comedies*, critical acclaim was not as newsworthy. It was not long before another co-production dragged the Abbey into the limelight, for the wrong reasons. As with *Barbaric Comedies*, Sebastian Barry's *Hinterland* offered a version of Ireland on international stages disdained by Irish commentators. It was again in the difference between local and international coverage of the play that the play's significance for contemporary Ireland during its production was disclosed.

### **GUBU Roi: *Hinterland***

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<sup>650</sup> Barnes, *Plays and Controversies*, pp. 131-132, and Barnes, 'When State Of The Art Needs A Change', *The Irish Times*, 10 February 2001.

<sup>651</sup> Barnes, *Plays and Controversies*, p 158.

<sup>652</sup> *Translations* opened in Dublin to positive notices and a packed house. It was a much-needed compensation after the financial and critical debacle of *Barbaric Comedies* and, according to Barnes, justified the Abbey's decision to take the play on European tour in 2001. The play was staged at the Long Wharf theatre, New Haven in June 2001, then toured to the newly opened and redesigned building of the Teatre Nacional de Catalunya, Spain from 27 to 30 September; the Comedie de St. Etienne, Paris, France on October 4; Theater im Pfalzbau, Ludwigshafen, Germany; Narodni Divadlo, Prague, Czech Republic on October 14, finishing at Hungary's Vigszinhaz Theatre in Budapest. The reception was generally very positive.

By 2001 it was clear that the Abbey's funding was insufficient to cover its output and that the theatre was not meeting all of its ambitions.<sup>653</sup> The Peacock Partnership project required a deferral of the Teatro Nacional de Catalunya's visit to the Abbey as part of the *Translations* exchange. At this time, the Abbey undertook to co-produce *Hinterland*, a new play by Sebastian Barry, with support from the British Council to open initially in the UK. *Hinterland* was a co-production between the Abbey Theatre, the British National Theatre and Out Of Joint, a British touring theatre company co-founded and directed by Max Stafford-Clark, former AD of the Royal Court, and known for his association with companies that develop new writing. (See Fig. 4.4 for the programme cover) After the success of Barry's *The Steward of Christendom*, and more recently *Our Lady of Sligo*, which was first produced at the National Theatre, also in co-production with Out of Joint and directed by Stafford-Clark, in April 1998, Barry's new play was highly anticipated.<sup>654</sup>

*Hinterland* concerns an ageing Irish politician at the end of his career, confronted with the public revelations of his corrupt career and awaiting the verdict of a corruption investigation. Johnny Silvester is arrogant but remorseful, and in the course of the play he is visited by the ghost of a betrayed colleague, Cornelius, his mistress, Connie and his exasperated family. The Silvester character's parallel with the former Taoiseach Charles Haughey is obvious, particularly in the text: Silvester's line: 'I have done the state some service', replicate the words spoken by Haughey upon resigning as Taoiseach.<sup>655</sup> Connie could easily be interpreted as Haughey's well-known journalist mistress, and Cornelius the late Brian Lenihan. The portraits of these figures were easily identifiable to Irish audiences. Where the play differs however is in Barry's taking up of the story to examine the latter life of the politician and father figure. The suicide attempt by Silvester's son is driven by the plot of the play, not real-life events. It is the muddying of real and imagined events that resulted in another controversy for the Abbey in Ireland. However the corresponding English productions of the play did not result in a

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<sup>653</sup> Barnes, *Plays and Controversies*, p 161.

<sup>654</sup> 'Hinterland', *The Irish Independent*, 29 January 2002.

<sup>655</sup> Sebastian Barry, *Hinterland*, (London: Faber & Faber, 2002), p. 11



similar outcry, save for reports of the circumstances of the Dublin run.<sup>656</sup> English critics were not offended that Haughey's personal life was being impugned, because they were largely unacquainted with such details. What the non-Irish production of this Abbey play shows by comparison, therefore, is the nature of the particularly Irish reaction to the play (that is, the sincerely felt shock that the play represented known living figures as it did), and an Ireland struggling to integrate the recent political past with contemporary ideas of national identity (in the subsequent overt political appropriation of the debate).

Prior to the play's opening, Barry emphasised in the pre-press interviews that this was a story of a 'flawed father figure', citing frequently a story about meeting Nuala O'Faolain and sharing overbearing father figures.<sup>657</sup> Later in a pre-press interview with Liam Fay, Barry talked about the recent death of actor Donal McCann. When questioned on the apparent sympathy with which he treats the Haughey-like character, Barry denied vindicating him, but connected the death of McCann, a close friend, to the process of writing the play:

The reason I hesitate to ask for the full measure of state justice to be brought down on somebody is, perhaps, I'm unwell enough to feel that this is a cloud coming down on top of myself also.

I'm not the only one to have had the experience of watching a great man die, a great talent disappear. What happened to Donal, that was an ultimate judgment.<sup>658</sup>

For Barry, the play was a difficult process of internalising the figure of his own father and the recent death of a friend. It was not unfamiliar for him to cloak personal stories in his writing, as he had admitting to doing in the past.

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<sup>656</sup> In articles such as Anthony Garvey, 'Legal Theatre over NT/Abbey Drama', *The Stage*, 21 February 2002.

<sup>657</sup> Barry tells the story in all three of the following interviews: Patricia Deevy, 'Still Haunted by Giants', *The Sunday Independent*, 13 January 2002; Mary Kate O'Flanagan, 'Keeping it in the Family', *The Sunday Business Post*, 13 January 2002, and Patrick Brennan, 'Uncharted Depths of a Father's Life Laid Bare', *Irish Examiner*, 15 January 2002.

<sup>658</sup> Liam Fay, 'Take me to your Leader', 13 January 2002.



Nonetheless, from initial press coverage it was soon widely known that Barry's protagonist was a thinly-veiled portrait of Haughey.

It was just ten years since Haughey had stood up in the Dáil, to quote *Othello* by saying he had done the state 'some service' and then resigned as Taoiseach. The play's appeal, for an Irish audience at least, most likely lay in its reference to Ireland's very recent political past and moments of humour based on recognition. Indeed the satire of the main character's Napoleonic disposition in *Hinterland* might have appealed to Barnes, who was struggling to maintain diplomatic accord with the then Taoiseach, Bertie Ahern, over the proposed new building for the Abbey. The knowledge that the play engaged with the disgraced former Taoiseach was treated as 'deeply encouraging'. 'At last', one paper wrote, 'our literary lions are embracing the sordid reality of this Great little Nation, instead of producing endless literary doodles that explore the ability of language to embody the sense of ennui of its own meaninglessness, or not.'<sup>659</sup> There was no anticipation that the play would cause trouble for the beleaguered company; in Barnes's journals, detailing production preparation, the director at no point expressed concern that the subject matter might draw criticism for its thinly-veiled portrait of a well-known, still-living figure. What this also shows is two misunderstandings on the part of the Abbey: firstly that the Irish audience would not be disturbed by the content of the play and its treatment of too-familiar figure, while secondly that the drama would transfer and translate for UK audiences, for whom the figures were almost entirely unknown. As recognisable a figure as the corrupt politician is, the play was designed to make the Haughey references and in-jokes as specific as possible.

The development of *Hinterland*, on which Barry worked closely with director Max Stafford-Clark, required numerous drafts and late rewrites which continued up to the beginning of January.<sup>660</sup> The cast were as follows: Patrick Malahide as Victor Silvester, Dearbhla Molloy as Daisy, James Hayes as Stephen, Anna Healy

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<sup>659</sup> 'Et tu, Barry, as the Abbey Stabs Charlie Haughey Behind the Arras', *The Sunday Independent*, 3 February 2002.

<sup>660</sup> Liam Fay, 'Take Me To Your Leader', *Sunday Times*, 13 January 2002.

as Connie, Kieran Ahern as Cornelius, Phelim Drew as Jack, and Lucianne McEvoy as Aisling.

*Hinterland* had its first performances with Out of Joint at the Octagon Theatre in Bolton from 17-26 January.<sup>661</sup> Thereafter Stafford-Clark's production moved to the Abbey in Dublin from 1 to 23 February 2002, and played the Cottesloe of the National Theatre, London from March 28-18 April.<sup>662</sup> The play was then toured by Out of Joint/NT to the Arts Theatre, Cambridge, 23-27 April; the Theatre Royal, Bath from 30 April- 4 May, returned to the Cottesloe from 6 May to 1 June; the Oxford Playhouse from 4-8 June and concluded at the Liverpool Playhouse from 11-15 June.

In Dublin, the Abbey was expecting to have the Irish audience recognise the unsubtle portrayal of Charles Haughey in the character of Johnny Silvester,<sup>663</sup> particularly as Patrick Malahide had rehearsed the role by studying videos and photographs of Haughey.<sup>664</sup> As expected, the audience made the connection instantly, however it was judged a bad decision by most commentators. Fintan O'Toole's reviewed the play at length in *The Irish Times*, generally positively, without calling into question the appropriateness of the portrayal. The play, like the 'Taoiseach who inspired it', O'Toole wrote, was 'deeply flawed but utterly compelling'. While the Haughey portrait was obvious, O'Toole noted, it lacked nuance and in its precise accord with mimicry lacked 'the formal coherence of a tragedy'.<sup>665</sup> However the mainstream radio programme *Liveline* held a debate on in which Conor Lenihan, the son of the betrayed former colleague of Haughey's who is featured in the play, participated. As the son of the ghost, Lenihan felt

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<sup>661</sup> Coverage was unremarkable: 'It may well become an even richer experience with a greater knowledge of Irish politics, but that is by no means a prerequisite to finding *Hinterland* a highly stimulating and provocative experience.' *Citylife*, January 2002. In 'Nothing to Hide' the *Lancashire Telegraph* emphasises the BBC career of Patrick Malahide, informing readers his character 'is a former Irish Prime Minister who is investigated for corruption.' 11 January 2002

<sup>662</sup> The programme/text gives 30 January as the Irish premiere, but it was postponed.

<sup>663</sup> Barnes, page 176.

<sup>664</sup> Donal O'Donoghue, 'Malahide Strand', *RTÉ Guide*, 25 January 2002.

In this interview O'Donoghue visits the actor and is shown a photo of Haughey tacked up on the rehearsal room wall at Out of Joint's rehearsal space in Finsbury, North London. Then Malahide does an impression of Haughey/Silvester; 'He slips into the shoes of the former Taoiseach'. Malahide denies he is a simple cipher. 'I'm not attempting an impersonation because that's not the point.'

<sup>665</sup> Fintan O'Toole, 'Portrait of Haughey as Macbeth at Bay', *The Irish Times*, 2 February 2002.



entitled to comment that though he had not seen it, he advised the Haughey family to sue the Abbey.<sup>666</sup> Sebastian Barry was then called in to defend accusations that the play suggested one of Haughey's children became suicidal because of the revelations about his political scandals. It was, Barry insisted, a personal story, but personal to him.<sup>667</sup> Indeed when staged in Bolton, it was reported, the audiences 'who don't carry loads of baggage about Haughey, responded to it as a play about power, fatherhood [and] sex.'<sup>668</sup>

As imaginary as the intended central figure was to Barry, the conflation of the factual aspects of the disgraced leader's life and career with the fictional events of the play, namely the suicide attempt of Silvester's son, was generally received by Dublin audiences as completely inappropriate. The representation of the attempted suicide imposed on a familiar story of living people was taken to be in poor taste, because the factual events portrayed were familiar. The imposition of this conclusion took the play from occasionally comic representation to malediction.

Because of the strength of the general reaction, there then was an evolution in the public debate on the play. Commentators seized upon the outrage in order to criticise the play on political grounds, in terms of engaging with the party politics of the day, but also to condemn the Abbey Theatre, at a time when its existence was constantly questioned. Conor Lenihan, for instance, followed up his radio interview with an article in the *Evening Herald* on the play, protesting, that 'anybody is now prepared to have a go at members of the political class'.<sup>669</sup>

For the occasion Lenihan also termed the play 'faction': a 'curious genre which mixes both fact and fiction', that allowed Barry to steal aspects of Haughey's life

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<sup>666</sup> Richard Delevan, Richard, 'Play Acting with our Right to Think', *Evening Herald*, 6 February 2002.

<sup>667</sup> This debate was also commented on by a Richard Delevan, who argued against the hysteria forming around discussion of the play. Richard Delevan, 'Play Acting with our Right to Think', *Evening Herald*, 6 February 2002.

<sup>668</sup> Frank Khan, 'Public Took Haughey Play Too Literally', *The Irish Independent*, 28 February 2002.

<sup>669</sup> Conor Lenihan, 'Spare CJ These Abbey Sneers', *Evening Herald*, 7 February 2002.



for his play, in such a way that 'actually blackens his reputation further by carrying with it the potent message that, not only was he an outrageous politician, but he was a bad father'. Ultimately it was, Lenihan wrote, 'highly distasteful and a bad play to boot', citing also the authority of former Labour party adviser, Fergus Finlay, who thought it a technically bad play. In a rare positive review, Stephen Collins, the political editor of *The Sunday Tribune*, wrote that Barry's 'remarkable new play', was 'astonishing', but that he found it hard to judge, as some in the audience apparently felt it was too tough on Haughey, others that it was too soft. Largely, he found, it was 'an upmarket *Scrap Saturday*' and 'a matter for the theatre critics to assess.'<sup>670</sup> Ironically Collins's politically-themed review dealt more with issues of pace, tone and problematic characters, while Irish politicians commented on the technical and dramaturgical faults they found with the play. Meanwhile theatre critics took the political view: in particular how Haughey should be remembered, and whether contemporary Ireland was ready to move on from Haughey's political era.

Most Irish reviews of the play, even prior to the scandal, included a photo of Haughey, sometimes in lieu of a publicity shot of the actors. In an *Evening Herald* review of the play, Luke Clancy echoed the remarks of Jocelyn Clarke in which Clarke pointed out that attacks on the clergy in *Barbaric Comedies* added to an over-saturated conversation. A play about Haughey would have been more interesting ten years previously, Clancy argued, 'Now tilting at CJH is mainstream.'<sup>671</sup> Many were critical of the character's being a 'thinly-veiled' portrait of Haughey, while Eileen Battersby criticized the play's 'bad manners' in her review for *The Irish Times*<sup>672</sup> and the *Sunday Tribune* wrote that Ireland's national theatre were engaging in lazy, casual malice.<sup>673</sup> (See Fig. 4.5). Jimmy Guerin and Bruce Arnold found fault that Silvester was not Haughey enough. Guerin wrote that it was a 'cheap shot' on the one hand, and that, on the other,

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<sup>670</sup> *Scrap Saturday* was a popular satirical radio programme that ran on RTÉ from 1989 to 1991. Stephen Collins, 'Is this a Charvet Shirt I see Before Me?', *Sunday Tribune*, 3 February 2002

<sup>671</sup> Luke Clancy, 'Not up to Charvet Standard', *Evening Herald*, 5 February 2002.

<sup>672</sup> Eileen Battersby, 'Poor Drama and Bad Manners', *The Irish Times*, 9 February 2002.

<sup>673</sup> Brenda Power, 'It's Right to Make a Right Charlie out of Liam', *Sunday Tribune*, 10 February 2002.

the 'poorly researched' characters were not like the Haughey family, whom he had known for over 20 years.<sup>674</sup> Arnold wrote in *The Irish Independent* that the Patrick Malahide as Silvester missed 'the remarkable Napoleonic presence of the man. Instead, the actor spends much of the play leaning over bits of furniture, in a way that is quite uncharacteristic of the real man he portrays', expressing the widely-held view that this was an attempt to portray a real man, and as such *Hinterland* was subject to criticism for its documentary failures.<sup>675</sup>

Amid the angry reviews, some critics were tongue-in-cheek about the uproar. Liam Fay pointed out in *The Sunday Times* out that Silvester was a wholly unlikely rendering, because of his functioning conscience, which made him, as a corrupt Irish politician, 'akin to a science fiction character'.<sup>676</sup> Perhaps as a result of the mainstream discussions of the play, or because of a reluctance to engage with the argument, some theatre critics recoiled from the debate. On the RTÉ radio arts show *Rattlebag* Myles Dungan, Peter Crawley and Mary Coll dismissed the play as 'tabloid theatre',<sup>677</sup> while *The Sunday Times*'s Michael Ross tartly reported that Tom Murphy did not deem Sebastian Barry to be a playwright at all.<sup>678</sup> Emer O'Kelly parlayed the scandal into a debate on the impartiality of RTÉ, after she was invited to discuss the play on *Liveline* but was dropped, she claimed, as she intended to discuss only 'the theatricality of it'.<sup>679</sup> Nonetheless it was not because she was anxious to defend the play: in the same day's paper, O'Kelly reviewed *Hinterland* as having 'huge structural weaknesses as well as strengths', and that Barry combined 'farcical elements with edges of melodrama, but the two sit uneasily at times'.<sup>680</sup> Not all reviews were negative, and a defensive tone emerged. *The Sunday Business Post* wrote that it was 'a remarkable and cleverly written play', 'a sort of *Scrooge* meets *Bull Island*', and

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<sup>674</sup> Jimmy Guerin, 'Cheap Shot at the Private Lives of Haughey Family', *The Sunday Independent*, 10 February 2002.

<sup>675</sup> Bruce Arnold, 'Anaemic Reflection of a Tempestuous Life', *The Irish Independent*, 5 February 2002.

<sup>676</sup> Liam Fay, 'Take Me To Your Leader', *Sunday Times*, 13 January 2002.

<sup>677</sup> *Rattlebag*, RTÉ Radio 1, 2.45 pm, 11 February 2002.

<sup>678</sup> Michael Ross, 'Culture', *Sunday Times*, 17 February 2002.

<sup>679</sup> Emer O'Kelly, 'A Party Line Belies Impartiality on Air', *The Sunday Independent*, 10 February 2002.

<sup>680</sup> *Ibid.*



that 'Patrick Malahide's acting skills gets right under the skin of Haughey's character.'<sup>681</sup> Hugh Leonard advised reading the play in the idiom of the film *Citizen Kane* rather than as a tragedy,<sup>682</sup> and the writer Jennifer Johnston wrote to *The Irish Times* criticising Battersby's 'vituperative' piece which she argued read as a personal attack on the writer.<sup>683</sup>

After three days of coverage, the Abbey were contacted by solicitors for Haughey seeking a copy of the script (Barnes claims to have invited the legal council to buy one 'in the foyer for a fiver'),<sup>684</sup> and later in the run Eoin McGonigal, the Haughey's barrister, was seen attending the play.<sup>685</sup> The subsequent controversy over the play oscillated in the press between criticism of the apparent personal attacks on the Haughey family and the overly sympathetic portrayal of Haughey. Barnes gave a public statement on the play and on the Abbey's decision to stage it, the irritated tone of which only served to further damage his relationship with the media.<sup>686</sup> Instead of evoking an intelligent Irish audience capable of making their own decisions, Barnes instead criticised reviewers incapable of understanding theatre.

Prior to its London opening, the theatre reviews in the UK for *Hinterland* glossed the Haughey references for audiences for whom the actor's cultivated mannerisms did not connote local political corruption. Silvester was described in *The Guardian* as 'a father to the Irish nation', 'a tragic-comic figure who is part of

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<sup>681</sup> Linda Flood, 'Hinterland', *The Sunday Business Post*, 10 February 2002.

<sup>682</sup> Hugh Leonard, 'Wednesday', *The Sunday Independent*, 17 February 2002.

<sup>683</sup> Jennifer Johnston, Letters, *The Irish Times*, 18 February 2002.

<sup>684</sup> Barnes, p. 176.

<sup>685</sup> Brenda Power, 'It's Right to Make a Right Charlie out of Liam', *Sunday Tribune*, 10 February 2002. He was elsewhere reported to have pointedly sat in front of 'three *Sunday Independent* writers'. While the legal sabre-rattling is interesting, it also tells us something of the type of audience that attended the play, in this case an inordinate number of journalists, unlikely theatre critics all. Jody Corcoran, 'Haughey Fury at Abbey Play', *The Sunday Independent*, 10 February 2002.

<sup>686</sup> Barnes, *Plays and Controversies*, p 178. Also Victoria White, "'Hinterland" Defended by Abbey's Artistic Director', *The Irish Times*, 14 February 2002, Bruce Arnold, 'Hamstrung Icon Needs More than a Cash Crutch', *The Irish Independent*, 14 February 2002 and Martha Kearns, 'Abbey Scorns 'Ignorant Journalists' Over CJ Play', *The Irish Independent*, 14 February 2002.

The remarks Barnes made in the papers most likely contributed to the negative treatment he then received in the media immediately after, as the new building plans were dragged out again.



the Irish psyche as Barry sees it', and 'Ireland's villain.'<sup>687</sup> If the Irish press focussed excessively on itemising the similarities between Silvester and Haughey, the English press was trapped in a similar one-note response to the play, mentioning the Irish scandal in every review.<sup>688</sup> *The Independent's* pre-press interview with Patrick Malahide referred to his performance 'as a disgraced Irish politician' which 'caused an uproar in Dublin', and described the play as exemplifying 'the subjectivity of audience reaction'. Malahide agreed that performing the play at the Cottesloe would be 'like doing a completely different play'.<sup>689</sup> *Hinterland* was indeed a different play in London, but as Benedict Nightingale observed, the lack of controversy served only to show that the play's strength lay in the audience's recognition of a specific man, not a representative father figure. Without the Haughey connotation, the play did not interest audiences and generally reviews were negative.<sup>690</sup>

What is interesting about this co-production is what its international profile tells us about the objections to the play in Ireland. Irish audiences disliked the play for its bad taste in representing a too-real portrait of a living individual, while simultaneously stimulating a discussion about recent politics that encouraged at least a reflection on Ireland's complex relationship with Haughey and his party. In the UK however Haughey was known neither in London nor Bolton for the crowd to recognise his mimicked mannerisms in the way an Irish audience would, and so no offence was taken. In fact the British press felt it incumbent

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<sup>687</sup> 'Theatre', *The Guardian*, 23 February 2002. See also Fiachra Gibbons, 'Ireland's Villain Recast in a New Light', *The Guardian*, 16 February 2002.

<sup>688</sup> Such as Michael Billington's 'Where's the beef?' in Michael Billington, 'Hinterland', *The Guardian*, 6 March 2002, Benedict Nightingale, 'Dish Loses Spice the Side of the Irish Sea', *The Times*, 6 March 2002, Susannah Clapp, 'Theatre', *The Observer*, 10 March 2002, James Inverne, 'Tragedy or Farce?', *Time*, 18 March 2002.

<sup>689</sup> Daniel Rosenthal, Daniel, 'Charles Haughey, I presume?', *The Independent*, 27 February 2002.

<sup>690</sup> Benedict Nightingale, 'Dish Loses Spice the Side of the Irish Sea', *The Times*, 6 March 2002. The *Evening Herald* appeared to delight in reporting on the negative London reviews, citing Barnes's recent comments. Peter Howick, 'Now London Critics Lash Haughey Play', *Evening Herald*, 7 March 2002. For *The Stage*, the play lacked 'Irish charm' and the reviewer thought Barry was 'embroiled in the shabby world of present-day politics': 'the shady deals and stretching of the moral code', were 'all too familiar in contemporary England.' Peter Hepple, 'No Irish Charm in Dull Piece', *The Stage*, 7 March 2002. See also 'Reviewing *Hinterland*', *The Phoenix*, 15 March 2002.

upon them to explain just who he was and what the play was attempting to do.<sup>691</sup> As such, the objections in the British coverage of the play were focussed on dramaturgical failings, proving the dictum *De gustibus non disputandum est*, or that in this case, the play's apparent bad taste was localised in Ireland.

If Jack's suicide was unpleasant for a Bolton or London audience, then in an Ireland where Haughey's family had gained familiarity through the mainstream press in most households it was comparable to being confronted with the reality of Old Mahon's bloody head. This familiarity was further underscored by extraneous events, such as the *Liveline* debate (the popular programme reached an audience of approximately 334,000 in 2002). In any case, while many of the plays under consideration here show how Ireland is viewed internationally, internationally-staged Abbey plays like *Barbaric Comedies* and *Hinterland* show how the Irish view themselves, and Barry's conflation of a recognisable dysfunctional family with national politics was an uneasy pressure point of the play.

Unlike *Barbaric Comedies*, the controversy in Ireland around *Hinterland*, threats that the Haughey family would sue and the increasing mainstream media coverage, led to the story being picked up again by the British and international press, this time not as a mutely received new play, but as the latest Abbey scandal.<sup>692</sup> Where, for instance, at the final curtain Haughey's family barrister Eoin McGonigal's response was reported to have been 'even more muted than most in the three-quarters-filled theatre', in which 'the audience was reluctant to applaud a second bow; it did, briefly, as the theatre emptied,'<sup>693</sup> ticket sales were in fact very good thereafter, with queues forming before the box office opened. Barnes had also by now presided over a theatre that had developed many European and US exchanges, had staged successful new Irish writing in Eugene O'Brien's *Eden* (2002), which transferred to the Arts Theatre, West End, London,

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<sup>691</sup> *The Guardian* published a short guide to Haughey. Fiachra Gibbons, 'Ireland's Villain Recast in a New Light', *The Guardian*, 16 February 2002.

<sup>692</sup> Mark Brennock, 'Haughey's Lawyers Studying Script of Abbey's *Hinterland*', *The Irish Times*, 7 February 2002, Jody Corcoran, 'Haughey Fury at Abbey Play', *The Sunday Independent*, 10 February 2002.

<sup>693</sup> Jody Corcoran, 'Haughey Fury at Abbey Play', *The Sunday Independent*, 10 February 2002.



October 2002 to positive, if muted reviews. The Abbey had also won numerous theatre awards. All of this was overshadowed by the controversies, however, and the ongoing financial problems that caused the cancellation of important theatre projects, the critical condemnation of *Hinterland* and the PR disaster of Barnes's reaction detracted from his already dwindling approval, and would contribute to the exceptional negative reception his projects earned thereafter.

Meanwhile, the biggest international success of Barnes's tenure, *Medea*, was well underway and would prove surprisingly ineffective in turning around the fortunes of the Abbey or its beleaguered management.

#### **'A Woman of Noted Misbehaviour': *Medea***

First staged in Dublin in 2000 using a 1994 translation, *Medea*, with the high-profile Deborah Warner as director and the well-known Fiona Shaw as Medea, in 2002 was the first major production transfer of Barnes's as AD. The production should have been a recuperative international project after *Barbaric Comedies* and *Hinterland* had overwhelmed the positive reviews of *Translations* and *Eden*. However there were problems with the production of *Medea* from the very start, largely due to a personality clash between Deborah Warner and Ben Barnes.<sup>694</sup>

The Warner-Shaw *Medea* was the first Greek play to be staged at the Abbey in 27 years. As part of a concerted effort to explore 'the classic European repertoire', which Barnes considered crucial in his 'opening up of the Abbey', the theatre also staged *Iphigenia at Aulis* directed by Kate Mitchell, in 2001, and later Seamus Heaney's *The Burial at Thebes* in 2004.<sup>695</sup>

The famous story was unchanged: the protagonist of *Medea* finds herself isolated in a strange land when the father of her children decides strategically to marry the daughter of a powerful man. Medea gains revenge by murdering her rival, then her own children. Marina Carr's retelling of the story in an Irish context in *By the Bog of Cats* (1998) was a significant success for the Abbey Theatre, and paved the way for a staging of the original. Warner's *Medea* explored celebrity

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<sup>694</sup> Ben Barnes, *Plays and Controversies*, p. 56.

<sup>695</sup> Barnes, *Plays and Controversies*, p. 27 and p. 122.



and new money culture, which, even if accidental, offered a meaningful representation of contemporary Ireland. Furthermore, Barnes discussed with Warner the notion of having some of *Medea* in Irish: that is, during scenes in which characters did not want Medea to understand what they were saying and thus emphasise her alienation (and very likely alienate some audience members too).<sup>696</sup>

In Warner's production for the Abbey, *Medea* was updated, first by means of Kenneth McLeish and Frederic Raphael's colloquial translation and in the contemporary wardrobe design. (See Figs. 4.6 and 4.7). Jason was cast as an attractive younger man with a close-fitting white t-shirt that suggested contemporary ideas of male beauty. Later, in the West End transfer, Patrick Kane was replaced by Jonathan Cake, who was reported in many reviews for his past role as the generically attractive, but anonymous man in the Cadbury Milk Tray television adverts. The character of Jason was not anonymous, but rather a cipher of upper-class vanity. Jacqueline Durran's costume design had Fiona Shaw wearing cardigans, day dresses and sunglasses, at one point with mismatched running shoes, to suggest her distraction. In the final scene once Medea's decision was reached, Shaw wore a loose plastic raincoat, like a butcher (and described in *Variety* as a 'shroud' although it was most certainly an up-to-date plastic cagoul), that showed up the lurid blood spatter. The music, such as it was, was a constant, imposing ambient noise, suggestive of city and traffic sounds.

The set design, grey and industrial, incorporated cinderblocks to effect a hostile and distinctly modern environment. The unfinished nature caused by the loose blocks reflected an emerging trait of the Ireland of the time: a newly-wealthy country obsessed with property that was hastily developing estates and apartment blocks throughout the rural landscape.

A wall of sliding glass doors upstage and small pool downstage suggested the expensive house in which this celebrity couple-style Medea and Jason lived, with modern plastic children's toys scattered about the stage. The production notes for the NY transfer indicate the desired effect of the designers:

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<sup>696</sup> Barnes, *Plays and Controversies*, p. 33.

No standard black masking will be used; all areas of the stage, forestage, and proscenium will be visible to the audience will be treated as part of the scenic environment. Re: downstage trapdoor: It consists of a center 8' x 8' x 8' deep pool filled with water, surrounded by a perforated steel grating. [...] The pool water will need to be changed periodically due to the amount of blood used in the show. [...] This show is bloody and messy! There is a possibility of a cleanup call following performances.<sup>697</sup>

The costumes and toys served both to modernise and domesticate the myth. The see-through wall and pool also doubled to enhance the bloodiness of the final scene, as the children were shown first walking to a coaxing Fiona Shaw, then, as blood was splashed across it, the surviving child was seen running away from her and being roughly caught up. Once killed, the children were carried to the pool by Shaw. She then washed them in the water they had earlier played in, turning it red and expanding the palette of blood on stage, which by the end dominated the visual aspect. Afterwards, the ending devised by Warner and Shaw saw Medea sitting partly in the pool flicking water at a devastated Jason, rather than ascending victoriously as in the original play's ending.

When the play went into previews, it was with some ongoing problems, and it was around this time that relations broke down between Barnes and Warner. Barnes has since written that he was asked by Warner to cancel the first preview and delay the opening of the play so that additional work could be done. Warner was concerned about opening the play when she did not deem it ready, while Barnes was anxious that tickets had been sold already.<sup>698</sup> Subsequent run-ins between Barnes and Warner, detailed in *Plays and Controversies*, contributed to the acrimony. The play opened at the Abbey on 6 June 2000. Once the production was underway at the Abbey, Barnes wrote, offers to support a tour came in from all over the world. Critical responses were very positive from the very beginning, and those excellent notices drove enthusiastic ticket sales.

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<sup>697</sup> Production Summary, File NWF 2002 *Medea*: BAM Archive.

<sup>698</sup> Barnes, *Plays*, p 55.

The West End arrangements for *Medea* were finalised in November 2000, with Barnes underlying his expectation that the Abbey would obtain a 'decent media profile' from the transfer.<sup>699</sup> Additionally, in March 2002 Barnes met with Jed Wheeler, the American producer for *Medea* to arrange the contract for that summer's transfer to the US, during which they also discussed the possibility of bringing Tom Murphy's *The Gigli Concert* and *A Whistle in the Dark* to New York.<sup>700</sup> However the decline of Barnes's relationship with Deborah Warner and the subsequent problems with *Medea* eventually inhibited both.

By June plans were underway to bring *Medea* to Paris and New York. In order to balance the expense of mounting the play in New York, the American producer sought to also arrange a regional tour in the US, which Warner and Shaw werereluctant to undertake.<sup>701</sup> The Abbey also struggled to broker indemnification against loss with the proposed venues, and the tour was projecting a loss. With that, and the threat of losing the London cast, Barnes recommended to the Abbey board that they withdraw, at a point when the BAM and Chailot theatres had already announced the play in their respective seasons. The withdrawal prompted action from Really Useful Theatre (behind the London production) to restart the project and an agreement was hammered out (this development caused further tensions between Barnes and Warner).<sup>702</sup> Although the Abbey were obliged to process the immigration paperwork as it was an Irish national theatre-origin production, *Medea* had now symbolically left the Abbey's hands, and a review of the subsequent press coverage shows very little acknowledgement of the play's origins at the Abbey.

### ***Medea* in London**

After *Medea* ran for six weeks in the Abbey in June 2000 to positive reviews, the production was then transferred to the Queen's Theatre, London, from 30 January to 14 April 2001, with extensive recasting. Most of the Irish cast with the obvious exception of Shaw were replaced: Siobhan McCarthy took over from

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<sup>699</sup> Ibid, p. 102.

<sup>700</sup> Ibid, p. 188.

<sup>701</sup> Ibid, p. 203.

<sup>702</sup> Ibid, p. 205.



Fiona Bell as the nurse, Jonathan Slinger took over from Garret Keogh as the tutor in a manner that was less teacher-like and more playful, Jonathan Cake took the role of Jason, Struan Rodger as Kreon, and Robert Hines took over as the Messenger.<sup>703</sup> David Nowlan wrote that in spite of the recasting it was:

Essentially the same as it was seen in the Abbey last June. But it has become more assertive, less carefully understated than it was in Dublin, and Shaw's Medea has become significantly less diffident, less overtly house-wifey, than she was.<sup>704</sup>

But the most significant difference was that, in the Irish production, Medea's outsider status was emphasised by Fiona Shaw's RP English accent against the Irish accents of the chorus. In the West End surrounded by various regional English accents, Shaw's Medea now spoke with an Irish accent, and so her outsider status was underlined with changing accents.

The transfer took place after Shaw had been appointed honorary CBE, had filmed *The Triumph of Love* with Ben Kingsley and was at a new height of fame for her part in the *Harry Potter* films, and so the appeal to audiences in this Abbey transfer obviously lay with her celebrity appeal. Among considerable newspaper coverage, *Medea's* London run is barely discernible as an Abbey production. Barnes's name comes up infrequently, in *The Guardian* the play is reviewed as 'Deborah Warner's production, which hails from the Abbey Theatre, Dublin'.<sup>705</sup> Where Shaw and Warner were widely interviewed and invited to contribute a co-written article to the *Guardian* on making *Medea* sympathetic,<sup>706</sup> an archive search brought up no full interviews with the artistic director of the theatre on foot of this much-touted new transfer.<sup>707</sup> The response to *Medea*, which was widely reviewed in the UK, was very enthusiastic.<sup>708</sup> The audiences too

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<sup>703</sup> Design: Tom Pye, Lighting Design: Peter Mumford, Costume Design: Tom Rand, Sound Design: Mel Mercier, Running time remained one hour forty minutes without an intermission.

<sup>704</sup> David Nowlan, 'Medea', *The Irish Times*, 1 February 2001.

<sup>705</sup> Michael Billington, 'Reviews', *The Guardian*, 31 January 2001.

<sup>706</sup> Fiona Shaw and Deborah Warner, 'Sympathy for the Devil', *The Guardian*, 30 January 2001.

<sup>707</sup> With the exception of comments by Jason Corcoran, 'Battered but Unbowed, Cast Triumph over a Greek Tragedy', *Evening Standard*, 31 January 2001.

<sup>708</sup> 'Last night, Fiona Shaw electrified Shaftesbury Avenue as Medea, bloodcurdling descendant of the Sun (the god, not the newspaper), and took her terrible revenge.' Michael Coveney, 'This

responded well: the play's West End audience gave a standing ovation on its opening night at Shaftsbury Avenue.<sup>709</sup>

The production began to gain notoriety for its bloodiness on and offstage; the cast and crew at the West End premiere were said to be 'relieved to emerge from the performance relatively unscathed.' A member of the stage crew had 'badly injured her hand after pulling down the ropes' and Shaw had suffered a disappointingly banal ear infection.<sup>710</sup> Moreover so brutal was the end scene that a number of audience members fainted in the auditorium, with growing numbers tending to faint once it was reported in the press. *The Observer* said that:

At the end, some people in the audience have swooned – one or two have even been sick – as Medea kills her little boys, to punish her faithless husband.<sup>711</sup>

*The Times* reviewer that:

A woman near me had to be helped out before the end, so vivid was a murder scene.<sup>712</sup>

*The Independent* that:

the audience gave the cast a standing ovation although some were concerned about the violence.<sup>713</sup>

And *The Sunday Press*, with some relish that:

When the feisty Irish actress bloodily slaughtered her two children on the Abbey stage during the Dublin run of *Medea*, five people passed out. Last

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Electric *Medea*, *The Daily Mail*, 31 January 2001. See also Nicholas De Jongh, 'Cruelty Through Time', *The Evening Standard*, 31 January 2001, Kate Kellaway, 'The Mother of all Tragedies', *The Observer Review*, 21 January 2001, Paul Taylor, 'A Mother's Revenge Served Cold...and very Bloody', *The Independent*, 31 January 2001.

<sup>709</sup> Paul Taylor, 'A Mother's Revenge Served Cold...and very Bloody', *The Independent*, 31 January 2001.

<sup>710</sup> Jason Corcoran, 'Battered but Unbowed, Cast Triumph over a Greek Tragedy', *Evening Standard*, 31 January 2001.

<sup>711</sup> Kate Kellaway, 'The Mother of all Tragedies', *The Observer Review*, 21 January 2001.

<sup>712</sup> Benedict Nightingale, 'Athenian Female Fury', *The Times*, 31 January 2001.

<sup>713</sup> Jason Corcoran, 'Battered but Unbowed, Cast Triumph over a Greek Tragedy', *Evening Standard*, 31 January 2001.

Tuesday night at the London premiere in the Queen's Theatre only one spectator was overcome by Deborah Warner's gory production. [...] After cleaning the fake blood off her person Fiona emerged for the after-show party to inquire: 'Did anyone faint?' She seemed disappointed to learn that only one had succumbed.<sup>714</sup>

The play's notoriety for its bloodiness and for the number of swooning audience members grew with the run. Probably the impact on the audience was due to the contemporary flourishes in the design which made the violence less notional and more literal, such as the long splash of blood against the glass sliding doors which preceded the attempted escape and violent capture of one of Medea's sons. As Michael Billington described it, Warner's production was 'closer to the milieu of Edward Bond' than a Corinthian palace' and 'banished 'the rhetorical formality of antique tragedy to replace it with a contemporary rhetoric of its own'.<sup>715</sup>

Benedict Nightingale interpreted that domestic note as a particularly Irish one:

This *Medea* comes from Dublin's Abbey Theatre, and everyone, from the principals to the chorus, wears the scarves, dresses, cardigans, anoraks and denim shirts you might see in any Irish town. It hardly needs saying that if you seek size, grandeur, poetry and all the things conventionally associated with tragedy, this isn't the production for you. But if you want immediacy, directness and intensity, you should feel more satisfied.<sup>716</sup>

While Nightingale at least made an Irish connection in the Abbey-originating play, it was nonetheless of a dated image of an impoverished, rural Ireland. By its US run, *Medea* was barely an emissary of the national theatre.

### ***Medea* in New York**

When the Abbey returned to BAM 26 years after *The Plough and the Stars* for the bicentennial, it was to stage *Medea* in the Harvey Lichtenstein Theatre. Barnes

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<sup>714</sup> John McEntee, 'Gory Stage Drama is Damned by Faint Praise', *Sunday Express*, 4 February 2001.

<sup>715</sup> Michael Billington, 'Reviews', *The Guardian*, 31 January 2001.

<sup>716</sup> Benedict Nightingale, 'Athenian Female Fury', *The Times*, 31 January 2001.



did not go to New York for the previews of *Medea*, later writing that he was busy with the centenary production of *The Plough and the Stars* and his production of *Danser à Lughnasa* at Le Théâtre du Nouveau Monde in Montreal. He was also still at variance with Deborah Warner.

Following what was a very successful West End run (the production won two *Evening Standard* awards for Warner's direction and Shaw's performance), *Medea* was well received in the US too. The play opened in Brooklyn 1 October 2002 for the 2002 Next Wave festival to standing ovations, and completely sold out. BAM Archivist Sharon Lehner recalled that, despite being sold out, the show nonetheless attracted ticket-seekers who queued around the building in the rain,<sup>717</sup> and Joe Melillo, BAM's executive producer, told the press that demand for tickets was 'like a tsunami'. A lot of celebrities called at the last minute to get in: 'the ones we were able to accommodate were Meryl Streep, Kevin Kline and Harvey Keitel.'<sup>718</sup> The preview coverage in the press was wide-ranging.<sup>719</sup>

After 13 performances at BAM, *Medea* was generally dubbed the essential ticket of the season,<sup>720</sup> and so a Broadway run was arranged for later in the season. It continued to almost universal critical acclaim to the Wilbur Theatre, Boston,<sup>721</sup> Kennedy Center's Terrace Theater, Washington,<sup>722</sup> Ann Arbor, Michigan<sup>723</sup>

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<sup>717</sup> Interview Sharon Lehner, BAM, June 2010.

<sup>718</sup> Riedel, Michael, 'Gore Galore for B'way', *New York Post*, 16 October 2002.

<sup>719</sup> Liz Waiser, 'Bridging the Arts in West Brooklyn', *Home Reporter and Sunset News*, 27 September; 'Brooklyn Academy of Music', *Civic News*, September/October 2002; 'NY Theater', *Newsday*, 8 September, 2002; Kevin Filipiski, 'Scientific Method', *The Brooklyn Papers*, 30 September 2002; Donald Lyons, 'Coming Out', *New York Post*, 5 September 2002 and 'The New Season Theater', *New York Times*, 8 September 2002.

<sup>720</sup> David A. Rosenberg, 'Medea', *Backstage.com*, 11 October 2002; Abby Ranger, 'Gripping Contemporary Production of Medea fills BAM Stage', *Brooklyn Heights Press & Cobble Hill News*, 10 October 2002; Paulanne Simmons, 'Beyond Reason', *The Brooklyn Papers*, 14 October 2002; Jason Zinoman, 'Medea', *Time Out New York*, 10 October 2002; Alisa Solomon, 'The Greats of Wrath', *Village Voice*, 9 October 2002; 'Theater Guide', *New York Times*, 11 October 2002; Ellen Lampert-Gréaux, 'Medea at BAM', *e\*Wire Lighting Newsletter*, 11 October, 2002; Linda Winer, 'As it Should Be, a Medea as Grisly as the News', *Newsday*, 4 October 2002; Donald Lyons, 'Athenian Tragedy Imported in Sexy Splendor', *New York Post*, 4 October, 2002 and Karen Fricker, 'An Ancient Tragedy Lands in the Present, Pain Intact', *New York Times*, 29 September 2002.

<sup>721</sup> Maureen Dezell, 'Woman on the Verge', *Boston Globe*, 18 October 2002.

<sup>722</sup> Alona Wartofsky, 'With Medea, She Didn't Just Get Mad', *Washington Post*, 3 November 2002; Donald Lyons, 'An Antiquated Antigone', *New York Post*, 1 November 2002 and Nina daVinci Nichols, 'Medea: One really Tough Lady', *Theatrescene.net*, 4 November 2002.

<sup>723</sup> Mimi Kramer, 'Medea', *New York Press*, 16 October, 2002; Christopher Potter, 'Shaw Astounds in a Weak Medea', *mlive.com*, 17 October 2002 and Joseph Hurley, 'Shaw Wows US Audiences as Medea', *Irish Echo*, 18 October 2002.

(where the reception was less effusive, but Shaw was consistently singled out for her performance as excellent); the Zellerbach Playhouse in Berkeley, Chicago<sup>724</sup> and back to New York, to the Brooks Atkinson Theatre on Broadway in December.<sup>725</sup>

The play's appeal was primarily the celebrity status of Shaw, who represented an unusual dual-benefit of being a household name celebrity but with a reputation for serious accomplishment in the theatre. *Medea* was extremely successful at BAM, with Fiona Shaw and Deborah Warner both winning at the 48<sup>th</sup> annual *Village Voice* Obie Awards.<sup>726</sup> The reviews, unsurprisingly, were ecstatic.

Upscaling to Broadway, *Medea* ran for 12 weeks at the Brooks Atkinson Theatre, 256 West 47<sup>th</sup> st., NY, from the 10 December to 22 February, the first BAM show to transfer to Broadway since *The Gospel at Colonus* in the 1980s, and the first Abbey-Broadway transfer since *Dancing at Lughnasa*.<sup>727</sup> *Medea* could easily have had an extended Broadway run, but for an already sold-out engagement in Paris at Le Théâtre National de Chaillot. The play's success in New York and the prestige associated with the production was reported back in Dublin.<sup>728</sup>

The *New York Times* identified the production's emphasis on *Medea* as a celebrity figure, in dress, cardigan, running shoes and dark glasses, as 'she might have stepped from those pages of *The National Enquirer* devoted to stars foolish enough to leave home without makeup'.<sup>729</sup> As with most reviews, the play is referred to as 'the thrilling Abbey Theater production', but there the Abbey

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<sup>724</sup> Elena Paek, 'Abbey Rethinks 'Medea' Irish Troupe Brings New Interpretation to Classic', *San Francisco Chronicle*, 10 November 2002; Gordon Cox, 'Stroman, Lane Prepare to Leap into 'Frogs'', *New York Post* 5 December, 2002 and Michael Phillips, 'Violence, Horror, Set *Medea* Stage', *Chicago Tribune*, 21 October 2002.

<sup>725</sup> John Lahr, 'Killing for Company', *The New Yorker*, 23 December 2002; Clive Barnes, *New York Post*, 'Medea Played for Laughs and Tears', *New York Post*, 11 December, 2002; 'On Theater', *The New York Sun*, December, 2002 and David Littlejohn, 'Updating Euripides With a Chorus of Irish Housewives', *The Wall Street Journal*, 19 September 2002.

<sup>726</sup> Jacobs, Leonard, '6 Obies at Brooklyn Station', *Hollywood Reporter*, *Los Angeles*, 21 May 2003 also Cox, Gordon, 'Host for the Tony Awards? It Had to be Hugh', *Newsday*, 22 May 2003.

<sup>727</sup> By now the cast was as follows: Nurse: Siobhan McCarthy; *Medea*: Fiona Shaw; Tutor: Robin Laing; Chorus: Kirsten Campbell; Joyce Henderson; Rachel Isaac; Pauline Lynch; Susan Salmon; Kreon: Struan Rodger; Jason: Jonathan Cake; Aegaeus: Joseph Mydell; Messenger: Derek Hutchinson.

<sup>728</sup> 'NY Hails Abbey's 'Medea'', *The Irish Times*, 5 October 2002.

<sup>729</sup> Ben Brantley, 'An Ancient Tragedy Fit for the World of Today', *New York Times*, 4 October 2002.



connection falls dead. Brantley engages with the play in terms of how it comments on latter-day celebrity culture and wealth as general themes and not as an insight into the contemporary Ireland from whose national theatre the play emerged. The sparse Broadway programme image is certainly free of shamrocks (See Fig. 4.8)..

The play's success in the US was assured by the usual factors: the Broadway run allowed critics to reinforce their vindicated endorsements for the previous Brooklyn run of the production, such as *Curtain Up*,<sup>730</sup> and Sara Krulwich for *The New York Times*, who simply extracted Ben Brantley's previous review.<sup>731</sup> It also allowed for others to recast their opinions on a slightly changed play. For instance in the Brooks Atkinson Theater, the overall space was larger than at BAM, but the audience were closer to the action. This also meant that the view of the pool was obscured for the most part for many audience members, whereas in BAM the sunken amphitheater had facilitated the audience's view. Charles Isherwood wrote that he'd thought the chorus 'often-hysterical' and 'overly intense' in BAM, but with its having moved to a theatre space where the audience were closer to the action, this no longer seemed to be the case. The audience, he argued, benefitted from the nervous energy and were engaged by it.<sup>732</sup>

Overall, the reviews for the Broadway run were just as positive.<sup>733</sup> As was to be expected, in January, 2003 *The Phoenix* magazine in Ireland reported that the

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<sup>730</sup> 'Now that I've seen the play again, I can safely report that it's transferred without a hitch', <http://www.curtainup.com/medeabam.html>

<sup>731</sup> Sara Krulwich, 'Fitting the Modern Age To the Classic Greek Form', *New York Times*, 11 December 2002.

<sup>732</sup> Charles Isherwood, 'Medea', *Variety*, 11 December 2002. This was also reported in *Newsday*: 'We lose [the] view of the family swimming pool in the proscenium theater. In all other ways, however, the passion is still magnificent and awful.' In Linda Winer, 'Unspeaking Act, Unforgettable Acting', *Newsday*, 11 December 2002.

<sup>733</sup> 'Brilliant, shattering new production', Elysa Gardner, 'Gripping Medea Cuts to the Bone', *USA Today*, 11 December 2002; 'The year's most unforgettable performance'; 'uncontrollable sobbing could be heard from more than one member of the audience', Michael Kuchwara, 'An Extraordinary Actress Finds More than just the Mayhem in Medea', *The Associated Press*, 11 December 2002. See also Michael Sommers, 'Timeless', *The Star Ledger*, 11 December 2002; 'This is the rare production of a classic that packs the visceral jolt of - dare I say it? - a Jerry Bruckheimer movie, alongside the searing emotional intensity of the greatest tragic theater', Charles Isherwood, 'Medea', *Variety*, 11 December 2002 and 'Never have I seen a *Medea* that got so many laughs or proved so thoroughly entertaining.' Clive Barnes, 'Medea' Played for Laughs and tears', *New York Post*, 11 December 2002. See also Robert Feldberg, 'Spurned Spouse Gets Even Using Violence and the Children', *The Record*, 11 December 2002.



play had found 'more appreciative audiences abroad' and that Tony awards were anticipated for the upcoming Broadway run.<sup>734</sup> Rave reviews notwithstanding, as Karen Fricker later pointed out, the Broadway run did not sell out, but achieved approximately 70% capacity, so the play was not as big a commercial success as *Dancing at Lughnasa*. While not financially involved in the Broadway transfer, the Abbey received above-the-title billing as original producer, and, according to the *The Irish Times* had an investment in the US and Paris tours.<sup>735</sup>

According to BAM pre-production paperwork, the billing was a condition of the tour, but despite the investment, the Abbey's involvement had declined and they made little financial or critical gains on it.<sup>736</sup> Amid the publicity blaze little of the Irish themes of the play were detected by the star-struck reviewers, let alone the usual comments on authenticity or costume, which hardly seem relevant to a set without a kitchen table in a twenty-first-century setting. I would argue that they were manifested in Shaw's changing accent and that of the chorus, the unfinished building, and the ill-fitting wealth and fame of the family depicted.

### **Medea in Paris**

By the time the Abbey/Warner/Shaw production of *Medea* reached Paris it had been recast twice and continuously re-rehearsed throughout the run. The Paris dates had been delayed to accommodate its Broadway run. Perhaps because of that build-up and the fact that Shaw and Warner were already known in France where they had previously been appointed *Officiers des Arts et des Lettres*,<sup>737</sup>

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<sup>734</sup> Brooks Atkinson, 'Medea', *The Phoenix*, 17 January 2003. Revivals of *Medea* have historically won Tony awards: for Judith Anderson (1948), Zoe Caldwell (1982), and Diana Rigg (1994). It was unsurprising that Shaw was nominated, and it was expected she would win, but Vanessa Redgrave was awarded her role in Eugene O'Neill's *Long Day's Journey Into Night*.

<sup>735</sup> Karen Fricker, 'Medea' Bows out on Parisian High', *The Irish Times*, 29 March 2003.

<sup>736</sup> Notes on the production co-ordination include one that reads: 'Minimum billing: Medea, The Abbey Theatre. Directed by Deborah Warner. Fiona Shaw does not need to be listed as part of the billing, but must be featured prominently in all publications when D. Warner is included.' File NWF 2002 *Medea*: BAM Archive.

<sup>737</sup> An honorary title rarely given to non-French artists.

*Medea* (sur-titled in French) opened to a sold-out Théâtre National de Chaillot and closed to an 'extended ovation'.<sup>738</sup>

Described by Karen Fricker as 'one of the most successful – and mercurial – Ireland-originated theatre productions in recent times', the Paris conclusion to the transfer and tour of *Medea* was a missed high point for the Abbey.<sup>739</sup> Fiona Shaw's complex identity has been written about by Fricker and by Aoife Monks.<sup>740</sup> This complicated Irishness was, Fricker wrote, 'exploited' by the production.<sup>741</sup> Shaw is Irish-born but associated with the British theatre more readily than the Irish. During the run, the publicised unveiling of her portrait in the Crawford Gallery in Cork went towards a reclamation of her by her native county. In Ireland, Shaw played *Medea* with a British accent that set her apart from the rest of the Irish cast. This reinforced *Medea*'s outsider status, and the accented difference was retained in the tour. Once the play was recast for London (retaining only Shaw and one other actor), the new cast's accents were either RP or regional English, and Shaw's Irish accent became the element that distinguished her *Medea* as an outsider. The cultural difference, Fricker argues, 'worked in reverse, with Shaw's Irishness contrasting to the Britishness of the chorus'.

*Medea*'s outsider status is an important catalyst in the story, as it brings her exoticism and mystery, but ultimately is a cause of distrust and leads to tragedy. Like Yolland in *Translations*, she can learn the language, but the private core will always be hermetic. Warner's approach to the play lends itself to a more nuanced interpretation than hubris leading to death. This *Medea* is a character grappling with identity in a country struggling to keep up with a rapidly changing economic and political setting. Following the Abbey's well-received tour of *Translations*, the figure of *Medea*, a barbarian because she is not understood, is open to refiguring as a postcolonial character in a Celtic Tiger context. Shaw's Irishness was known to the Irish audience who saw her on an

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<sup>738</sup> Karen Fricker, 'Medea' Bows out on Parisian High', *The Irish Times*, 29 March 2003.

<sup>739</sup> Fricker, 2003.

<sup>740</sup> Aoife Monks, *Comely Maidens And Celtic Tigers: Riverdance And Global Performance*, (London: Goldsmiths, University of London, PhD thesis, 2007).

<sup>741</sup> Fricker, 2003.

Irish stage performing with a British accent the role of a woman trying to embrace and integrate an elevated social status. Although the point of the play was not to suggest that aspirational middle class equated with hubris and death, it did offer a meditation on two kinds of outsider status Shaw took on: as English and as Irish. This accented difference served also to further alienate the Abbey by disengaging so many of its actors. Shaw and sound designer Mel Mercier were the only consistent Irish artists in the production as it continued to tour.

Where Shaw's mercurial Irish/Englishness served as a powerful commentary on contemporary Irish identity and the fluidity of identity in a globalised context, the diminishing of the Irish national theatre's role voice in the production de-emphasised that important quality. Instead of reading *Medea* as an interpretation of Celtic Tiger Ireland, a theme many critics, and perhaps therefore audience members, latched on to was the resonance of the myth in post 9/11 America. As Shaw herself argued:

America is probably more open to tragedy than it's ever been, because America's wearing its nerves on its skin. America has stuffed itself with a diet of romantic comedy because it doesn't want or need anything else, and suddenly it probably does. And the purpose of tragedy now, I suppose, is the same as the purpose of tragedy then, which is that compassionate possibilities are enormous.<sup>742</sup>

Critics pointed to the universality of the story: 'Warner and Shaw seem to be telling a modern audience that has witnessed countless murders and calls for revenge a troubling truth; none of us is very far from the passions that provoked Medea. She wears our clothes and our face. She lives next door to us.'<sup>743</sup> Despite Shaw's Irish-accented performance she was made increasingly local and specific by reviewers for her relatable interpretation of the Greek character.<sup>744</sup> Her performance was reviewed as universal, then American, and even compared to

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<sup>742</sup> Alona Wartofsky, 'With Medea, She Didn't Just Get Mad', *Washington Post*, 3 November 2002. Shaw reiterated the point in less emotive terms in Chicago: Elena Paek, 'Abbey Rethinks 'Medea' Irish Troupe Brings New Interpretation to Classic', *San Francisco Chronicle*, 10 November 2002.

<sup>743</sup> Paulanne Simmons, 'Beyond Reason', *The Brooklyn Papers*, 14 October 2002.

<sup>744</sup> 'Its dialogue between uncommon heroes and heroines and the common folk of the chorus.' 'Theater Guide', *New York Times*, 11 October 2002.



Hillary Clinton at one point.<sup>745</sup> The Abbey had the unlikely pleasure of not being reviewed in terms of their having facilitated what sociologist Tom Inglis calls an 'occasion of ethnic solidarity'.<sup>746</sup> There are very few references to the Irishness of the event at all.

Even the production's own press pack de-emphasised the Abbey in favour of the international scope of the play. The information packs sent to media outlets included citations from the positive UK reviews, articles on *Medea*, some historical information about the Abbey Theatre (made up largely of the official history from the website), and some notes on Shaw's *Harry Potter* fame. Included were interviews from *The Guardian* and *The Observer*, among many other reviews for the UK run.

The US production in BAM (in which the proscenium was visible) opened with nonspecific Gaelic singing, then a character narrating events in a nonspecific (ie easily comprehensible) Irish accent. Jason had an English accent, while some of the chorus had Scottish and regional English accents. During the scene when Medea heard of Glauce and Creon's deaths, Shaw's exit was followed by some recognisably Irish dancing by one chorus member on the iron grid section of the set.<sup>747</sup> The production then, had many Irish technical qualities: voices, sounds and so on, but no real signifiers of Irish *theatre* as the audience may have come to expect; the Irish spoken was no more significant than the other regional accents of the empire that set apart the characters in terms of class. The Irish singing and dancing, rather than evoking a mood or representing the reclaiming of a tradition, as in *Lughnasa*, were merely dated signifiers of ethnicity and mysterious otherness. The specificity of the Irishness was in fact by now no more than a token minority language and dance form to point up Medea's estrangement, rather than represent a meaningful examination on contemporary Irish culture.

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<sup>745</sup> Jason Zinoman, 'Medea', *Time Out New York*, 10 October 2002.

<sup>746</sup> Tom Inglis, *Global Ireland: Same Difference*, (New York: Routledge, 2008). p. 97.

<sup>747</sup> *Medea* production video, taken at Brooklyn Academy of Music performance. Viewed NYPL, 16 June 2010.

*Medea* was a commercial venture masquerading as an Abbey tour, and this explains the downplaying of the Abbey in subsequent promotional material. I would argue that this rift contributed to the failed opportunity for the Abbey: that is, the critical kudos that might have stacked in Barnes's favour, much like *Well of the Saints* or *Dancing at Lughnasa* did for Mason. But the play was considered Shaw and Warner's success story on its international tour.

### **Conclusion: History and Histrionics**

The international projects of the Abbey Theatre at this time were dominated by productions that were conceived with international audiences in mind. They attempted to internalize the success of the preceding years and put the national success story on international stages. *Barbaric Comedies*, an inherited project for the new AD, set the tone for the upcoming five years of critical and media disapproval. The role of the international production and subsequent controversy was to grant a sort of permission to the Irish audience to react with unreconstructed moral and religious outrage.

The Abbey is well practiced in challenging the received view of Irish theatre. In this period, however, it struggled to contribute meaningfully to the understanding of the new manifestations of Irishness in a contemporary context. If the salience of the Abbey's international reputation lies in its representation of the nation, then the successful tour of *Medea* was also a failure for the theatre. *Medea* reached many audiences, but did not conspicuously contribute to the Irish national conversation to the same degree that it spoke to audiences of local concerns. Moreover the Abbey simply failed to leverage the artistic capital from that tour, capital that could have fuelled subsequent tours.

While *Hinterland* attempted to deal meaningfully with recent Irish history, it was plays like *Medea* and *Eden* that showed international audiences the real malaise of contemporary Ireland, and that sadly remained under the radar. As the Irish property bubble grew in the early 2000s and increasing numbers of Irish people scrambled to get on the property ladder by buying in commuter towns, the sense

of displacement in *Medea* struck a truer chord than the sympathetic portrait of a corrupt politician.

Fiona Shaw and Deborah Warner's *Medea* was a sort of modern incarnation of Cathleen Ni Houlihan, one who found herself dispossessed, but in this version, had to take matters in her own hands when failed by handsome young men. Ironically, this version of the nation that the Abbey Theatre offered to audiences in England, America and France, as well as those who read about it on the numerous new media outlets of the internet, was, due to personality clashes and poor judgement, barely an 'Abbey' product. The play was, judging from press coverage, audience responses and conversations with practitioners associated with the show, a vehicle for a very famous actor who happened to have an authentic Irish accent that was used to delineate the difference of her character's identity, without inviting and exploration of that identity in any depth. And so the theatre lost out on the critical appraisal it sorely needed after a disastrous few years.



Chapter 4 images:



Fig. 4.1 *Barbaric Comedies*, Abbey Theatre and Edinburgh International Festival, 2000.





Fig. 4.2 *Barbaric Comedies*, Abbey Theatre and Edinburgh International Festival, 2000.

**Promoters leap to defence of Abbey play after reports of walkouts**

Victoria White Arts Editor  
*The Irish Times* (1921-Current File); Aug 17, 2000;  
 ProQuest Historical Newspapers *The Irish Times* (1859-2010)  
 pg. 6

## Promoters leap to defence of Abbey play after reports of walkouts

From Victoria White, Arts Editor, in Edinburgh

THE promoters of *Barbaric Comedies* have defended the Edinburgh Festival/Abbey Theatre co-production against claims that its violent and sexually explicit scenes have caused large numbers of the audience to walk out.

The *Times* said that on the opening night on Monday the King's Theatre was half full before the interval and a quarter full afterwards. The *Daily Telegraph* said it was half full when the curtain went up and only a third full when it went down.

However, Ben Barnes, artistic director of the Abbey, says he saw only three walkouts on opening night and the number of walkouts had been "grossly exaggerated".

From this reviewer's position in the upper circle, there was no sign of anyone walking out or not returning after the interval.

Ms Jackie Westbrook, press and marketing director of the Edinburgh International Festival, said that "anecdotally" she had heard of walkouts, but added that there was no way of knowing why a person didn't return after an interval. "Maybe they were going for their bus."

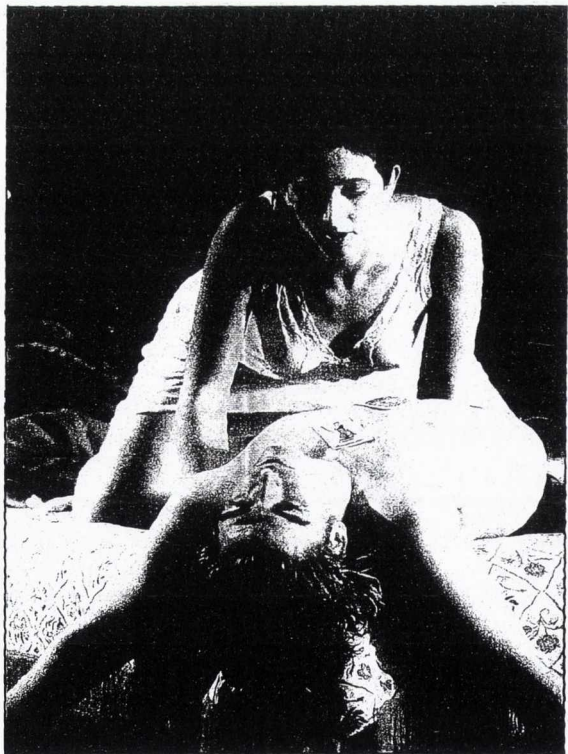
*Barbaric Comedies*, a version by Frank McGuinness of an early 20th-century work by the Spanish writer Valle-Inclán, runs for four hours. There had been, she said, "not one single official complaint".

Reviews to which the *Times* referred in a news article about the production were mixed, but the article's implication that this was due to the sexually explicit scenes does not stand up.

Benedict Nightingale of the *Times* and Joyce McMillan of the *Scotsman* wondered, rather, whether such a dark, difficult work, which was, in McMillan's words, "not a lot of fun", could bring in enough people to justify the festival's investment.

Ms Westbrook describes booking for the show as "fine" and says no tickets have been cancelled because of these news reports. "It's almost new writing, and we wouldn't expect it to sell out in advance," she said. Certain critics did not like the kind of "director's theatre" which was favoured by the festival director, Brian McMaster, and she felt these news reports were part of that wave of criticism.

The explicit parts of the production include rape, sexual intercourse on stage and a priest masturbating. Ben Barnes says he takes the view of Mr McMaster that it is no stronger than what is seen in the cinema. "In the context of Edinburgh, it's important that we tackle something new, not just another Brecht or a Schiller," he added. He was not worried that the publicity would put audiences off when the show opens at the Abbey during the Dublin Theatre Festival. "One of the great things about Dublin audiences," he said, "is that they make up their own minds."



Karl Shiels, as Don Miquelito, and Cathy White, as Pichona, in the Abbey/Edinburgh Festival production of *Barbaric Comedies*, at the King's Theatre, Edinburgh. Photograph: Robbie Jack

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Fig. 4.3 *The Irish Times* reports upon the *Barbaric Comedies* controversy.

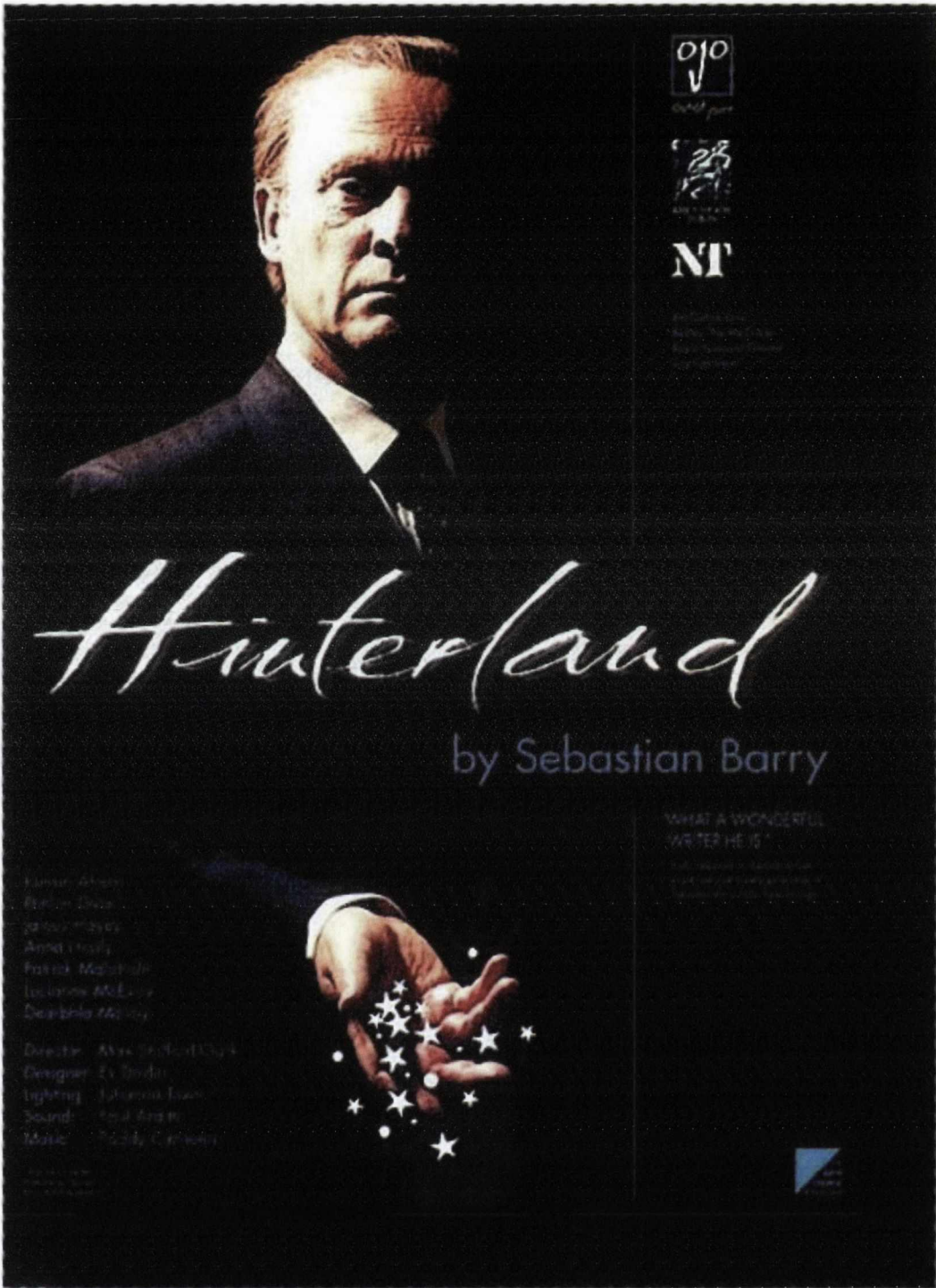


Fig. 4.4 National Theatre's programme for *Hinterland*, 2002.



**Haughey's lawyers studying script of Abbey's 'Hinterland'**  
 Mark Brennock Political Correspondent  
*The Irish Times (1921-Current File)*; Feb 7, 2002;  
 ProQuest Historical Newspapers The Irish Times (1859-2010)  
 pg. 1

# Haughey's lawyers studying script of Abbey's 'Hinterland'

By Mark Brennock,  
 Political Correspondent

**LAWYERS** for Mr Charles Haughey are studying the script of the current Abbey Theatre production of Sebastian Barry's new play *Hinterland* in which the central character bears remarkable similarities to the former Taoiseach.

The Abbey Theatre sent a copy of the script of the play to Mr Haughey's solicitors, Ivor Fitzpatrick and Company, after a request on behalf of the former Taoiseach this week.

According to an Abbey spokeswoman, the letter from Mr Haughey's solicitors did not state whether legal action was under consideration, but said

they believed the play contained material "that might be of concern to Mr Haughey". Mr Eoin McGonigal SC, who represents Mr Haughey at the Moriarty Tribunal, would not comment on reports he attended the play on Tuesday, saying he was not prepared to say where he was "in my private time". Asked if Tuesday night was "private time", he said every night and day was private time, "except when I am in court".

Many details in the play, including the fall from grace of the central character amid financial scandal, coincide with events in Mr Haughey's life.

The Abbey would not comment yesterday, beyond confirming the request for a copy of the script, and that it had complied with the request.

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## Poor drama and bad manners

Eileen Battersby  
*The Irish Times (1921-Current File)*; Feb 9, 2002;  
 ProQuest Historical Newspapers The Irish Times (1859-2010)  
 pg. B3

# Poor drama and bad manners

'Charlie Haughey' - or is it? - on stage has been the talk of the week. His lawyers even examined the script. But *Hinterland* doesn't capture his complex, rather menacing persona; instead, Sebastian Barry's drama depicting the disgraced former taoiseach's life and misdeeds is a vulgar, tacky travesty, argues Eileen Battersby

**N**OT even the worst excesses of Ireland could justify the vulgar travesty now on offer at the Abbey Theatre. To witness the seaside comedy of *Hinterland* is to witness the most sordid period in Irish politics, the fact is that while the ridiculing of a society is fair comment, the ridiculing of one man's messy life is not. *Hinterland* is poor theatre. But far worse than that, it is bad manners.

Among the many problems of art and literary criticism is that, it confers, indeed demands, a suspension of moral judgment. It is no use denouncing a novel under review because you don't approve of the characters, their behaviour or opinions.

Instead, the critic looks for a skilful handling of characterisation, dialogue, plot, narrative structure, language - and an overall cohesion. These are the elements by which a work is judged. The explicit nature of art often goes beyond that of polite society. In other words, one does not expatiate in public - although simulations of such are acceptable on stage or on screen. Murder is another major theme in art, particularly in cinema and of course, fiction, and it is not necessarily confined to the thriller genre.

This suspension of moral judgment is problematic - consider the critical reaction to Bret Easton Ellis's novel *American Psycho* in 1991, when many critics initially responded with arrousness rather than revulsion. I remember being engaged for reviewing it as a novel, not a moral outrage. Ultimately, however, it was judged as the novel it is.

Some critics and viewers looked askance at Lucian Freud's paintings because they depicted the squalor of real-life bodies. Others praised the painter's genius of his brutal realism.

*Hinterland* cannot be treated in a similar way, such is the ironic obviousness of its satire. It has the tenacity of a restoration comedy but none of the wit. Even a mildly informed 10-year-old will grasp most of the innuendo, never mind guff such as the one about the Georgian soap - "the game is over to Mrs. Thacker".

The character Johnny Silvester in Haughey, so it seems comradely to have changed the name. Brian Lenihan's lover transplant is here amended to a heart transplant - was that solely to facilitate the weak joke "have a heart"?

As anyone who has been barely conscious during the past 30 years knows, Haughey is extremely easy to mimic. Many amateur mimics, myself included, can impersonate his voice. His gestures. Like Mary Robinson, he is an easy target.

Not is it difficult to recreate the historic. Remember *Scraps Saturday*? Its scriptwriters replicated the Florentine grandiosity underfoot by book-boy strut with far more punch than this characterisation.

Patrick Malahide, the lead, mimics Haughey's voice and delivery, complete with an old man's shuffle. It's not acting. And in fairness, his impatience lacks the darker aspects of the real-life character.

Instead of the complex, rather menacing persona of the former leader, we have Haughey as a greedy but benign idiot, claiming to love his son and his country, asking his wife "Have you no sense of humour?"

There is far more to the political story than spending public funds on private entertainment and conspicuous consumption. In any event, still angry with Connolly's role in a

## HISTORY AS FARCE



● Haughey's career warrants a serious investigation, not the naive undergraduate review treatment it has received. Above: Haughey enacting scenes as taoiseach. Photograph: Don MacDonagh. Right: Patrick Malahide as the Haughey character, Johnny Silvester, and Keran Ahern as Cerealia (or is it Brian Lenihan?) in *Hinterland*.

quasi-comic Marley without the angst. The play has no interior life. The direction is unimaginative. There is no silence.

The only profundity is voiced by the disturbed son, an invented character, who tells his father "I am screaming".

*Hinterland* is not Shakespeare because Haughey is not a tragic hero; he has no moral grandeur to lose. But his surviving the Arms Trial alone suggests that, beyond the big spending and grotesque self-delusion, there is something of near-sinister substance that Jonowald, secretary. A sloppy farce such as *Hinterland* is not the appropriate place for that political examination.

Not should this play be condoned as the collective revenge of the Irish people on the man who betrayed the nation. It is to be hoped the revenge of the Irish people is somewhat more sophisticated than the knowing cackles that greeted the direct hit of each unstable election on opening night.

**T**IMING invariably highlights irony. Coincidentally, the television drama *No Tears*, with its portrayal of a ruthless minister for health currently taking its toll on the reputation of the real-life health minister of that name, Michael Noonan, has concluded just as *Hinterland*, with its comic Johnny Silvester Haughey, begins its run. Both prove that art imitating life simplifies issues.

In both cases, "art" has been overwhelmed by complexities. The blood scandal must be

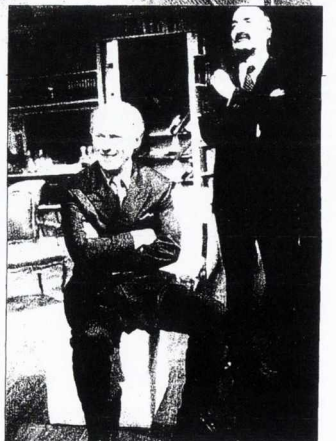
subjected to a meticulous documentary Haughey's career warrants a serious investigation, not the naive undergraduate review treatment it has received from Sebastian Barry.

The surprise that Barry, a playwright with an international reputation based largely on the success of *The Signet of Christendom*, should have written this, adds to the surrealism of it all.

Of his seven plays thus far, the finest remains *Prayer of Oberon*, which premiered in 1970. *Bass Gully's Boys* (1988) and *White Horse Street* (1992) also share the two qualities that have dominated his work, grace and society - neither of which features in *Hinterland*. It is important to recognise that the *Signet*, having triumphed largely due to the performance of the late David McCann, remains to be fairly rated, which won't happen until another actor tackles that role.

Had Hugh Leonard or Bernard Farrell, both fillers of theaters, written *Hinterland*, there would be righteous outpourings - but many critics regard Barry as above tastelessness. Not this time. The arrival of the high-stopping minister as a Chief De Ville-type coat and the exchanges that follow compound the text's multiple vulgarities.

Far from serving the nation in staging this silly trash, the national theatre has simply confirmed that the Irish love gossip. Most ironically of all, it has furnished the files upon which even more mythology and yet another escape route.



● *Hinterland* continues at the Abbey

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Fig. 4.5 *Hinterland* occupied many newspaper columns after opening.



Fig. 4.6 *Medea*, Abbey Theatre, 2001.



Fig. 4.7 *Medea*, Abbey Theatre, 2001.

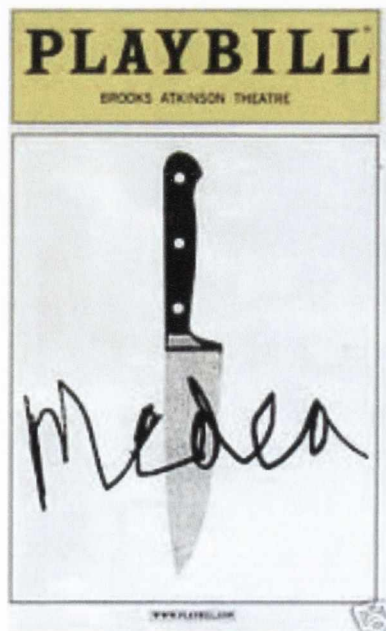


Fig 4.8 *Medea*, Broadway programme, 2002.

## Chapter Five:

### The Centenary: Commemorating the past, Living up to the Present

2004-2005

Tours and transfers during this period:

*Abbeyonehundred: The Gigli Concert* (Australia, 2004); *The Playboy of the Western World* (US, 2004); *The Plough and the Stars* (UK, 2005).

#### Introduction: *abbeyonehundred*

'I think the *abbeyonehundred* is a celebration of what the Abbey meant to Ireland and to arts and culture. It is also about looking to the future.' Ben Barnes.<sup>748</sup>

'One man's iconography, commemoration or ritual is another's coat-trailing.' Edna Longley.<sup>749</sup>

Seven full productions and eleven play readings were to be performed during the two weeks of the Abbey Theatre's 100th birthday celebration in 2004, while the centenary programme spread over the year and into 2005.<sup>750</sup> The Abbey commemorated 100 years of the Irish national theatre in a programme of classic

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<sup>748</sup> Ben Barnes, interviewed in Fiona Brady, 'On Abbey Road', *Irish Echo* (Australia), 26 August 2004.

<sup>749</sup> Edna Longley, 'What do Protestants want?', *Irish Review*, 20 (1997), 109.

<sup>750</sup> *Abbeyonehundred* Brochure, Abbey Theatre 2004, pp. 5-6.



dramas alongside new commissions, lectures and events. A touring programme was also devised to take in the US, Australia and the UK from June 2004 into 2005. When the centenary was first publicised, it was a project of 'five seasons in the programme, [...] thirty openings on three continents [and] one hundred events worldwide.'<sup>751</sup> The programme was divided into 'The Abbey and Europe', 'The Abbey and New Writing', 'Summer at the Abbey', 'The Abbey and Ireland' and 'The Abbey on Tour'. This chapter will examine how the staging of the centenary tour programme evolved in the wake of the development of Irish drama on international stages and the Abbey's own recent touring past. In particular, what is significant about those plays toured is how they were expected to represent the nation on international stages during the Abbey's centenary year: celebrating, commemorating and above all presenting the 'definitive' enactments as sanctioned by the title of 'national'. The centenary ended in a financial and management crisis for the theatre, and the programme was not considered a success in the popular imagination. However, with regards to the theatre's touring during that time, it is worth challenging the general view of *abbeyonehundred* as a complete failure for the Abbey Theatre.

The programme brochure for *abbeyonehundred*, the Abbey Theatre's centenary, stated plainly that 'the Abbey's international reputation was built on touring', and so the theatre would give special consideration to representing the national theatre on international stages while simultaneously commemorating the centenary at home. The Abbey announced its intentions to present a production of its most famous play *The Playboy of the Western World* by JM Synge in a national tour, followed by a US tour that would reflect the original, controversial US tour. Furthermore, the brochure announced, the 'highly acclaimed' 2001 production of Tom Murphy's *The Gigli Concert* was to be revived to tour Australia, and Sean O'Casey's *The Plough and the Stars* would run at the Barbican in London.<sup>752</sup> All the touring productions were to be directed by Ben Barnes, then Artistic Director of the Abbey. *The Playboy* was perhaps the most obvious choice for a US tour, given its history of notoriety at home and abroad. However

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<sup>751</sup> Declan McCavana, 'Abbey Theatre: End of Act One', *The Irish Eyes*, 83, (2004).

<sup>752</sup> The brochure does not here indicate that *Plough* would not tour until 2005. *abbeyonehundred* brochure, Abbey Theatre, 2004, p. 11.

the initial plan was in fact to tour with *The Plough and the Stars*, but the *Playboy* was only later substituted. Because of this, the production of *Playboy* was deferred to later in 2004 than had been anticipated. This would have significant consequences for the resultant production, as the context in which the Abbey eventually put together its *Playboy* meant that they were competing with other acclaimed productions. In responding to the recent Druid Theatre Company's popular production, the Abbey produced an interpretation that was unfavourably compared to Druid in Ireland, and then to the Abbey's own historical versions when on tour.

In *The Gigli Concert*, the Abbey again had to compete with a recent production that had been offered to audiences in more auspicious terms, again finding unfavourable comparison. This was exacerbated by the centenary crisis reaching its peak in the middle of the Australian tour. With *The Plough and the Stars*, however, the Abbey's staging in fact was perfectly timed to make a significant contribution to the discourse of commemoration in international theatre. By the time the play reached the Barbican in 2005, however, the centenary crisis had dominated the media for months, the Artistic Director had left, and the successful and critically praised production barely registered within the discussion of what had gone so badly wrong for the Abbey during *abbeyonehundred*.

The breakdown of the centenary programme, *abbeyonehundred*, was as follows: for 'The Abbey and Europe' Irish writers would offer adaptations of non-Irish classics;<sup>753</sup> 'The Abbey and New Writing', would include several new plays;<sup>754</sup> 'Summer at the Abbey' would offer work that was generally quite accessible to the less committed theatre-goer.<sup>755</sup> For 'The Abbey and Ireland' season,

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<sup>753</sup> Tom Murphy's translation of *The Cherry Orchard* by Chekhov and *The Burial at Thebes* Seamus Heaney's version of Sophocles' *Antigone*, (2004) were to accompany the theatre's hosting of a number of productions from visiting European theatres.

<sup>754</sup> *The Wolf of Winter* (2003) by Paula Meehan, *Defender of the Faith* (2004) by Stuart Carolan, *Savoy* (2004) by Eugene O'Brien and *Finders Keepers* (2004) by Peter Sheridan.

<sup>755</sup> Dion Boucicault's well-known comedy *The Shaughraun* (1874), Stewart Parker's *Heavenly Bodies* (1986), which related to Boucicault; *The Playboy of the Western World*, and Colm Tóibín's *Beauty in a Broken Place* (2004), which related to the work of O'Casey.



audiences would see numerous high-profile Irish plays of recent years as well as older established works from the repertoire.<sup>756</sup>

As stated above, for 'The Abbey on Tour' the touring schedule would include *Playboy of the Western World* to be brought to the US, *The Gigli Concert* to be taken to visit Australia, and *The Plough and the Stars*, to be taken to the UK.<sup>757</sup> Because of the decision to tour *The Playboy* to the US instead of *The Plough and the Stars*, and the deferral of *The Playboy* until the summer, there would be a shorter run in to the tour and less chance of major cast changes. Friel's *Aristocrats* was therefore chosen to fill the gap in the earlier part of the schedule.<sup>758</sup>

The Ireland whose theatrical history and new writing was to be celebrated had changed enormously in the course of the national theatre's first 100 years. At this time Ireland had been designated 'the most globalised country in the world' three years in a row (2002-2004) in a survey by A.T. Kearney in *Foreign Policy Magazine*, because of the Republic's open economy in foreign trade and investment, modern technology, communications outside Ireland, and involvement in global politics. In *Global Ireland*, Tom Inglis writes of this period that 'transnational companies began to take an interest in Ireland. It had the advantage of a young, relatively cheap, relatively well-educated workforce, stable industrial relations and a form of corporate government in which programmes of social and economic policy were agreed between the main social partners, particularly the state employers and trade unions'.<sup>759</sup> The result was a new brand of Irishness. In *Theatre and Globalisation* Patrick Lonergan writes that 'The word "Irish" has become deterritorialized: it may be used to refer to the

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<sup>756</sup> Frank McGuinness's *Observe the Sons of Ulster* (1985), Tom Murphy's *The Gigli Concert* (1983), Bernard Farrell's *I Do Not Like Thee, Dr Fell* (1979), George Fitzmaurice's *The Dandy Dolls* (finished approximately 1908, first performed 1945), WB Yeats's *Purgatory* (1938), JM Synge's *Riders to the Sea* (1904), Marina Carr's *Portia Coughlan* (1996), and Lennox Robinson's *Drama at Inish* (1933). *abbeyonehundred* catalogue.

<sup>757</sup> The centenary also included 'Reading the Decades', a play reading series, with a reading of a representative play from each decade of the Abbey's first hundred years, lectures, debates, exhibitions in various institutions such as IMMA and the Chester Beatty, seminars and the commission and publication of the Abbey's *Book of Days*. The Abbey arranged with Christopher Fitz-Simon to write *The Abbey Theatre: The First Hundred Years* and planned already to make it part of the touring merchandise. Barnes, *Plays and Controversies*, p. 222

<sup>758</sup> *Abbeyonehundred* programme, Abbey Theatre, 2004, p. 11.

<sup>759</sup> Tom Inglis, *Global Ireland*, p.18.



physical territory of Ireland, but it also acts as a brand – a commodified abstraction that gives meaning to its purchaser instead of signifying the physical territory of a nation.<sup>760</sup> And that commodified abstraction was a positive signifier in 2004, indicating modernity, wealth and success. Staging Ireland for an international audience meant putting the national success story on stage: either the humble beginnings or the cultural spirit that preceded the Celtic tiger.

Internationally, given the newfound increase in wealth in Ireland in 2004, the worldwide reputation of the Abbey Theatre and its prestige in contrast to the early years of the theatre, the centenary was an opportunity to celebrate the best of Irish drama which had been nurtured by the theatre over the century, and to showcase new work while adding to the prestige and cultural capital of the theatre. In touring especially, the Abbey Theatre has always engaged in a form of exported cultural tourism, as the status of ‘national’ brought with it authority and authenticity, while the centenary brought an added weight to this undertaking. Whatever the Abbey toured could be expected to be the definitive version.

The rising tide did not lift all boats, however, and arts funding cuts in 2003 had resulted in an uninspired year in Irish theatre. Patrick Lonergan points out that Irish theatre had experienced an ‘unusually quiet period,’ acknowledging that the year had been free of the controversies that had dominated in recent years, but that there was also a dearth of creativity and excitement, making the point that, as well as Arts Council funding cuts, it was possible that an atmosphere of restraint by beleaguered theatre-makers might have stymied creativity. Moreover, as it was the year before the Abbey centenary, companies may have been withholding their best work in advance of the season. Lonergan also anticipated that the upcoming centenary would give Irish theatre an opportunity to ‘raise its profile’, but observed that, worryingly, ‘much of the discourse around the centenary is focused on brands, budgets and bottom lines.’<sup>761</sup> This observation was substantiated by the subsequent discussions around the Abbey

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<sup>760</sup> Patrick Lonergan, *Theatre and Globalization*, p. 28.

<sup>761</sup> Patrick Lonergan, ‘Half-Hearted: Irish Theatre, 2003’, *New Hibernia Review*, 8:2, (2004), 142-151.

crisis, which drew disproportionate attention to the budget, particularly the overspending, that year.

Barnes had begun visiting US universities in October 2000 to establish plans for the US centenary tour, amid the ongoing discussions and development for the new Abbey building, which appeared to be gaining momentum at that time.<sup>762</sup> He also arranged for a production of Brian Friel's *Translations* that he would produce in 2004 in Toronto for the Canadian company Soulpepper during *abbeyonehundred*.<sup>763</sup> At the Abbey, *The Shaughraun* would be the main attraction during the summer.<sup>764</sup>

Colm Tóibín was commissioned to write a play for the centenary year on the early controversies of the Abbey Theatre, prompted by the publication of his *Lady Gregory's Toothbrush* in 2002.<sup>765</sup> Tóibín's biographical essay, which included many personal and domestic details of Lady Gregory and Yeats, was short and accessible, and offered a genial portrait of the Abbey director. The result, *Beauty in a Broken Place* (2004), was set during the first production of O'Casey's *The Plough and the Stars* and focussed on the theatre's role in shaping discourse on national identity. Though not strictly naturalist (the actors performed under spotlights, before a plain backdrop), the play offered its audience 'authentic' costumes and reproductions of physical signifiers of the old Abbey (in props such as the exit signs). There was an unmistakable documentary feel to the production, but the historical information was disseminated through a stylised filter, conveying something of the unreality behind the circumstances as they were experienced and later relayed by key figures. What Tóibín's play attempted to do was to underline the important role the Abbey had in relation to the history of Ireland: that history might be shaped by events at the Abbey, but that the theatre is always at odds with official

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<sup>762</sup> Barnes, p. 94

<sup>763</sup> Barnes, p. 217.

<sup>764</sup> Conall Morrison was initially approached by Barnes, who was mindful of Morrison's success with *The Colleen Bawn*, as discussed in chapter three. Eventually the play would be directed by *Riverdance* producer and Abbey board member John McColgan. There were plans to take *The Shaughraun* to the US but after a successful Christmas revival at the Abbey, the subsequent short West end run met with a lukewarm reception and so a US tour was not pursued. Barnes, p. 245.

<sup>765</sup> Barnes, p. 249.

narratives and demonstrates that its obligation is not to reflect any party line so much as national pressure points.

By the end of the first Dublin run of Barnes's *The Plough and the Stars* in 2002, there was interest from American theatre producers in mounting a US tour. Two major concerns that were raised were the large scale of the play and the fear that US audiences might feel alienated by the political content. It was also felt that Bessie Burgess's antagonism to the nationalist cause in the play would confuse audiences. *Playboy of the Western World*, which Barnes had inevitably decided to direct in the centenary year, was suggested as an alternative, and Barnes wrote that all were 'immediately more comfortable with both the scale and the accessibility of this Abbey classic.'<sup>766</sup> As a considerable amount of support for the Abbey in the US comes from Irish-American organisations, the trepidation over how the politics in the O'Casey play would be received is understandable. While the Abbey, in initial tours to the US at the beginning of the twentieth century often advanced controversial productions, one concern approaching the centenary was that audiences would recoil from sectarian politics on stage, but also that, in the period after the Good Friday Agreement, they would simply struggle to recognise and engage with the historical events portrayed. Without offstage conflict, through which the events on stage could then offer a prism of interpretation, the events of 1916 – a giant leap for Irish independence but a small step in world politics – were simply not as meaningful to international audiences 88 years later.

There is a parallel between this tour and the 1976 tour of *The Plough and the Stars* in terms of how the production circumstances reflected the anxiety the Abbey had in approaching an American audience. In 1976 the Abbey had been invited to take *Playboy* but substituted *Plough and the Stars* on logistical grounds. In that production Siobhan McKenna played Bessie Burgess with an anachronistic Northern Irish accent to frame Bessie's by-then atypical Dublin working-class Loyalist character. In 2004 *Playboy* was this time substituted for *Plough* because by then *Playboy* was a safer bet to tour, and now considered

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<sup>766</sup> Barnes, p. 252.



more accessible. Rioting was not a concern. Before long *Plough and the Stars* was invited to the Barbican's BITE 2005 festival, and so was earmarked for London at the end of the centenary instead.

As such while *The Playboy* might have seemed the ideal play to anchor the centenary celebrations – it was the seminal text with which the Abbey made its name and also a major text in establishing the Abbey's international profile – it was not first choice for tour. An agreement was reached with the American promoters to take *Playboy* to the US after its regional Irish tour and summer run on the Abbey mainstage in 2004. Eventually Barnes's production of *Playboy* would visit Connecticut, Philadelphia – where its players had once been arrested for their part in the same play – New York, Boston and Chicago.

Following these events, the Irish run of *Playboy of the Western World* for the centenary was deferred because of that decision to tour it to the US. Initially the plan was to stage the play in 2003. Once touring was decided upon though, Barnes did not want to stage it earlier, because the delay in the staging and then revival posed the risk of the actors not being available for the tour. This is significant because, as discussed in greater detail below, had the Abbey staged *Playboy* as planned in 2003, preceding the *Druid* touring production, it might have had a different production, and reception.

As it stood in 2003, Barnes's attention was divided: he was to direct Brian Friel's *Aristocrats*, the centenary *Playboy* and the *Plough* revival, as well as *Translations* in Toronto. Meanwhile the production of *Danser à Lughnasa* that he directed for a regional Canadian tour (for Le Théâtre du Nouveau Monde in Montreal) was getting under way, and he was feeling 'worn down by the relentlessness of the pace and the problems of this job and, surprisingly, by its thanklessness.'<sup>767</sup>

An additional challenge to the tours before they had even started was the mounting negative publicity around the centenary. There were tensions in the Board, since the new building discussions had taken a bad turn early in Barnes's tenure, and there was considerable fundraising to complete if the centenary

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<sup>767</sup> Barnes, p. 267.

ambitions were to be met.<sup>768</sup> 2004 began with private funding falling short and negative press coverage of the centenary programme. Media negativity towards Barnes since his misplaying of the *Hinterland* debacle focussed on the programme. It was criticised as too ambitious, too conservative and representing too few women writers. Bernard Farrell's inclusion in the programme was said by some to reflect Barnes's personal relationship rather than Farrell's place in the Abbey canon, and the inclusion of and dominance by the commercial producer John McColgan represented for many a selling-out of the theatre's values. The programme was unlikely to have pleased commentators given that the ambitious scope of commemoration and celebration was really a large-scale, scrutinised upscaling of what the Abbey's normal remit was anyway, and it rarely made critics happy on a day-to-day basis. Ultimately this undermined public confidence in the programme, which in turn contributed to an environment in which the Abbey would struggle to find critical approval.

Fortunately for the Abbey, *Festen* opened the 'Abbey and Europe' season to very positive notices, but it was a bright start to a lacklustre year. By March, though the Abbey were awarded €1m from government supplementary estimates, private funding came up short and *The Cherry Orchard* had not performed financially as well as expected. Thereafter the estimates for the design budget for *The Shaughraun* came out at several times the standard budget. In the end, *The Shaughraun* was a box office success, but the Abbey and Europe season was not. As the financial concerns grew, the Abbey had to cut *Drama at Inish* and Paul Mercier's *Smokescreen* from the programme as a cost-saving measure. Amid these problems, the first of the three international tours got underway.

### ***The Gigli Concert: 'I don't want to build anything anymore': Contextual Problems***

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<sup>768</sup> The American launch of *abbeyonehundred* took place in New York in December 2003. Although it was also a fundraising event, it was unsuccessful in that regard. Barnes, *Plays*, p. 298.

'There was a general sense in the Irish community that things had not gone well for the Sydney leg of the Abbey venture.'<sup>769</sup>

As Peter Kuch points out, the Abbey Theatre's decision to tour Australia for the centenary with a revival of their 2001 *The Gigli Concert* was a way of acknowledging the long tradition of Irish theatres visiting the country.<sup>770</sup> While the Abbey had only officially visited for the first time in 1990 (and unofficially in 1923 with the tour of the Abbey Players), other Irish companies before them had laid the ground. Druid Theatre Company had made several forays, which included a tour of *Playboy* in 1988 as part of the Australian bicentennial celebrations.<sup>771</sup>

Meanwhile *The Gigli Concert* had already had an international life since its Abbey premiere in 1983, which included an Australian staging of the play from the autumn of 1999.<sup>772</sup> This production of *The Gigli Concert* by Maeliosa Stafford and John O'Hare's Sydney-based O'Punksky Theatre Company is most significant in the context of the Abbey's tour of the same play five years later, as three revivals led to its being staged in Sydney as recently as 2003.

The Abbey's tour of *The Gigli Concert*, with Owen Roe as the Irish man (see Fig. 5.5), and Mark Lambert as JPW King, was beset by many problems – the current difficulties of Ben Barnes as AD, unsuitable venues, an inappropriate set – but one of the most significant was the fact that the play was already well-known in Australia from recent revivals in a very different sort of production. *The Gigli*

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<sup>769</sup> Peter Kuch, 'The Gigli Concert in Brisbane and Sydney', *A New Ireland in Brazil: Festschrift in Honour of Munira Hamud Mutran*, ed. by Laura P. Izarra and Beatriz Kopschitz X. Bastos (Sao Paulo: Humanitas, 2008), pp. 163-176. [167].

<sup>770</sup> Kuch, p. 167.

<sup>771</sup> The production starred Marie Mullen as Pegeen, Lorcan Cranitch as Christy and Mick Lally as Old Mahon. Druid's tours to Australia prior to this were with: *At the Black Pig's Dyke*, Seymour Centre, Chippendale, NSW, 9 January 1995; *Conversations on a Homecoming*, Belvoir Street Theatre, Surry Hills, NSW, 8 January 1987; *Playboy of the Western World*, York Theatre, Sydney, NSW, 7 January 1988; and *The Beauty Queen of Leenane*, The Bridge Theatre, Coniston, NSW, 23 May 2000. They later took *The Playboy of the Western World*, to His Majesty's Theatre, Perth, WA, in March 2005.

<sup>772</sup> The Tom Murphy archive in Trinity College indicates the following international performances of *The Gigli Concert*: Costa Mesa, California, South Coast Repertory, October 1984 (as part of the company's 20th anniversary season); London: Almeida Theatre, January/February 1992; Buffalo, New York: Irish Classical Theatre, April/May 1994



*Concert* by O'Punksky's theatre company upstaged the Abbey in its tour, and this was a key reason for the play's misfiring. However, it was compounded by other factors, which are worth examining.

In the 1988 tour of *Playboy* Druid went from the Belvoir – a Sydney theatre comparable to an Off-Broadway venue – to the York, a bigger venue and more of a showcase theatre. The scale-up resulted in the reception going from positive to disillusioned, as the actors were placed at a greater distance from the audience.<sup>773</sup> Kuch argues that *Druid* then suffered the same problems that would transpire for the Abbey in 2004, associated with transferring a production to a less suitable performance space. In addition to the practical considerations relating to a venue (appropriate stage size, enough harmonising with the show's technical requirements, etc), generally speaking in theatre, a small venue on an unassuming circuit tends to draw a particular kind of niche audience. Those attending an independent or fringe show will be receptive to companies with low budgets as long as the performances are of a high standard. There is a casual context for shows that appear to have been put on in a fast and loose production with no money, and the risk that the production will be aesthetically a failure is mitigated by the usually inexpensive tickets and the possibility of witnessing an important theatrical event in its infancy. In larger venues, however, where audience members have paid more for their tickets and other associated costs of a night at the theatre, they are participating in an event and so have different expectations of how formal and professional a production should appear. Moreover, smaller venues very often favour traditional Irish plays, as the establishment of the Irish theatrical canon happened in a cramped space and playwrights frequently tended to write to suit such spaces. Consequently, small, inauspicious venues are very often perfect for staple Abbey classics, which struggle on the theatre's own large stage, and scaling up productions like *Playboy of the Western World* and *The Gigli Concert* for larger theatre spaces is exceptionally challenging.

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<sup>773</sup> 'I think the York Theatre space, larger, angled and with a greater distance between the stage and the audience is not as sympathetic to the *Druid*'s acting as in Belvoir Street, where the actors and the audience are close, almost face to face.' Ann Nugent, 'Joys and Sorrows Made Real', *The Canberra Times*, 12 January 1988.

A further problem awaiting the *Gigli Concert* tour was the context in which the production would take place. Although the Abbey had by now visited Australia with *Shadow of a Gunman* (in 1990); *Dancing at Lughnasa* (in 1992); *Well of the Saints* (1995); and *The Secret Fall of Constance Wilde* (in 1998) they had not as yet played Brisbane, Hobart or Darwin. Moreover, as Peter Kuch points out, the Abbey at this point had played only arts festivals, and were less au fait with commercial theatre in Australia.<sup>774</sup> In contrast to previous festival-hosted tours, the Abbey now lacked the protective auspices of a festival's reputation.

Generally speaking, the Abbey's tours in Australia had been well-received critically, with *Constance Wilde* enjoying a better reception there than in the UK and *Well of the Saints* also enjoying a better reception than it had in Dublin, although as one member of the cast remembered, audiences were receptive if not apparently always comprehending the play.<sup>775</sup> *Dancing at Lughnasa* had also created goodwill toward the Irish theatre, albeit a full twelve years previously.

Back in Ireland *The Gigli Concert* was revived and redesigned for the 2004 revival, and played at the Cork Opera House in August, before its Australian tour.<sup>776</sup> The Australian tour was an expensively publicised, upmarket event. *The Gigli Concert* opened at the Suncorp Theatre, Brisbane, from 3-9 September as part of the Energex Brisbane Festival. The Suncorp Theatre was due to be demolished, but opened specially for the four-week Brisbane Festival. The play was then taken to the Sydney Theatre from 12-18 September.

The Australian tour of *The Gigli Concert* was not as critically successful as it had been in Ireland for a number of reasons. It was an expensive tour to mount, and

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<sup>774</sup> Kuch, pp. 163-176.

<sup>775</sup> By comparison to the UK and French performances Derry Power recalls that the Australian audiences laughed on fewer occasions as the jokes inherent in Synge's lyrical flourishes did not always appear to translate. Interview with Derry Power, June 2009.

<sup>776</sup> The Cork Opera House performance was described as 'a heartshaking supremely powerful piece of theatre that left its audience breathless,' though the audience were cautioned about the three-hour run time in Jo Kerrigan, 'The Gigli Concert Plays On', *Irish Examiner*, 26 August 2004. The *Evening Echo* called it 'One of the great plays of Irish theatre,' but thought Mona's character dwarfed. Liam Heylin, 'Dynamic Drama is a Winner', *Evening Echo*, 26 August 2004. Review at Cork Opera House.

robust ticket sales were depended upon, but sales were initially slow.<sup>777</sup> The eventual financial redemption of the play was not a success for the Abbey, so much as an intervention by private fundraisers, resulting from problems arising from mismanagement. Kuch argues that the turmoil at the Abbey was responsible for the delay in the marketing campaign, thus impeding ticket sales.<sup>778</sup> The many production performances meant that a demanding play spread thin: both in terms of exhausting a likely audience as well as physically exhausting the actors. Barnes granted the play 'full rehearsal' in Australia, something he did not tend to do with touring plays.<sup>779</sup> The run in Brisbane and Sydney of *The Gigli Concert* was to include more performances over the week than in a standard Irish theatre, this was realised by the Abbey at a very late stage, and so their raising the issue was an unexpected problem for the organisers in Australia. The performance schedule disagreement resulted in a pared-back schedule, as far as the Australian promoters were concerned, resulting therefore in less ticket sales.<sup>780</sup>

In addition to the external events undermining the tour, Barnes's choice of set was incongruously large for a play about two men in a cramped office, particularly for the venues in which the Abbey played. The large set for *The Gigli Concert* was characteristic of Barnes's work during this time: lots of wide space onstage and high walls. The play was staged in this sprawling set which, though 'dingy', struggled to look plausible. While the stage directions do not specifically designate a small space, it is implied in the word 'cluttered', and in King's frugal lifestyle and his having to use the office as living quarters.<sup>781</sup> In the 800-seat Suncorp Theatre and then the Sydney theatre, which seats up to 896 people, the sense of the cramped and cluttered dynamatologist's office was lost, as was the intimate connection with the audience.

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<sup>777</sup> Peter Kuch, p. 171.

<sup>778</sup> Ibid, p. 173.

<sup>779</sup> Fiona Brady, 'On Abbey Road', *Irish Echo* (Australia), 26 August 2004.

<sup>780</sup> Peter Kuch, p. 171.

<sup>781</sup> Tom Murphy, *Plays 3: The Gigli Concert*, p. 165.



Given the origins of O'Punksky's version of *The Gigli Concert*, it is unsurprising that the Abbey's large-scale production drew unfavourable comparisons. Already in Ireland in 2001 one critic wrote that: 'the exceptionally large stage space at the Abbey makes the action seem unnecessarily broad. The play feels like it should be more claustrophobic, and it is not clear if the decision to open the space out into a literal and metaphorical attic is a help or a hindrance'.<sup>782</sup> Patrick Dickson, who played JPW King for O'Punksky's, candidly dismissed the Abbey's centenary version when it came to Sydney:

The set was appalling. It had no impact at all and had no traction. I don't think anybody in the audience knew what was going on. It just didn't connect. It's a very intimate piece and it really needs to draw you in.<sup>783</sup>

The Australian broadcaster Nigel Munro-Wallis also criticised the set's dwarfing the play: 'undoubtedly too large for such a claustrophobic play'.<sup>784</sup> He also took issue with the nuances of the language and cultural references, which, despite the relatively simple story arc, alienated the audience in his opinion.

Preproduction notices had been positive. The *Sunday Mail* interviewed Murphy, who did not travel to Australia with the production. The article indicates the play was gathering a reputation in Australia prior to its opening. 'When Artistic Director Ben Barnes brings the Abbey players to Queensland next month for the Brisbane Festival it won't be with one of the older classics such as JM Synge's *Playboy of the Western World* or Sean O'Casey's *Juno and The Paycock*, but rather Murphy's 1983 masterpiece *The Gigli Concert*'.<sup>785</sup> Talking about the play, Barnes described it as technically demanding, adding he was 'confident that Australian audiences [would] enjoy the show, despite admitting it was 'a little more culturally specific'. He did not clarify whether that was more 'culturally specific'

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<sup>782</sup> Harvey O'Brien, *The Gigli Concert*, 6 November 2001, Culturevulture.net. <http://www.culturevulture.net/Theater/Gigli.htm>

<sup>783</sup> Patrick Dickson, interviewed in Aine De Paor's, *O'Punksky Theatre Company and their contribution to the Sydney Theatre Scene in the 1990s*, ongoing MA Dissertation, University of Sydney.

<sup>784</sup> *The Gigli Concert*, Nigel Munro-Wallis at the Brisbane Festival, 612 ABC Brisbane, 3 September 2004, <http://www.abc.net.au/brisbane/stories/s1195785.htm>.

<sup>785</sup> Douglas Kennedy, 'Murphy's Lore', *The Sunday Mail* (Australia), 22 August 2004.

than a non-Irish audience might expect, or than the Abbey would usually tour. As the Abbey has previously moderated productions for international tour through programme glossaries, lobby posters and even directorial decisions, this play at least seemed unapologetically local. Whatever direction a potential audience were given from previews in the media, posters and so on, the fact that the visiting company described the play as difficult was likely to discourage an audience.

On opening, the audience response was 'muted – respectful, mildly enthusiastic, bemused, aware of a privilege rather than an occasion for enjoyment.'<sup>786</sup> The press reviews bear this out: though ostensibly positive, there was a distinct lack of enthusiasm. Again the problem persisted that even positive reviews would serve to discourage an audience, as they tending to comment on the play as being difficult but rewarding. For example *The Courier Mail* warned of the three-hour run time, and that the play was 'uncompromising' and 'strong meat for Brisbane theatre-goers'. Furthermore, the reviewer added, knowledge of Irish history and politics was necessary to understand the play.<sup>787</sup> In Sydney the *Sunday Morning Herald* described the play in admiring terms, but cautioned that 'fathoming the intricacies of *The Gigli Concert*' would be hard work.<sup>788</sup> And this was the case in the majority of reviews.<sup>789</sup>

As a survey of archival material shows, however, the relative inaccessibility of the play, (especially compared with the regularly cited *Lughnasa*), was not the real cause for the Abbey's problems with its tour, as the play had been well received in recent years. Rather this problematic quality of the play became a problem when other factors coalesced. The key problem for the tour would seem to be that the O'Punksky's more critically and commercially successful

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<sup>786</sup> Peter Kuch, 'The Gigli Concert in Brisbane and Sydney', p. 170.

<sup>787</sup> James Harper, 'Strong Theatre', *The Courier Mail*, 6 September 2004.

<sup>788</sup> Lenny Ann Low, 'The Gigli Concert, Abbey Theatre', *Sunday Morning Herald*, 14 September 2004.

<sup>789</sup> In *The Australian* the play was a 'compelling endurance test' and 'high profile Irish import,' and was described as 'easier to admire than love', and 'so enigmatic and fluid that it requires constant attention', 'Compelling Endurance Test', *The Australian*, 6 September 2004; and Lenny Ann Low in a positive review refers to the play as 'hard work' though worthwhile in Lenny Ann Low, 'A Desperate Search for Self Amid the Dust of Buried Dreams', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 14 September 2004.



production of the play staged in Sydney only a few years previously had upstaged this new production. It has been said that Murphy's work does not travel well, and with specific reference to the 2004 *Gigli Concert* that:

Despite playwright Murphy's popularity on home soil, [he] isn't as 'commercially attractive' overseas. [Murphy's] work speaks to a darker side of the Irish psyche.<sup>790</sup>

This was not strictly true for Australian audiences. They had responded very positively to Druid Theatre Company's *Conversations on a Homecoming* in 1987, O'Punksky's *The Gigli Concert* in 1999 (revived up until October of 2003) and *Bailegangaire* in 2000. It was pointed out by one reviewer that in O'Punksky's *The Gigli Concert*, The Irish Man had been played by the actor and founder of O'Punksky's, Maeliosa Stafford, who first came to Australia as a member of the cast of *Murphy's Conversations on a Homecoming* and was now set to play Old Mahon for the Abbey's centenary *Playboy of the Western World*.<sup>791</sup> Murphy told the 2004 press that he had last been to Australia for the Druid's Belvoir Street Theatre's production of *Conversations on a Homecoming* in Sydney, and 'had an unexpectedly wonderful time'.<sup>792</sup> The O'Punksky's production of *Gigli* had made the play familiar to a large number of Sydney's critics and theatre-going community, and, Murphy said 'I got a bag of reviews through my agent and it seems to have been very well received. Even better, it appears to have been completely understood. Nobody was talking about how deep and profound it was, or the fact that someone was called Man. They talked about its themes, its truths and its emotion.'<sup>793</sup>

### **O'Punksky's: 'Alive in Time at the same time': Invidious Comparisons**

O'Punksky's Theatre Company was established by Irish actor/directors Maeliosa Stafford and John O'Hare. Stafford was already a well-known Irish actor, having

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<sup>790</sup> Fiona Brady, 'On Abbey Road', *Irish Echo* (Australia), 26 August 2004.

<sup>791</sup> Pamela Payne, 'The Voice of Ireland is Calling', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 6 September 2004.

<sup>792</sup> Sue Williams, 'Murphy's Lore', *Weekend Australian*, 21 August 2004.

<sup>793</sup> Sue Williams, 2004.



worked extensively with Druid Theatre Company and the Abbey. Druid Theatre Company had toured to Sydney's Belvoir St Theatre with *Conversations on a Homecoming* in 1987. When Stafford travelled to Australia with Druid at the time, that was, he recalls, the basis for his eventually moving there and establishing the company with O'Hare in the 1990s.<sup>794</sup> Sydney had a theatre community that appeared to be dominated by costume drama, cumbersome sets, and it was in need of updating. O'Punksky's, it was said in a 2004 interview with Stafford, did 'a great deal to introduce the work of Frank McGuinness, Tom Murphy and Billy Roche to Australian audiences, where the reaction to them has been very positive'. Stafford told the interviewer: 'They are very into physical theatre, but not so much into literary drama. There's such a cultural mix and also it's too young a country to have a background in literary history. Australia is still an infant.'<sup>795</sup> Stafford and O'Hare did not set out to establish an 'Irish' company as such: they performed a mix of Irish, English and Scottish plays to bring gritty twentieth-century dramas to Sydney.<sup>796</sup>

The company was not consistently successful in every project, but they gradually found success in the presentation of plays from the contemporary Irish canon. As Aine de Paor has written, the company's success was also due to its affiliation with Theatre Hydra which was based in The Old Fitzroy Hotel: 'A space which had quickly gained a reputation for high quality independent theatre.'<sup>797</sup> While the Old Fitzroy was a small venue, perfect for kitchen sink drama, successful stagings there frequently led to upscaled transfers. Luckily for O'Punksky's, their productions generally retained their low-key, small-budget highbrow reputations in mainstream venues by dint of their celebrated beginnings, in parallel with the type of elements that led to the success of Druid Theatre Company.

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<sup>794</sup> Interview Maeliosa Stafford, 29 August 2010.

<sup>795</sup> Judy Murphy, 'Son to Father', *Irish Examiner*, 17 August 2004.

<sup>796</sup> The repertoire included McGuinness's *Carthaginians* (1994) and *Observe the Sons of Ulster Marching Towards the Somme* (1985), David Halliwell's *Little Malcolm and his Struggle Against the Eunuchs* (1965) (the play concerns a radical anti-establishment group which descends into to a neo-facist movement), Friel's *Faith Healer* (1979), and Scottish playwright John Byne's *The Slab Boys* (1978) (from a trilogy about working-class Scottish boys between 1957–1972).

<sup>797</sup> Aine de Paor, *O'Punksky Theatre Company*.

This was certainly true of *The Gigli Concert* in 1999 in the Old Fitzroy Hotel. With Stafford as The Irish Man, Patrick Dickson as JPW King, the critically acclaimed Tracy Mann as Mona and John O'Hare directing, the small venue suited the cramped atmosphere of Murphy's play. The timing too was promising: with the growing reputation of O'Punksky's in place, there was a sense of anticipation around the speculation that Stafford and Dickson were of the right age, appearance and background and that O'Hare now had the right directorial experience.

The critical reception for O'Punksky's *Gigli* was very positive.<sup>798</sup> The production was then chosen for the 2000 Perth Festival, where it played alongside Conor McPherson's *The Weir*. *Gigli* played at the Perth's Dolphin Theatre, another small-scale (but packed) venue, to positive notices that led to its third revival in Carnivale Festival, Sydney later in 2003. As such, O'Punksky's small-scale three-hander play, despite playing to the 'dark side of the Irish psyche', proved both commercially attractive and capable of being seen by a relatively large, receptive audience, and was said to have been 'the peak of the O'Punksky experience'.<sup>799</sup>

O'Punksky's, like Druid, found critical success touring the writing of Tom Murphy to Australia where the Abbey did not. Arguably the earlier successes also lay in the companies' style of branding. As Shelley Troupe argues, Druid tend to promote the *company* as opposed to the writer whose work it stages.<sup>800</sup> Similarly O'Punksky's production of *Gigli* was very often reviewed in the context of the company and the ensemble. The Abbey were publicising the event as the definitive centenary version of a major twentieth-century Irish play, a very difficult ambition to fulfill. The major reason for the Abbey's disappointing tour was that O'Punksky's production was simply more accomplished, more appropriately staged under more auspicious circumstances, and also because it

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<sup>798</sup>'A truly astonishing play', 'three superbly wrought performances and pitch perfect direction from John O' Hare'; 'mesmerising', in Colin Rose, *Sun-Herald, Time Out*, 28 September 1999 and Leo Schofield, *Sydney Morning Herald Metro*, 26 September 2003.

<sup>799</sup> Patrick Dickson, interviewed in Aine de Paor, *O'Punksky*.

<sup>800</sup> Shelley Troupe, *Theatre and Space: Druid's Productions of Tom Murphy's Plays, 1984-1987*, (PhD thesis, NUI, Galway, 2011).

had happened recently enough to bear unfavourable comparison. Having been well-received and revived three times in Australia by O'Punksky's, *The Gigli Concert* had already found and perhaps exhausted its audience by the time the Abbey's version came along. Later because of practicalities with the stage and Barnes's desire to represent great tableaux at a formal distance from the audience, the Abbey's cumbersome version could not convey the squalor of JPW King's office.

### ***The Playboy of the Western World's Centenary Tour: Déjà Review***

It's not déjà vu, and no, you haven't already read this review: despite the fact that Garry Hynes and Druid mounted a production of Synge's 190[7] play earlier this year, and premiered it in the same venue, this is an entirely different kettle of shifts.<sup>801</sup>

Three years after the Abbey Theatre last staged it and only four months after Druid's touring production opened, the Abbey toured Synge's *Playboy* for the centenary. While *The Gigli Concert* was getting underway in Australia, *The Playboy of the Western World's* US tour began.

*The Playboy of the Western World* is a cultural event.<sup>802</sup> The play has been performed abroad by Irish companies (including the Abbey Theatre's first American tour), by local companies, reinterpreted at home and abroad by companies like Blue Raincoat and most famously Druid Theatre Company. Druid also produced *The Playboy of the West Indies* by Mustapha Matura in Galway in March of 1994. The play was an adaptation of the Synge classic, set in Trinidad with the language translated from Synge's Hiberno-English to a Caribbean patois.<sup>803</sup> More recently *Playboy* has been re-worked and modernised, translated

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<sup>801</sup> Susan Conley, 'The Playboy of the Western World', *Wow Review*, 7 June 2004. Conley lists the play's premiere as 1904, a fairly common error.

<sup>802</sup> Lionel Pilkington, 'The Playboy of the Western World as Cultural Event' in *Playboys of the Western World: Production Histories*, ed. Adrian Frazier, (Carysfort Press, 2004), pp 161-166.

<sup>803</sup> See Druid's synopsis: <http://www.druid.ie/productions/the-playboy-of-the-west-indies>.



into Chinese by Pan Pan Theatre company (2006) and re-written in contemporary urban Dublin slang by the Abbey Theatre in 2007 in a collaboration by Bisi Adigun and Roddy Doyle. As frequently as *The Playboy* is revived, it is reinvented and reinterpreted for interested audiences. Into this context the Abbey Theatre, which housed the play's writer, the premiere and riots, would produce their adaptation 100 years after the founding of the theatre, a crucible for such writing.

The centenary *Playboy of the Western World* was a contemporary interpretation of the play chosen for its historical significance. It was an opportunity to show the Abbey celebrating its most famous play, in the context of a much-changed Ireland and to present it in an aesthetic that reflected its myriad influences and evolution as an international theatre. Many outreach activities were organised: library programmes, youth theatre workshops, amateur theatre sessions, post-show discussions, play readings, and an exhibition displaying the history of the Abbey's touring tradition and, in particular the *Playboy* tours from 1907 to the present. In addition to the usual expectations that come with a production of this play, the Abbey had also to contend with those recent stagings of the *Playboy* that were by turns innovative, traditional, highbrow and commercially successful. The context of this centenary production of this classic Abbey play that had made the Abbey Theatre internationally famous was a flooded market. Two productions of *Playboy* in particular, Blue Raincoat's in 2001 and Druid's in 2004, upstaged the Abbey, much as O'Punksky's production of *Gigli* did in Australia. In following up and responding to those recent productions, the Abbey failed either to commemorate the past or live up to the present by responding to the many innovations by other companies.

In 2000 WJ Mc Cormack's biography of Synge, *Fool of the Family: a Life of JM Synge*, was published. This, according to Barnes's memoir, was an impetus behind the decision by the Abbey to mount a new production of *Playboy* that year, at the Peacock rather than in a full mainstage production. As part of his Peacock Partnership scheme Barnes invited Niall Henry of Blue Raincoat, Mikel

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Murfi and Olwen Fouéré to work on the production, all practitioners known in their different ways for physical theatre, experimental practice and for reinvigorating classical texts. Blue Raincoat Theatre Company, based in Sligo, is an international company: the actors have been trained abroad, they use a variety of styles and draw on international styles. Murfi and Henry had seen international productions of *The Playboy* while studying in Paris. French, Japanese and Australian companies each using a different theatrical idiom had broken 'the hold over them of Irish traditions of enactment.'<sup>804</sup> The Peacock, moreover, has always been a venue for experimental work, and tends to bring audiences receptive to experimentation. Blue Raincoat's staging of *The Playboy of the Western World*, directed by Niall Henry, took place in the summer of 2001 in the Peacock Theatre.

The resulting production was a movement-based piece, using puppetry (in place of the local girls, Murfi as Christy used his fingers as puppets instead, to enact 'juvenile fantasies of girls dotting on his handsome face') and counterintuitive casting.<sup>805</sup> The young Cathy Belton played Widow Quin and Olwen Fouéré, aged more than 'a score', played Pegeen. This inversion of expected casting rectified what Barnes called 'the bizarre tradition at the Abbey' of always casting the Widow Quin as an old crone, reminding audiences that Synge specifies her as a woman of about 30. As such, Barnes was eager to encourage what he considered the more authentic interpretation of Synge's play from the very beginning of his tenure as AD. Murfi and Henry also slowed down the dialogue to give a new weight to the words used. In most productions, speech in the play is delivered quickly and the impression is of fluidity, and the fleeting humour embedded in certain lyrical flourishes. In a slowed-down version, there is a menacing quality to the violent language, but also an opportunity for an audience to hear it all at a manageable pace, rather than focussing on the well-known action. In his *Culturevulture* review, Harvey O'Brien encouraged audiences to experience this interpretation of what he considered to be a tourist attraction that had lost its meaning for Irish audiences through overfamiliarity:

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<sup>804</sup> Frazier, *Playboys of the Western World*, p. 8.

<sup>805</sup> *Ibid.*

All of this discourages the audience from getting comfortable with their bag of chocolates, and draws attention to the work of theatre in performance. Suddenly the absurdities are less about caricature than they are a sort of carnivalesque surrealism. The play becomes more akin to a twisted nightmare about the oppression suffered by these characters in this setting than it is a happy slice of blarney. It sets the mind in action. It does not lull it into a stupor.<sup>806</sup>

The play was well received, and so the success of the studio production and the fact that Barnes was mindful of the play's being 'haunted by earlier productions', in some regards laid the groundwork for the 2004 production.<sup>807</sup>

Druid's 2004 production of *The Playboy of the Western World* was directed by Garry Hynes and the Irish film actor Cillian Murphy best known at that point for his role in Danny Boyle's *28 Days Later* in 2002 was cast as Christy. The actor cast as Pegeen, Anne-Marie Duff, was also something of a household name. She was known for her roles in Peter Mullan's film *The Magdalen Sisters* (2002) and in the popular Channel Four series *Shameless*. In addition to their celebrity status, both actors retained respectable reputations as accomplished theatre actors, and so were not dismissed by critics as marquee names to attract audiences. Widow Quin was again played as a younger than usual woman by Aisling O'Sullivan.

Druid's staging of the *Playboy* was a departure. The traditional Abbey kitchen set represents both a visual cliché but also an important signifier of unfolding events. Throwing that out is a gamble, as stylised sets risk appearing derivative. Druid dealt with this in their 1982 production by replacing the twee faux-shebeen set with one that located the action in a more plausible rural context, what Nicholas Grene calls 'a keynote' of 'dirty realism'.<sup>808</sup> In 1982 for instance, real turf smoke was used in the production that was revived repeatedly and continued on international tour. In 2004, the set was less realistic, but grounded

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<sup>806</sup> Harvey O'Brien, 'The Playboy of the Western World', *culturevulture*, 16 July 2001. <http://www.culturevulture.net/Theater/Playboy.htm>.

<sup>807</sup> Barnes, *Plays*, p. 147.

<sup>808</sup> Nicholas Grene, 'Two London Playboys: Before and After Druid', in Frazier, *Playboys of the Western World*, p. 80.



the play by means of a different touchstone of reality, in their use of Victorian costume. The Druid set was devised by Hynes, Francis O'Connor and Davy Cunningham. Dark and grim, it was lit from the front, Hynes said, because it was a 'roof set with only two apertures'.<sup>809</sup> As dark as it was at first, the window and doors opened in the second act were lit to contrast Christy's improved circumstances with his unpromising entrance to the village. The walls were metallic and mottled and took on a green/verdigris hue in the dim light. In place of a bar or hearth, there was a pillar centrestage. The costumes were Victorian (a top hat for Michael James, a swallow-tail coat for Shawn Keogh, and boned corsetry for Pegeen). As the floor was covered in loose clay, the actors became progressively muddier throughout. In addition the involvement of choreographer David Bolger in the Druid production was cited by critics who praised Murphy's physicality in his interpretation of Christy.

These decisions rescued the play from clichéd-Abbey-Theatre Ireland to one that avoided overtly naturalistic imagery, playing as they did with the very stereotype the Abbey had been trying to subvert in the first place. In doing so, the company represented a notional Ireland that had more in common with pre-Abbey representations of Ireland on stage. Ironically, 100 years after the establishment of the Abbey, their well-established naturalism, to which they are bonded, felt less authentic to modern audiences, while a muddy *Punch*-style representation felt more real. The success that met Martin McDonagh's plays for Druid against the relative hostility that greeted the Abbey's *The Great Hunger* in the US illustrated the fact that the Abbey could not get away with pastoral pastiche. However the Abbey approached it, it would be construed an aesthetic mistake.

Druid toured the *Playboy* nationally to some unusual venues. While the Abbey was the site of the play's premiere and of the riots, and the play the work of one of its directors, somehow Druid managed to appropriate ownership of the play. They had designated Synge their 'house playwright' in 1982, and by 2004 had a history of successful productions of *Playboy* to their credit. They comfortably

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<sup>809</sup> Hynes, 'Roundtable Discussion', *Playboys of the Western World*, p. 94.

took the title of 'authentic' by emphasising the local in their sites of performance. The play visited the Aran Islands, where Synge first heard the origin of the plot, and Geesala, where the action is set. Druid took advantage of a weak point in the Abbey's role as national theatre: its lack of national tours. Despite attempts down the years to bring the national theatre to the nation, national tours were infrequent. Former Artistic Director Patrick Mason spoke of the expense of national tours and the difficulty of generating audience interest being so prohibitively loss-making, that it would in some cases have been 'cheaper for the Abbey to bring those audiences by bus to Dublin.'<sup>810</sup> National touring was therefore attempted with less regularity from the late 1990s up to 2005. However Druid in the west of Ireland had become a serious provincial theatre company, and succeeded where the Abbey had failed in generating interested audiences throughout the country. Druid was able to cast the tour as authentic, by promoting the national tour as a 'retracing':

Retracing (in reverse) the journey undertaken by the bold Christy Mahon after 'murdering' his father, Druid visited venues and locations in many of the small communities that are at the heart of Synge's vision – Geesala, Co Mayo (where the play is set), Castlebar, each of the three Aran Islands, Tralee and Dun Chaoín in Kerry, the tour reflected Druid's unique relationship with both Synge and his extraordinary play and provides audiences with an unique opportunity to experience an unforgettable cultural engagement.<sup>811</sup>

And so a combination of shrewd publicising, innovative venue decisions and high-quality productions allowed Druid literally to go further west than the Abbey. Authenticated by their Aran Islands stop-off, Druid's play was a great success and was fresh in the minds of critics when the Abbey mounted its own centenary production.

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<sup>810</sup> Interview with Patrick Mason, August 2010.

<sup>811</sup> The tour was as follows: 10-21 February, 2004, Town Hall Theatre, Galway; 23 February- 20 March, Gaiety Theatre, Dublin; 23 March, Geesala, Co Mayo; 25-27 March, Inis Meain, Inis Oírr & Inis Mór; 30 March – 03 April, Royal Theatre, Castlebar, Co Mayo; 05 April, The Blasket Centre, Dun Chaoín, Co Kerry; 6-10 April, Siamsa Tíre, Tralee, Co Kerry. Druid Theatre Company website. <http://www.druid.ie/productions/the-playboy-of-the-western-world-2004>.

Barnes was to direct the Abbey's centenary *Playboy*. At the end of 2003, he had written his policy statement, titled *Act 2*, in which he raised the familiar theme of the Abbey's difficulty in balancing its commitments to new writing and to the repertoire, and pointed out that throughout the 1980s and 90s:

Every facet of Irish life underwent profound changes and while many of those changes were reflected on the Abbey stage, the ethos of the theatre and its structures were slow to adapt to the needs of the late twentieth-century, and now twenty-first-century-theatre art.<sup>812</sup>

Barnes argued for 'a greater geographic and stylistic diversification of content in the work of the Abbey Theatre' and to stake out 'an imaginative territory that is unique to the theatrical form and plays to the considerable strengths available to it' as a means to combat television and cinema as the theatre's major competitors in dramatic media.<sup>813</sup> Again he emphasised the importance of engaging with the European theatre community and replicating the model he saw there. A practical application of this assertion was the 2004 *Playboy*, which met that commitment to be stylistically diverse in form and content.

Because of the decision to tour with *Playboy* instead of *The Plough and the Stars* and the need to defer the play, before the casting had even been decided upon, it was known by the theatre that the *Playboy* would tour nationally and internationally (as opposed to running at the Abbey and later being picked up by an international festival, as often happens with Abbey tours and transfers). As such, the design for the set of *Playboy* was influenced as much by mobility as having to fill the large stages of the Abbey and subsequent venues. The set by Guido Tondino was based on sliding panels that functioned as walls to delineate the small shebeen, then opened up for outdoor scenes, revealing a white screen with characters in silhouette. Barnes asserted his wish that the set open into a space that looked like an 'arena'. Audiences literally saw the races on the sand in this production, which involved Christy's moment of physical victory being brought onstage. The traditional fixed kitchen set for which the play is known

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<sup>812</sup> Barnes, 'Act 2' cited in *Plays*, p. 305.

<sup>813</sup> Barnes, *Plays*, p. 307.



was to be replaced with open spaces, and the characters would be able to look over the moveable shebeen walls. The play's enclosed, claustrophobic Mayo setting, of which Michael James's shebeen was a synecdoche, was blown open. The tops of these walls held rows of glass bottles to indicate the setting, but what was most noticeable to an audience was that the set was spacious and that the lighting was for the most part very bright, except when the villagers were presented in threatening silhouettes, or in the final scene when Pegeen was spotlit and the rest of the stage darkened, accompanied by the sound of a ticking clock. There were signifiers of the traditional cottage set in the wooden half doors and settle, as well as the walls having been painted a muddy white to suggest a cottage interior.

Barnes also added the character of 'The Bellman' for this production based, he claimed, on the tinker characters in John B. Keane's *Sive*.<sup>814</sup> There is also a source for this character in Synge's text, specifically in the bellman calling for the tug-of-war. In 2004, the 'Bellman' served as a narrator, delivering lines from Synge's preface to *The Playboy*, sounding cymbals intermittently as a framing device. The Bellman also delivered the wedding items ordered by Pegeen at the beginning of the first act, and performed occasional similar functions to establish him as an intermediary between the historical play and the audience. As Barnes wrote:

We plan to equip Simon [O'Gorman, cast as The Bellman] with cymbals rather than a bell and these will be clashed at key moments throughout as a call to action and in homage to the offstage gong that sounded backstage at the Abbey to signal the raising of the curtain and the commencement of the performance.<sup>815</sup>

The Bellman's costume was made up of an unusual striped shirt, loose trousers held up with suspenders and bowler hat. For the rest of the costumes, Monica Frawley's shabby, functional rural garments suggested the 1940s or 50s, and were mismatched in style and time enough to at least accidentally suggest the mix-and-match of styles the *Playboy* has known. Pegeen's dress, for example, was

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<sup>814</sup> Barnes, *Plays*, p. 335.

<sup>815</sup> *Ibid*, p. 323.

a loose floral summer dress rather than a painstakingly sourced traditional 19th-century dress from the Aran Islands. When the village girls tried on Christy's clothes and danced around the room, Kelly Campbell as Sara Tansey showed mud streaked legs (and the image of Campbell's dress held provocatively high to show her bare legs in Christy's boots was repeatedly used in the programmes). The costume, lighting and design were intended, Barnes later wrote, to reference Jack B. Yeats's painting of *Playboy*, and it was intended that images of the 2004 play's race sequence would be printed alongside Yeats images in the accompanying book.<sup>816</sup>

The cast included Tom Vaughan Lawlor as Christy, Maeliosa Stafford as Old Mahon, and Cathy Belton and Olwen Fouéré, who had played in the 2001 *Playboy*, as Pegeen and the Widow Quin, respectively.<sup>817</sup> The significance of the casting is worth noting: Tom Vaughan Lawlor, who had played one of the child characters in Barnes's 1988 *The Field* which toured to Moscow and Leningrad with *The Great Hunger*, was known for his physical approach to performing. Stafford was known for his association with Druid Theatre Company, he was AD when Hynes took over at the Abbey in 1991, and for having played Christy Mahon in Druid's celebrated 1982 production of *Playboy*.

Most notable in the casting decision was that, in the 2001 Blue Raincoat production, Cathy Belton had played Widow Quin and Olwen Fouéré had played Pegeen. For the Abbey's 2004 production the same actors were cast, but this time in the opposite roles, reinstating the traditional expectations in a direct reference to the earlier production. In addition, many critics referred to Maeliosa Stafford's role as Christy for Druid in 1982, now that he was playing Old Mahon.

The Abbey's *Playboy* opened at the Town Hall Theatre in Galway in June, and Barnes shortly after left for Toronto to continue work on *Translations* at Soulpepper. Meanwhile *Playboy* toured to An Grianán, Letterkenny, the Grand Opera House, Belfast, The Táin Theatre, Dundalk, Cork Opera House, the

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<sup>816</sup> Barnes, *Plays*, p. 372.

<sup>817</sup> Andrew Bennett played Shawn Keogh, with John Olohan as Michael James, David Herlihy as Jimmy Farrell, Brendan Conroy as Philly Cullen, Ciara O'Callaghan as Susan Brady, Katy Davis as Honor Blake, and Kelly Campbell as Sara Tansey.

Watergate Theatre, Kilkenny and the Hawk's Well Theatre, Sligo. Reviewing the play in the Town Hall Theatre, Galway, Helen Meany made the connection between this and the Blue Raincoat production, noting that Fouéré and Belton were reversing the roles they had played in the Blue Raincoat production at the Peacock. The versatility displayed in this swapping of roles is one element the critic singles out for praise, and so the previous production was not so much a hindrance at this point, and indeed Meany goes on to discuss the difficulty of 'making something new from familiar materials'. Generally, the review identified Barnes's 'striving towards a formal, almost ritualistic aesthetic' but also the problem of 'self-conscious layers which slow things down and seem a bit ponderous'.<sup>818</sup>

In the Irish reviews, comparisons to Druid's recent production were inevitable, and few notices focused on how it was a departure for an *Abbey* performance of the classic play. *The Sunday Business Post*,<sup>819</sup> *The Irish Times*,<sup>820</sup> *The Guardian*,<sup>821</sup> the reviewers on RTÉ Radio's *Rattlebag* and the following week on RTE's *Summer Days* all compared the Abbey's production to Druid's.<sup>822</sup> One presenter failed to distinguish the different productions,<sup>823</sup> and *The Irish Examiner* also compared the Abbey's to the 1982 Druid production:

Stafford's own relationship with *The Playboy of the Western World* stretches back to 1982 when he played Christy Mahon in the powerful and much acclaimed production from Galway's Druid theatre.<sup>824</sup>

On 12 June, *The Irish Times* reported that, while the Abbey were going west, opening their centenary *Playboy* in the Town Hall Theatre in Galway before continuing on to the national tour, the successful Druid production (branded 'DruidSynge') of *Playboy* was to go east, their:

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<sup>818</sup> Helen Meany, 'The Playboy of the Western World', *The Irish Times*, 14 June 2002.

<sup>819</sup> 'Theatre', *The Sunday Business Post*, 15 August 2002.

<sup>820</sup> Lorna Siggins, 'Playboy of West and East', *The Irish Times*, 12 June 2004.

<sup>821</sup> Karen Fricker, 'The Playboy of the Western World', *The Guardian*, 16 June 2004.

<sup>822</sup> RTÉ Radio 1, 'Play on in Abbey', *Rattlebag*, 6 August 2004, RTÉ Radio 1, *Summer Days*, 12 August 2004.

<sup>823</sup> 'Play on in Abbey', *Rattlebag*, RTÉ Radio 1, 6 August 2004.

<sup>824</sup> Judy Murphy, 'Son to Father', *Irish Examiner*, 17 August 2004



Highly successful version, meanwhile, has been invited to Edinburgh, and there's also talk of London's West End by the end of the year.<sup>825</sup>

Hynes's growing authority in her company's approach to Synge was further established in the report that:

Already, Garry Hynes, or Druid Theatre Company, is preparing for the next in the series of Synge plays she intends to stage: *The Well of the Saints* and *The Tinker's Wedding*. And just as *The Playboy* was brought to Geesala in north Co Mayo, where the author based the play, so this pair will be staged simultaneously in the hills of county Wicklow.<sup>826</sup>

In *The Guardian*, Karen Fricker wrote on the bad decisions being played out:

Choosing to premiere his *Playboy* in the same [Galway] theatre where Garry Hynes opened her superb staging of it less than four months ago is only the first of several bizarre choices made by Abbey Theatre Artistic Director Ben Barnes around this centenary-year touring production.<sup>827</sup>

Fricker suggests that it is 'perhaps to differentiate his from Hynes's gritty heightened-realism' that 'Barnes has opted for pointed stylisation' in a play that is ultimately 'a confused and reckless postmodern pastiche', asking 'what possible sense will US audiences make of it when it tours there later this year?'<sup>828</sup>

The *Irish Examiner* critic complimented the cast, but found the direction puzzling: 'including the decision to put the Widow Quin in man's garb. The audience already know she is a strong personality and such touches were more distracting than insightful.'<sup>829</sup>

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<sup>825</sup> Lorna Siggins, 'Playboy of West and East', *The Irish Times*, 12 June 2004.

<sup>826</sup> Ibid.

<sup>827</sup> Karen Fricker, 'The Playboy of the Western World', *The Guardian*, 16 June 2004.

<sup>828</sup> Ibid.

<sup>829</sup> Judy Murphy, 'Abbey Revives Playboy', *Irish Examiner*, 18 June 2004.

The *Sunday Independent* took umbrage with the Abbey's programme:

The programme for the Abbey centenary touring production contains a glossary of some of Synge's language. Are we now so gentrified that we need such a thing? There are no intimations in Ben Barnes' interesting and serious, if flawed, production, that would lead one to believe that he thinks so. He has introduced the character of Bellman, a town crier cum ringmaster [...] it would seem Barnes believes his audience does need educating in the importance of Synge's work.<sup>830</sup>

In RTÉ Radio 1's culture show *Rattlebag*, on 6 August, the presenter Myles Dungan's first question to his panel was, given there were so many recent productions of the play: 'how difficult is it at this stage to do something different with *The Playboy*?'<sup>831</sup> The issue for the Abbey in this review context was not whether the play worked in an historical context, but how it fitted in the very recent theatrical past, and measured up to the likes of *Druid*'s recent staging.

UCD's Anthony Roche's response was to point out that the Abbey's version acknowledged that there have been other *Playboys* in the casting, for instance of Maeliosa Stafford as Old Mahon.<sup>832</sup> Incorporating Stafford, Roche argued, was akin to taking *Druid* on board, while casting Belton and Fouéré was a means of incorporating the *Blue Raincoat* version.

So while audiences would have recognized the same faces in this all-encompassing production, in taking those actors Abbey's casting could be said also to have been a 'recasting': that is, where Niall Henry had made the uncommon decision to cast a young *Widow Quin* and an older *Pegeen*, the Abbey were now switching the actors to the more conventional age roles. In a sense it showed the Abbey's authoritative stamp on the centenary production, putting to

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<sup>830</sup> *Sunday Independent*, 20 June 2004.

<sup>831</sup> 'Play on in Abbey', *Rattlebag*, RTÉ Radio 1, 6 August 2004.

<sup>832</sup> 'Play on in Abbey', *Rattlebag*, RTÉ Radio 1, 6 August 2004.

rights the unconventional casting, but as the rest of the direction and design was far from traditional, the conflicting idioms undermined the production. If Pegeen is to be a more typical age, and a significant member of Druid's naturalist productions to be included, then the anachronistic costumes, mimes and shadow play were at odds.

In Irish reviews, the play was largely regarded as 'a postmodern mess', and unfavourably compared with Niall Henry's 2001 production.<sup>833</sup> Many critics did not see the point of the Bellman.<sup>834</sup> In Ireland, therefore, the centenary production of *The Playboy of the Western World* was considered to have been misjudged. Following as the company did after recent productions, it was difficult to offer a meaningful interpretation in an original way, and the subsequent production felt irrelevant, its stylized approach perfunctory and ineffective. Ironically it was that very experimental character of the new production that would then see problems emerging for the production on US tour. The play in Ireland did not measure up to Druid and Blue Raincoat, but US audiences had not seen those productions to make comparison. What they *were* expecting, as a result of years of Abbey tours and the accompanying press and publicity for this particular tour, was an Abbey Theatre production that would prove authentic and meaningful. While the Abbey failed to live up to comparisons to other companies in Ireland, in the US it was to fail to live up to its own reputation. *The Playboy* would now be appraised in the context of traditional Abbey tours, and their first US tour in particular.

The national tour of the Abbey's centenary production of *Playboy of the Western World* ended on 31 July; then the play ran at the Abbey until 11 September before the company began its two-month American tour. As the *Playboy's* international tour got underway, the financial crisis intensified. Cuts were made to the *abbeyonehundred* and the liquidation of the Abbey's painting collection was seriously considered, despite some additional private support and the

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<sup>833</sup> The reviewer was also critical of the 'jarring spectacle' of naturalist performances within a stylized, postmodern framework. Rachel Andrews, 'Synge out of Tune', *Sunday Tribune*, 15 August 2004.

<sup>834</sup> 'Play on in Abbey', *Rattlebag*, RTÉ Radio 1, 6 August 2004.



success of *The Shaughraun*. The negative publicity was not well managed by Barnes, who was absent for a number of weeks with the *Gigli* tour. During the opening performances of *The Gigli Concert* in Brisbane, the problems at home in the Abbey reached crisis point, with the announcement of staff cuts proposed in *The Headcount Review* and dissatisfaction at the AD's absence during these events. Barnes was obliged to leave Australia before the show had even moved on to Sydney. During these controversial events, the *Playboy* began its American tour, to venues in Connecticut (New Haven and Stamford), Philadelphia, New York, Boston and finally Chicago.<sup>835</sup>

The US programmes show the ambivalence of the experimental production of the classic play, and in some ways point to the subsequent problems the audience would have. Visually the programme is new, stylish, non-traditional and unpredictable. For example the programme for the Skirball performance bore the title '*The Playboy of the Western World* by JM Synge October 26-31, 2004', in lowercase, in a contemporary font. Aside from the line beneath 'The Abbey Theatre: National Theatre of Ireland 100th anniversary', there were signifiers of neither traditional Ireland nor the traditional Abbey. The publicity action shot from the play was of Tom Vaughan Lawlor as Christy, writhing on the ground in ropes and a yellow day dress, with his face contorted in what looks more like anger than fear. (See Fig. 5.1). In Dublin, on the other hand, the Abbey's choice of image used in posters and brochures was a sepia toned photograph of Willie Fay as Christy in his striped jersey, holding an implement menacingly. The background for that image is a clash of strong, smeared reds that in some ways evoke cave paintings. It communicates the violence of the play, as well as situating it definitively in the past, whereas the white backdrop of the American programme photograph does not direct such a reading. Compared to the programme for the 1976 tour of *The Plough and the Stars* with its shamrocks,

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<sup>835</sup> Beginning 7-10 October, *Playboy* was staged at the Shubert Theater in New Haven, Connecticut; then 12-17 October, Annenberg Center for the Performing Arts in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania; 19-24 October, Rich Forum in Stamford, Connecticut; 26-31 October, Skirball Center for the Performing Arts in New York, New York; 2-28 November, The Wilbur Theatre in Boston, Massachusetts (where the preview night was also the night of the Presidential Election); and finally finished with a run from 30 November -12 December at the Chicago Shakespeare Theater in Chicago, Illinois.

pointed use of green and distinctive nostalgic typeface, the American programme layout and imagery for *The Playboy of the Western World* is more naturally modern.

There was a disparity between the look of the programme and the more conventional mediating of the Abbey product for the US audience in the text. The programme's glossary, to which some Irish critics objected, was more justifiably placed in the US tour. It explains words like 'shebeen' ('a small country pub'); 'maiming ewes' ('maiming (damaging/disfiguring) animals that belonged to landlords (common during the "Land War")'); 'loy' ('a special spade with an extra blade for cutting turf'); 'shift' ('ladies' underwear'); and the 'bell-man' ('the town crier'). The programme's text, in contrast to its imagery, is similar to past programmes discussed previously, in that the theatre is cast as an historical cultural institution with a remit to produce the best of contemporary writing. The author's preface was extracted, followed by a programme note on the original riots. The piece detailed the first American tour of the play and Clan-na-Gael's opposition to its performance and the rescue of the company by a New York lawyer when an injunction was brought against future performances and the company arrested. This was followed by an extract from Arthur Gelb's *O'Neill: Life With Monte Cristo* in which the Abbey's 1911 tour and its influence on American playwright Eugene O'Neill was briefly detailed.<sup>836</sup> Similarly, in the flyers distributed from the Skirball, it was noted that the Abbey and *Playboy* 'had a major influence on the future of American theater', and so the text emphasized the importance of the early American tours by the Abbey in international theatre history.

The production opened in New Haven to good reviews and briefly enjoyed the goodwill of the US audiences. *The New York Times*, due to scheduling conflicts, did not review the play's opening in New Haven as it usually might have done, postponing what was to be a negative review and so extending the grace period. In Philadelphia the play was deemed 'puzzling' by the *Philadelphia Inquirer* who

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<sup>836</sup> US *Playboy* programme, pp. 9-13.



considered the Abbey had tampered with the classic: 'especially among theatergoers who expect a traditional treatment of Synge's comedy from such an authoritative source.' Widow Quin, for instance, 'wearing a shabby farmer's suit and hat, comes across as far too masculine, independent and strong-willed to need to compete for Christy's favor'.<sup>837</sup> In New York typically the critical reaction would have greater importance (as the *New York Times* is more widely circulated and cited, and has been credited with closing Broadway shows, such as *Wonderful Tennessee*), and so more hinged on the success of the play there, especially as there were two more major cities to visit. The reception thereafter, broadly speaking, was negative and a round-up of reviews reveal a pattern of dissatisfaction that the play was presented in such an unconventional way. The US reviews reflect a shared dissatisfaction with a production that neglected to celebrate the classic play in a way that met with critics' expectations. Ironically, or perhaps not, the play known for provoking strong reactions upon its debut and subsequent tours for misrepresenting an audience's idea of Ireland on stage, was to disappoint audiences in its centenary production for similar reasons. Cries of 'that's not the real Ireland' in the auditorium in 1907 and 1911 became 'that's not the real *Playboy*' in the *New York Times* in 2004.

In the widely-circulated *New York Times* review of the Skirball Center performances, Charles Isherwood conceded the Abbey's 'natural proprietary interest' in the *Playboy*, citing the historical riots in Dublin and the US, but found the centenary staging 'self-conscious, wayward and dispiritingly grim'.<sup>838</sup> The main complaint Isherwood found with the production was the emphasis on the darker side of the play at the expense of the comic aspect. The addition of the Bellman was 'misguided' with his clashing of cymbals, a 'stylistic gimmick', achieving 'silly dramatic emphasis'. Isherwood went on to criticise the 'pointless directorial adornments', singling out the third-act dumb-show in which the village games were enacted as 'a particular offender'.

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<sup>837</sup> Desmond Ryan, *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, 14 October 2004.

<sup>838</sup> Charles Isherwood, 'A Seductive Fellow Returns, but in a Darker Mood', *New York Times*, 28 October 2004.



Essentially Isherwood argued that the stylistic flourishes were unnecessary while the performances failed to capture the humanity of the characters. Maeliosa Stafford and Andrew Bennett drew praise for their performances, but Pegeen, for instance, was found 'strangely chilly and charmless' and in a pointedly ignominious comparison, considered to resemble 'more the calculating, embittered shrew from Martin McDonagh's *Beauty Queen of Leenane*, than the tough-spirited but tenderhearted young lass affectionately observed by Synge.'<sup>839</sup>

The objection by US critics to the 2004 *Playboy* was an objection to the perceived tampering with the play in terms of costume and also in terms of representation; *The Philadelphia Inquirer* pointed out that the Bellman was not in the cast list: 'This interrupts the natural flow of the piece without, to my mind, adding anything. It is meddlesome rather than meaningful'. He also disliked 'the eccentric staging of the races Christy wins'.<sup>840</sup> This is a problematic aspect of this particular production of *Playboy*. In its original staging, there were physical limitations to the Abbey stage; however, this is not the reason why the race scene or Christy's attempt to murder Old Mahon a second time happen offstage, as Synge was making a point about mythologising in opposition to the mundane truth.

Setting the race onstage, rather than in the imagined space out of view of the limited shebeen, undermines the alchemy of Christy's transformation. What his literal physical achievements are matter far less than the stories the villagers, a proxy for the audience, tell each other about him. Making literal the mythologised events was tantamount to the villagers, celebrating Christy's gallous story, then having to witness the dirty deed and finding it less than they'd hoped for. Indeed though Druid's 2004 production had eschewed the typical set, they nonetheless retained walls. As Hynes put it:

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<sup>839</sup> Ibid.

<sup>840</sup> Desmond Ryan, *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, 14 October 2004.

One thing that hasn't changed in my perception of the play is that you have to have the physical walls of the house. Outside is better left to the power of the imagination. So I started from four walls.<sup>841</sup>

The US critics by and large approached the play from the point of view of 'a traditional treatment of Synge's comedy from such an authoritative source,' and found it failed to measure up.<sup>842</sup> The Abbey's staging was considered neither authentic nor traditional, as the centennial frame of the tour apparently suggested. The negative reviews were reported back in Ireland.<sup>843</sup>

The conclusion to be drawn from the 2004 *Playboy* is that the Abbey failed their audience's expectation of providing a meaningful symbol in their staging of the classic Abbey play. In Ireland the staging was considered unimaginative in the wake of *Druid* and *Blue Raincoat's* productions, then in the US it was criticised for failing to represent an authoritative enactment of the play most valued from the Abbey Theatre's past.

### ***The Plough and the Stars: A Terrible State O' Chassis?***

The third play in the Abbey's international touring programme for the centenary was a revival of the 2002 Barnes production of Sean O'Casey's *The Plough and the Stars*, another Abbey classic (see Figs. 5.2 - 5.4). Compared to a relatively new play such as *The Gigli Concert*, and considering its having been edged out by *Playboy* for the US tour, it can be easily placed as another heritage play for the Abbey. The choice of *The Plough and the Stars* is obvious, verging on the banal: as discussed in Chapter One, *The Plough* was a showpiece of the Abbey Theatre's repertoire throughout the twentieth century. On average the play was performed annually between 1926 and 1939, then every two years until 1947, then with a gap of usually five years – and no more than seven – until the 1976 production. Thereafter the frequency declined to roughly every eight years, and the biggest

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<sup>841</sup> Garry Hynes, 'Roundtable Discussion', Frazier, *Playboys of the Western World*, p. 94.

<sup>842</sup> Desmond Ryan, 'Abbey Meddles With a Classic', *Philadelphia Inquirer*, no date.

<sup>843</sup> Jerome Reilly, 'Abbey's Production of "Playboy" is Savaged by New York Critics', *Sunday Independent*, 31 October 2004; and Deirdre Falvey, "'Playboy' in New York", *The Irish Times*, 13 November 2004, summarises the reviews.

gap in the Abbey's performance of the play was between Garry Hynes's 1991 production and Ben Barnes's production 11 years later, which was revived twice and then featured in the centenary. As well as the numerous productions in the Dublin theatre, in touring terms *The Plough and the Stars* represented the nation on stage three times nationally and three times internationally over that first one hundred years.

Despite its ubiquity, however, the decision to take *The Plough and the Stars* to London at the end of the centenary resulted in a positive reception in which the play was placed in a broader political context that gave new relevance to the text. With neither the pressure to be authentic nor outlandishly reimagined, the play was presented in a comparatively conventional staging that nonetheless won greater approval than the rest of the centenary tours. Representing the ideal exchange between the Irish national theatre and international audiences in its topicality and historical import, the play was overshadowed by the company's financial crisis, so that its success was not registered.

Preparations for what would eventually be the 2005 London transfer of *The Plough and the Stars* began in early 2002 when Barnes started auditioning actors for the role of Nora. In April he outlined preferred sound and lighting plans with his colleagues, Paddy Cuneen (sound) and Francis O'Connor (set), and decided on relatively grand tall, mobile windows for the main set:

The Georgian window is such a strong feature in O'Casey. These will form the backdrop for all the action and become progressively degraded as the evening unfolds to reflect the attrition in the bombing of the city.<sup>844</sup>

The set's most distinctive feature was the debris of the conflict, which overran into the auditorium:

Our plan is to leave the stage open and create barricades of sandbags, assorted furniture and bric-a-brac which will ring the space, becoming

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<sup>844</sup> Barnes, *Plays*, p. 195.



more discernible throughout the night and going on fire in the fourth act. This will give the effect of a city ringed with fire.<sup>845</sup>

Barnes's set preference during this period was architecturally baroque. This addressed the problem of filling the large Abbey stage, but was also part of the director's preference to make a production appear grander and therefore upmarket to the audience. Upmarket, that is, in the sense that it was a representation of poverty and dilapidation that had more in common with the expensive set of *Les Misérables* than say, Garry Hynes's spartan 1991 production of *Plough*. Writing in his memoir about Rae Smith's design of his 1998 production of *Juno and The Paycock*, for which the staircase of the entire house was visible in the large set, he argues that this allowed the production to draw attention to the spectre of Georgian Dublin, and so the empire, in the architecture.<sup>846</sup> In addition, the set of *Plough* allowed for very elaborate destruction in the third act, with smashed windows and mangled iron railings. Aware that this was an 'operatic design', Barnes was obviously interested in bringing out a sense of grandeur in the architecture, and drawing attention to signifiers of a *fin de siècle* empire. Casting the Abbey play as a large-scale pantomime-like spectacle might have been a sensible way to rebrand it, but the effect was to present the audience with the dissonance between the poverty onstage and the expensive set spilling off it, as Patrick Lonergan has argued.<sup>847</sup>

Barnes was also of the opinion that the play in previous productions had its context and a 'nationalist viewpoint' downplayed for diplomacy. He asserted that, in post-ceasefire Ireland, it was acceptable to acknowledge 'the historical significance of the play beyond the broader anti-war and humanist concerns' traditionally associated with O'Casey.<sup>848</sup> There was also a discussion about adding images of the 1916 Rising leaders in the auditorium.<sup>849</sup> By September 2002, Barnes had decided to scale back the more overt references to the Rising

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<sup>845</sup> Barnes, *Plays*, p. 195.

<sup>846</sup> Barnes, *Plays*, p. 88.

<sup>847</sup> 'Citizen Artists in an Age of Globalization: Two Abbey Theatre Productions of *The Plough and the Stars*', International Federation for Theatre Research Annual Conference, Washington DC, June-July 2005.

<sup>848</sup> Barnes, *Plays*, p. 192.

<sup>849</sup> *Ibid*, p. 218.

but still planned to have the dead characters in the play rise up during the end scene. While the British soldiers drank tea and sang, the ghouls would come downstage and recite the Proclamation of the Irish Republic.<sup>850</sup> This was an attempt by Barnes to show the body count at the end of the drama, both of the fictitious and real victims of 1916, and the ghosts of past Abbey actors too. The effect of the rising, ghostly figures was also to suggest Patrick Mason's revival of Frank McGuinness's *Observe the Sons of Ulster*.

Barnes wanted to keep the casting relatively young, 'to enfranchise a new generation of actors in the classic repertoire of the Abbey.'<sup>851</sup> While he was anxious the cast not be weighted by the production history of the play, Barnes nonetheless showed an ambivalence towards that history. In an exercise designed ostensibly to encourage an unbiased beginning to proceedings, on the first day of rehearsals Barnes gave each cast member a list of all the actors who had played their respective parts since the first production in 1926.<sup>852</sup> While this was followed by the instructions 'Now you've seen it, throw it away, forget about it', it is easy to imagine how such lists set the historical tone for the actors in 2002. Furthermore, the set was designed to reflect the vestiges of a grander Dublin, while the end scene, as Barnes would have had it, was to be populated by ghosts and the auditorium was to be decorated with portentous images of the Rising leaders. Although Barnes claimed to want to do a definitive version of *The Plough* and to break away from cliché and stock representations of the Abbey classic, the subsequent production and tour, and especially Barnes's own memoir, show that the approach he took was really to burden the new production with the past.

The swapping of *Playboy* and *Plough* had more significant consequences then, in that the two stagings ended up representing the other's intention: *Playboy* was

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<sup>850</sup> Ibid, p. 197.

<sup>851</sup> The Dublin cast was as follows: Tina Kellegher as Nora Clitheroe, Aidan Kelly as Jack Clitheroe, Marion O'Dwyer as Bessie Burgess, Owen Roe as Fluther Good and Derbhle Crotty as Mrs Gogan. Mark Lambert was designated for the role of Uncle Peter, but was replaced by Mark O'Regan when scheduling conflicts arose. He recorded the Voice of the Man in Act II instead. Barnes downplayed the comedy to an extent, particularly in the characters of Fluther and Rosie Redmond, whom he directed the actors to play as more despondent figures than as typical comic relief. Barnes, *Plays*, p. 203.

<sup>852</sup> Ibid, p. 235.



supposed to be a homage to the classic, derived from archive research by the director, but which turned out to be too strange for international audiences. *The Plough*, on the other hand, was supposed to be a reinvention, and was in fact weighted with historical symbols and welcomed by its UK audience as such.

The success of the play (critically and in terms of audience response) in London may be attributed to a number of factors: the pre-performance interpretive material made available to audiences, the Abbey's staging decisions which made the play accessible for unfamiliar audiences and the most historically important and least predictable factor: context. The play was well timed for a London audience receptive to a play engaging with and commemorating historical conflicts.

Early in its development, Martin Drury undertook the organisation of a series of lectures, discussions and workshops to accompany the production of *Plough*, including a public interview with Shivaun O'Casey. This was conceived as forming part of a programme for an international tour of the play, if one should arise, 'to aid understanding and give context'.<sup>853</sup> The Abbey were mindful of the international context before even a tour had been discussed. There was an accompanying book *The Page and the Stage* by Drury.<sup>854</sup> While the Abbey on tour has almost always offered something like a glossary or additional explanatory notes in the programme, this production of *Plough* had a larger-than-usual amount of accompanying texts to direct the audience how to read the play. Again while Barnes wrote of and spoke of a new unburdened production, events and publications such as this served to cast the play very much in a historical context. The reason for this was the Abbey's hope that the play would tour as part of the centenary programme.<sup>855</sup> US producers, including Jed Wheeler who was involved with the *Medea* US tour, visited Dublin to see the production with a view to taking it to the US. Theatre scouts saw the play amid full houses as *The Plough* opened in Dublin in June of 2003 to a very good reception.

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<sup>853</sup> Barnes, *Plays*, p. 235.

<sup>854</sup> Martin Drury, *The Page and the Stage: The Plough and the Stars*, The Abbey Theatre's Outreach/education Department Theatre as Resource Series, 2003.

<sup>855</sup> Barnes, *Plays*, p. 237.



The result was a transfer to London where *The Plough* played at the Barbican theatre from 18-29 January 2005 to positive notices. This success was not relayed back in the Irish papers with the same enthusiasm as was usually reserved for critical failures, the journalistic cold shoulder undoubtedly a result of the high-pitched debate in the Irish press about the future of the theatre and its new Artistic Director Fiach Mac Conghail. UK reviewers were unlikely to approach the play with the kind of aggressive exasperation that Dublin critics did, and generally the London reviews show a reception that was very positive on the performances and the direction. Reviewers commended the play's historical significance and how it harmonized with contemporary events. The play's relevance was frequently cited, despite its being almost 80 years old. In *British Theatre Guide*, Philip Fisher began an affable review in which he described the Abbey as 'that wonderful creative institution'.<sup>856</sup>

*The Plough*, Fisher wrote, is 'an archetypal Abbey production' and 'a symbol-laden tragedy of almost Shakespearean proportions'.<sup>857</sup> As far as this notice (and more like it) were concerned, the reputation of the Abbey was where the company wanted it to be. Paul Taylor for *The Independent* was one of very few journalists to note that 'recently the dramas off stage have rivalled the official programme' for the Abbey Theatre.<sup>858</sup> On the whole, the visit was celebrated by critics, and the warm atmosphere in the audience felt by the performers indicated popular acclaim too.

The review in *The Times* by John Peter cited the 1926 riot, as did all reviews, more or less. As with most UK notices, the article underlined a relevance and edginess to the play. John Peter told readers that, if O'Casey were 'alive today, and wrote a play like this about Northern Ireland, he would be torn to pieces by the IRA, the UDA or both together'.<sup>859</sup> The review was positive overall, and commended the company's 'passion, anger, sharp characterisation [and] superb

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<sup>856</sup> Philip Fisher, 'The Plough and the Stars', *British Theatre Guide*, January 2005.  
<http://www.britishtheatreguide.info/reviews/ploughstars-rev.htm>.

<sup>857</sup> Philip Fisher, 2005.

<sup>858</sup> Paul Taylor, 'The Plough and the Stars, Barbican, London', *The Independent*, 24 January 2005.

<sup>859</sup> John Peter, 'Rest of the week's theatre', *The Times*, 23 January 2005.

staging'.<sup>860</sup> Peter Hepple in *The Stage* found it 'magnificently authentic in both accents and Francis O'Connor's setting'.<sup>861</sup> Eamon Morrissey who played Fluther Good, recalled a more positive reception than he had been used to from international audiences, and recalled that 'In the 2005 production in the Barbican you could feel the difference onstage. The audience wanted to be part of, and to understand, the various arguments presented in the play.'<sup>862</sup>

*The Guardian's* Michael Billington's interpretation of the 'downstage barricade of junk furniture' was that it indicated a production that would be 'as much about poverty as nationalism'.<sup>863</sup> Describing the 'famous tenement tragedy' as an 'innovative Irish import', Billington's review casts the play as the opposite of outmoded political drama, still qualifying as 'shocking' and O'Casey as a pioneer. At the same time the review draws a connection for the reader with WWI: 'By the end, Dublin has become a flame-lit hell evoking the carnage simultaneously taking place in Flanders.'<sup>864</sup> The production as such was celebrated as commemorative on the one hand and yet still new and exciting. *The British Theatre Guide* also connected the play with a broader international experience of war:

The set designed by Francis O'Connor is substantial with the playing area surrounded by vast quantities of detritus loaded on to sandbags. This seemingly symbolises the Civil War zone in Dublin but also alludes to the trenches of mainland Europe.<sup>865</sup>

Susannah Clapp compared *The Plough and the Stars* with another 'new staging of another once explosive play', John Osborne's *Look Back in Anger*, which was playing at the Lyceum in Edinburgh at that time.

Clapp's review of the *Look Back in Anger* might very well apply to *The Plough*:

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<sup>860</sup> Ibid.

<sup>861</sup> Peter Hepple, 'The Plough and the Stars', *The Stage*, 20 January 2005.

<sup>862</sup> Interview with Eamon Morrissey, 2010.

<sup>863</sup> Michael Billington, 'The Plough and the Stars', *The Guardian*, 21 January 2005.

<sup>864</sup> Michael Billington, 2005.

<sup>865</sup> Philip Fisher, 2005.

John Osborne's play needs radical treatment if it's not to look hopelessly dated. As Richard Baron's bustling but over-literal production proves.<sup>866</sup>

With O'Casey's play, Clapp informed readers of the premiere's riot, and that *The Plough* was 'a forceful attack on the 1916 Easter Rising and on a romantic nationalism'; 'incisive because of the vivacity of its expression, the dancing lightness of its dialogue.' The importance of *Plough*, Clapp argued, could still be discerned.<sup>867</sup> As such while *Look Back in Anger*, 50 years after its first production, 'looks less like the start of a new wave than a DynoRod drama: a play which usefully performed a dirty task in blasting away preconceptions about the stage, but whose main interest is now historical', *The Plough*, in this review at least was still germane.

A further benefit to the Abbey production was probably that context in which the transfer took place. As well as the Osborne play, the major UK theatre scene that spring was dominated by revivals of older plays. Numerous Shakespeare productions throughout the country – and on tour – were announced (with four separate *Macbeths*), as was Edward Bond's *Lear* and *The Big Life* by Paul Sirett and Paul Joseph (after *Love's Labours Lost*). The major theatres were hosting productions of, for example: *The Bacchae* by Euripides (Bristol Old Vic), *The Birthday Party* by Harold Pinter (Birmingham Rep), *Dr Faustus* by Christopher Marlowe (Playhouse, Liverpool), *Hecuba* by Euripides (Albery Theatre, London), and *Hedda Gabler* by Henrik Ibsen (Almeida, London). Previewing the season, Lyndsey Turner advised that 'American drama has been sidelined in favour of the classics of the European repertoire'.<sup>868</sup> What this season indicates is that, in the beginning of 2005, UK theatres were trying to attract school groups, and so it was not a season of new writing. Compared to Dublin, where the Abbey was under intense pressure to justify its choice of including a Boucicault play on the centenary programme and then cancelling a new play by Paul Mercier, its London reception took place amid many other interpretation of historical plays. As such, the play did not look as outmoded as it did even in 1976.

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<sup>866</sup> Susannah Clapp, 'Meet the Macbeths', *The Guardian*, 23 January 2005.

<sup>867</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>868</sup> Lyndsey Turner, 'The Play's the Thing for Spring', *The Guardian*, 4 January 2005.



### **Conclusion: 'The rising tide will wash all traces from the memory of man'**

The Abbey's reputation was built on touring, but in the wake of the centenary crisis, higher than anticipated touring costs were blamed, said to have caused the hidden losses of almost €1 million, which impelled the departures of Brian Jackson and Ben Barnes from the Abbey.<sup>869</sup> The theatre's reputation was badly damaged and it came close to technical insolvency. The media coverage is not completely reliable, as it became increasingly shrill during the year and in the wake of Barnes's resignation and the fast-tracking of Fiach Mac Conghail into the position of Artistic Director. It was later reported that the international tours had, in fact, made money, though the national tours created a loss.<sup>870</sup>

The obligation of the Abbey Theatre in the centenary was, as 'national' theatre, to perform a public act of commemoration: to represent the best of the historical theatre of the nation, to showcase new Irish writing, such as has been nurtured by the theatre as part of its manifesto, and to show the best of a contemporary international theatre, all while managing to remain financially solvent. The financial crisis has already been written about in detail elsewhere, and in all major Irish – and some English, American and Australian – newspapers.<sup>871</sup> The issue here is the way the very imposition of the crisis on the debate was detrimental to audience reception. The dissatisfaction critics had with the centenary programme was vindicated in the subsequent meltdown of the management, and so led to disproportionately negative reviews of the plays at home and on tour (problematic plays aside).

Cultural globalisation is defined by one scholar as 'acceleration in the exchange of cultural symbols among people around the world to such an extent that it

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<sup>869</sup> 'Extensive Touring Blamed For Abbey's Hidden Loss', *The Irish Times*, 5 May 2005.

<sup>870</sup> 'Digging A (Black) Hole In The Abbey', *The Irish Times*, 5 May 2005. Also: 'Although it was panned by American critics, *Playboy* actually made a €300,000 profit on a six-city tour of the US last autumn, with theatres in New York, Boston, Philadelphia and Chicago each paying the Abbey about €100,000 to stage it. The tour of Australia of *The Gigli Concert* also made a profit'. John Burns, 'Playboy behind Abbey losses', *The Sunday Times*, 15 May 2005.

<sup>871</sup> It is also well summarized in Holly Maples's *Culture War:*

*Conflict, Commemoration and the Contemporary Abbey Theatre* (New York: Peter Lang, 2011).

leads to changes in local popular cultures and identities.<sup>872</sup> The general view of the centenary programme and subsequent events was that it, and the tours, failed to offer a meaningful exchange, either of the best of the theatre's past or of its present. I would argue that the Abbey Theatre failed to incorporate the work of other Irish companies and produce a truly relevant 'national' theatre in the productions of *The Gigli Concert* and *The Playboy of the Western World*. The Abbey has always been located in an international context and has contributed to international theatre discourse while also taking on influences from the outside. The problem for international tours in the centenary was that after years of touring, the Abbey Theatre was presenting something watered down either by taking on too many outside influences (*Playboy*) or by entering a saturated market (*Playboy* and *Gigli*). In its tour of *The Plough and the Stars*, however, the Abbey did offer a meaningful celebration of a play nurtured by the company and historically most often chosen to represent the nation on international stages by the Abbey. The context of the performance, as well as the direction and staging decisions, offered a London audience a production that was both definitively Irish in content but international in relevance.

Audiences at home and abroad know the *Playboy* and the story of the riots around it. The play and the set are clear signifiers of the establishment of the Irish national theatre. Building on this prevailing knowledge is a challenge to any production, but the rewards, as Druid have shown, are valuable. The Abbey was attempting to perform the evolving character of Irish theatre. In the 2004 tour *Playboy* was a palimpsest of all the preceding tours and Barnes wanted to inscribe something new for the centenary. Unfortunately for them, they were undermined in Ireland by the productions of Druid and Blue Raincoat, who made use of non-naturalistic approaches. Druid did so by using a stylised, caricatured approach that draws upon the now familiar images of McDonagh's plays to recast Synge in this modern context and perhaps retrieve from McDonagh the kudos he poached for creating a certain type of rural comedy. This put pressure on the Abbey not to return a familiar clichéd Abbey version of the play. As such

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<sup>872</sup> J. Nijman, 'Cultural Globalisation and the Identity of Place: The Reconstruction of Amsterdam,' *Ecumene*, 6, (1999) 146-164 [3].



the Abbey's centenary *Playboy*, neither drew from its own historical way of staging the *Playboy*, (rendered trite by Druid and McDonagh), nor from recent imaginative revivals of the play.

In their 2004 staging of *The Playboy* the Abbey alienated their Irish audience by including a programme glossary that made a museum-piece of the play, as though the audience had become far-removed from the language and required an interpretation. A second layer of mediation, the addition of the Bellman character, further distanced the audience to voluble discontent from critics. It was two degrees of removal after Druid had brought a muddy, tangible enactment of the play to community centres and venues that would fit as few as one hundred audience members eager to get up-close with the exciting celebrity cast. In *Blue Raincoat*, as Adrian Frazier argues, one could see the production as 'leaders of a still youthful Irish theatrical tradition attaining the confidence to experiment with a sacred text and extend their own powers of self-expression.'<sup>873</sup>

In the context of *Blue Raincoat*'s experimentalism and Druid's popular, critically acclaimed version which was authenticated through the company's performance in Mayo, the Abbey were trying to present a centenary version of the play on which they had a weakening grasp. The Abbey's version lacked the localizing credibility and celebrity status of Druid's, as well as having gambled away its 'traditional' status on an unconventional staging. The Abbey's strongest selling point on tour is its authenticity and the hallmark of 'national' – a shaky ground for any cultural endeavour that seeks to develop and grow while purporting to enrich with knowledge and also speak for a national identity. Taking their stylised version to the US, they alienated a second audience, by not offering an authentic representation of the classic play.

The 'meaningful exchange of symbols' was a problem also that dogged the Australian tour of *Gigli*, as another Irish company had pre-empted the Abbey's tour and presented a very successful version of the play. It was unfortunate for the Abbey that audiences and reviews do not make a distinction between the

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<sup>873</sup> Frazier, *Playboys of the Western World*, p. 9.



Chapter 5 images:



Fig. 5.1 Tom Vaughan Lawlor as Christy in the Abbey Theatre's *The Playboy of the Western World*, 2004.



Fig. 5.2 Laura Murphy as Mollser in *The Plough and the Stars*. Abbey Theatre, 2005.



Fig. 5.3 Eamon Morrissey as Fluther Good in *The Plough and the Stars*. Abbey Theatre, 2005.



Fig. 5.4 Owen McDonnell as Jack Clitheroe, Aonghus Óg McAnally as Langon and Conor Delaney as Captain Brennan in *The Plough and the Stars*. Abbey Theatre, 2005.



The Abbey on Tour

Fig. 5.5 Owen Roe in *The Gigli Concert*, as part of the *abbeyonehundred* 'The Abbey on Tour' programme, 2004.



response of niche audiences to small fashionable productions in inexpensive venues and that of mainstream, high-paying audiences in upmarket venues, but that was a major factor in the unfavourable comparison between the two *Gigli*s.

Circumstances often make meaningful the symbols presented by the Abbey, and while at home they were undermined by localization, abroad by being too globalised, in the UK however the circumstances represented the ideal context for a meaningful exchange. The Abbey harmoniously commemorated its own centenary, one of its most famous plays, Irish history and UK and European history in a single theatrical event. *The Plough* in 2005 represented the pinnacle of touring the national theatre, and representing the nation on stage.

It is ironic that in *The Plough*'s set there was a literal gap between audience and performers, but that was not felt as acutely as the variance audiences felt with *Gigli* and *Playboy*. *The Plough* is as much a heritage piece as *Playboy*, but whereas the Abbey *Playboy* in 2004 was an old dog struggling with new tricks, *The Plough* found a new relevance in its international context. The significance of the play in London was not as a commemoration of Irish events, but of international, shared experiences. Unfortunately for the Abbey, the success in the UK of *The Plough* was too late to redeem the centenary.

## Conclusion: Departures

### Under the radar

Often, and I speak from experience, we have to temper our enthusiasm to tour because you could programme work with touring in mind, as opposed to making sure the work you present works at home first.<sup>874</sup>  
Fiach Mac Conghail, Artistic Director of the Abbey Theatre 2005-present.

After the dust from the centenary crisis had settled, the role of Abbey Theatre's Artistic Director was taken up by Fiach Mac Conghail, formerly the director of the Project Arts Centre in Dublin city centre. Mac Conghail's appointment was unusual for the professional background he would bring to the Abbey, as an arts administrator and not a theatre director. With this shift in the AD's profile, Mac Conghail would programme the theatre without the inherent conflict of interest that comes with the director's promotion and development of their own work.

An additional shift in tone was achieved by the subsequent approach to international touring that the Abbey then adopted. From 2005 to time of writing, the Abbey quietly began a new international touring profile:

What I decided was not to tour in the first couple of years – not to do any international tours. I decided to decline a lot of the international invitations, primarily because the organisation wasn't match fit enough,

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<sup>874</sup> Interview with Fiach Mac Conghail, September 2011.

and secondly because we had to renew ourselves here, we had to repair and revitalise ourselves, we had to work out why we were doing work'.<sup>875</sup>

No production transferred abroad for three years. The theatre staged works by Mark O'Rowe, Marina Carr and Enda Walsh, while also revisiting classics like *Cathleen Ni Houlihan* and mounting a Shakespearean play annually. More recently the broadcaster/economist David McWilliams offered a lecture on the recent financial crisis that had put paid to the Irish property boom, and a *verbatim* play by Mary Raftery, based on the Ryan Report, offered Peacock audiences a shocking response to institutional child abuse in Ireland. Meanwhile the Abbey also staged several productions of new and well-known plays by the American writer and actor Sam Shepard. This Shepard retrospective began with *True West* in 2006, which directly led to the playwright's writing *Kicking a Dead Horse* for the Abbey and the actor Stephen Rea, in 2007. In 2009 his *Ages of the Moon*, also commissioned by the Abbey, premiered in Dublin.

International touring restarted relatively unobtrusively: there was no designated touring programme announced in the press. Rather one understated transfer led to another, and a snowball effect of sorts occurred. Mark O'Rowe's *Terminus* opened at the Peacock in 2007. In 2008 this monologue play set in contemporary Ireland was invited to play at the Public Theater, New York, as part of the fittingly named Under the Radar Festival in January. The following June *Kicking a Dead Horse* visited the same venue, then transferred to the Almeida in London. *Terminus* continued to the Traverse in Edinburgh for the Edinburgh Festival Fringe, not the main EIF. In 2009 it was staged at the Melbourne International Arts Festival, Australia, then returned to the Peacock after touring nationally. Shortly thereafter, *Ages of the Moon* transferred to the Linda Gross Theater in Chelsea, New York in 2010.

The choice to take *Terminus* to the Edinburgh Fringe in 2008 was unusual, in that the Abbey had, after *The Great Hunger* and then *Well of the Saints* finally broken back into the main Festival. In one sense, attending as part of the Fringe was a step back; however, it is better seen as a shrewd choice, given the Abbey's recent

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<sup>875</sup> Ibid.



problems, the Fringe's association with 'new' as opposed to classic works, and the inherently less hard-to-please nature of a Fringe audience:

I really wanted the Abbey to go to the Fringe, in the way that *The Great Hunger* had. Some people asked me, 'Really? The Fringe? You should be part of the international festival'. But I thought that festival was the right context for *Terminus*, a new piece of writing, a verse play.<sup>876</sup>

The play is made up of three interlocking monologues of violence, murder and a Mephistophelean contract by two women and one man during one night in a dystopian Dublin. Written and directed by Mark O'Rowe, *Terminus* is, in one sense, a return to form for the Abbey Theatre in that it is a verse play, which recalls Yeats, and set in inner city Dublin, which recalls O'Casey. The play does not, however, tend to draw such comparisons readily, because of its contemporary setting that included cranes in the Dublin skyline that situated audiences unmistakably in the present, and the fact that spoken verse tended to remind audiences of contemporary rap, not celebrated poets.<sup>877</sup> The form and the language were received as departures from the conventional by Dublin audiences, and reviews were very positive (although the play was also flagged as violent and 'experimental').<sup>878</sup> O'Rowe, a young writer known for his 'vivid and shocking' work had already won acclaim for the award-winning *Howie the Rookie*, but was not as commercially successful as Martin McDonagh or Conor McPherson.<sup>879</sup> As such, while *Terminus* is confrontational in its violent imagery it was indemnified by O'Rowe's critical reputation.

*Terminus* was very well received in Edinburgh, winning the Fringe First award which led to an influx of global invitations. The tour did not make any money for the theatre, but offered fundraising connections as well as helping towards the

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<sup>876</sup> The Gate Theatre followed suit, bringing Beckett's *Watt* to the Under the Radar festival in 2011. Mac Conghail, 2011.

<sup>877</sup> For instance a year later a direct comparison was made with Jay-Z. Jason Zinoman, 'For Him, the Devil Is in the Rhymes', *New York Times*, 13 January 2008.

<sup>878</sup> Peter Crawley, 'Putting Writers Centre Stage', *Irish Times*, 24 May 2006.

<sup>879</sup> Ray Comisky, 'Take Seats', *Irish Times*, 5 May 2006.

repair of the Abbey's reputation with the work of a young, relatively less-established writer.<sup>880</sup>

By February 2011, *Terminus* had undertaken an extensive tour of the US, the UK and Australia, returning to the Annenberg Center, Philadelphia, and playing the high-profile Sydney Opera House, but also playing at distinctly low-key venues. In fact they were mostly university-based venues, with the drama departments having the key role in taking on the production, rather than the more conventional international promotion company working with receiving houses.<sup>881</sup> Since 2007, *Terminus* has been on the road almost non-stop until July of 2011, even though the reception has by no means been universally positive.<sup>882</sup> Fortunately for the production and for the Abbey, extremely enthusiastic reviews have alternated with those that felt insulted by the coarse language (New York) and violence (Boston). The strong tenor of the reviews assures a longer life for the production than a more expensive but only moderately-liked tour.<sup>883</sup>

By now a sense of goodwill had built up at home and abroad, as Mac Conghail says, the theatre had gradually been rebuilding its reputation and becoming 'match fit'.<sup>884</sup> By 2010 the theatre could afford, commercially and politically, to stage a high-profile production. In 2010 Henrik Ibsen's *John Gabriel Borkman*, in a new version by Frank McGuinness, was staged at the Abbey with the very well-known cast of Alan Rickman, Fiona Shaw and Lindsay Duncan. As the play had the dual popular appeal of making unsubtle reference to recent banking scandals

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<sup>880</sup> Ibid.

<sup>881</sup> For example: Emerson Arts in Boston, Carolina Theatre of Durham (at Duke University), Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago, Thurber Theatre at the Drake Center in Columbus, the Mahaney Center for the Arts, Middlebury College, the Clarice Smith Performing Arts Center, University of Maryland, the Lowry in Salford, the Young Vic in London, the Cambridge Arts Centre, and the Citizens Theatre Glasgow.

<sup>882</sup> One recurring criticism, for instance is that: 'it's not always clear what, beyond schlock value, all this unpleasantness achieves.' Brian Logan '*Terminus* - review', *The Guardian*, 5 April 2011.

<sup>883</sup> 'Interestingly when we opened in Boston, it just did not work at all. It was a very tense, uncomfortable opening night. When we got to Philadelphia, boom! Fantastic reaction. Chicago: fantastic reaction. So it depends on where you play. Melbourne loved it so much that Sydney invited it back the following year to be part of the season there. So that was a fascinating experience. It didn't work well in Belfast. It worked well in Longford, but it didn't work well in Galway.' Mac Conghail, 2011.

<sup>884</sup> Ibid.



and of offering two stars of the *Harry Potter* film franchise, the box office figures were unsurprisingly positive. The play continued to New York in the beginning of 2011.<sup>885</sup> With the significant funds raised by *John Gabriel Borkman* the Abbey was also able to then stage a number of Peacock productions.

### **New Directions**

The other unusual aspect of Mac Conaghil's directorship to date has been his staging and touring of Sam Shepard's work. Mac Conghail has said that, as a fan of Sam Shepard's work, he was interested in staging a survey to show how Shepard was influenced by Irish writers like Samuel Beckett, Sean O'Casey, JM Synge, Frank O'Connnor and Tom Murphy, and how, in turn, Shepard's work has influenced successive Irish writers like Martin McDonagh.

The Abbey announced in 2006 the intention to stage a number of Shepard's works: 'We're doing this body of work as a survey of an international writer that is off the beaten track but that formally, structurally and thematically has a lot of links with Ireland.'<sup>886</sup>

This survey began with *True West* directed by Jimmy Fay in the Peacock, with a full Irish cast and with the writer's blessing. Shepard then wrote *Kicking a Dead Horse* which he offered to Abbey, on condition that the actor Stephen Rea undertake the part. The transfer to the Public Theater in New York was not a huge risk for the Abbey, as it is the theatre with which Shepard is most strongly associated in New York. This new Abbey/Shepard partnership was unusual, because officially the Abbey's submission guidelines indicate 'At present, we are concentrating on Irish writing and so are not accepting scripts from abroad'.<sup>887</sup> But making space for Shepard reopened doors for the struggling Abbey:

It was refreshing because the Abbey got an awful hammering in 2004 with the *Playboy*. The ensuing crisis was covered in the *New York Times*, so our reputation was very, very bad. When I went on my first visit as

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<sup>885</sup> 'We're now in a position where those invitations are coming through but now we can seriously consider them. We can consider them because of the work we're doing.' Ibid.

<sup>886</sup> Ibid.

<sup>887</sup> Abbey Theatre website. [http://www.abbeytheatre.ie/literary/article/submitting\\_a\\_playscript](http://www.abbeytheatre.ie/literary/article/submitting_a_playscript)



director of the Abbey in late 2005 to New York, nobody was returning my calls. It was tough, it's a tough business. Bringing Sam Shepherd's plays to New York allowed us to rebuild our reputation.<sup>888</sup>

In 2011 the Abbey also staged Shepard's *Curse of the Starving Class*, deliberately just before *Juno and the Paycock*, to draw attention to the similarities in the two families' financial predicaments. The survey concludes in 2012 with *Buried Child*.

Currently, then the Abbey has regained control over its international image, as the 2004 controversy, reported extensively in the international press, caused considerable damage.<sup>889</sup> Perhaps surprisingly, the theatre still has had to contend with the international reputation built up over the company's first 100 years of touring. As Mac Conghail argues:

The Abbey, whether I like it or not and no matter what happened before I took it over, is a brand. No matter how much we try to damage it, deliberately or by accident, it still has a very strong brand. And there's still a huge demand for the Abbey to tour. We get monthly if not weekly invitations to tour all over the world. But they want a particular type of production. What they want is the brand: the Abbey Theatre touring O'Casey, Synge, Friel a little, or Shaw and Yeats. All of those are very important writers that we'd like to tour. So does that then influence how I programme this theatre, as opposed to the other way around?<sup>890</sup>

Currently, the Abbey's approach to touring, exactly 100 years since its first tour to America, according to Mac Conghail, derives from three key motives: 'first, to extend the life of the work, secondly, to promote new writing and Irish writing and, thirdly, to make money through the box office and fund-raising. And that's the reason why Yeats toured. So I've gone back to square one.'<sup>891</sup>

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<sup>888</sup> Mac Conghail, 2011.

<sup>889</sup> In 2011 Nancy Harris's *No Romance* was invited to London and Carmel Winters's *B for Baby* (both Peacock productions) toured to Finland, and was invited to Germany in 2012

<sup>890</sup> Mac Conghail, 2011.

<sup>891</sup> In fund-raising terms, in 2011, the Abbey are about to formulate a North American Company called the Abbey Theatre Foundation to help fundraise in America. With an international board in place, the project also takes a note from Yeats's book, as the poet founder had also tried to do that with John Quinn. Ibid.

## **The Abbey Theatre on Tour: Full Circle**

One hundred years after embarking on its first international tour, the Abbey Theatre has returned to touring new plays, verse plays, undertaking lectures, and fundraising in international venues. Ultimately the Abbey still can neither predict audience nor critical reactions, even when taking expectation into account. It is therefore important to differentiate between 'commercial' or 'critical' success - the same applies to failure - and to untangle these inherently interconnected concepts through an appraisal of the production history of the centenary to gain a perspective on those very issues at a significant point in the theatre's history.

The politics of its unique national theatre status create a requirement to address accepted narratives about the nation. From the theatre's inception it has challenged those narratives, while attempting to represent the artistic and cultural life in contemporary Ireland. Success therefore, for the Abbey, might only be judged by the standards of the INTS, the forerunner of the Abbey, and its own founding manifesto, taking into account the subsequent 100 years and somehow internalising that production history. The historically antagonistic relationship the Abbey Theatre has had with its Irish audience has shown that, whatever the role of a national theatre, the one envisioned by Yeats for the Abbey was certainly not a crowd-pleaser.

The Abbey's self-delineated success then might be qualified as 'written with a high ambition', to 'build up a Celtic and Irish school of dramatic literature', 'to bring upon the stage the deeper thoughts and emotions of Ireland', 'freedom to experiment' and, crucially the wording is that the founders were 'confident' of the support of the Irish people, (not 'dependent' upon), and that they would 'find' their audience. In many ways the document shows a legalistic deftness: the founders emphasised intention over result.<sup>892</sup>

To achieve its own particular success in the framework of an international tour, means that for the Abbey Theatre:

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<sup>892</sup> Irish Literary Theatre manifesto, reproduced in Lady Augusta Gregory, *Our Irish Theatre: A Chapter of Autobiography* (New York, (Gerrards Cross: Colin Smythe, 1972).

The production has to work here and has to have a connection here in Ireland. I can never do a work that I think would work really well abroad but won't work in Ireland. It has to have an integral connection with the artistic programme in Ireland.<sup>893</sup>

In relation to the 1975-2005 period which is the subject of this dissertation, Mac Conghail's assertion is a useful prism through which to assess the national theatre's successful representation of the nation on tour. What an analysis of the Abbey's international touring has shown is that successful tours largely share this quality of having primarily an important relationship with its Irish audience, as opposed to those plays which are specifically designated for international audiences.

In local terms the play must be meaningful and relevant. A fear of localised specificity in a work might prohibit a tour as it only means something to a small few, as has been the case for Tom Murphy's work over the years, but the inverse is also problematic: a generalised, transferable piece risks meaning nothing to everyone. The balance has been located, historically, somewhere between the two.

### **Culture as Text**

'The notion of culture as text [...] vastly expands the range of objects available to be read and interpreted.' Stephen Greenblatt<sup>894</sup>

Acknowledging the ephemeral nature of theatre is important, and just as much in the case of touring. While touring may extend the run of a particular production, no two productions are the same, and this is certainly the case in, for instance the Abbey's *The Shadow of a Gunman* at Her Majesty's Theatre for the Adelaide festival in March 1990, where the intense heat outside caused a dissonance with Johnny Murphy as Seumas Shields attempting to warm his hands over a meagre candle light with 30 degrees centigrade heat outside, causing the audience to

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<sup>893</sup> Mac Conghail, 2011.

<sup>894</sup> Catherine Gallagher and Stephen Greenblatt (eds.), *Practising New Historicism*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000) p, 9.



laugh.<sup>895</sup> Similarly in the case of *The Great Hunger* in Edinburgh's Assembly Rooms in 1986 the relatively commonplace walkouts became amplified by the venue's noisy flip-up seats, and the imposing sound became so great as to become a part of the production experience that night, encourages a shift in emphasis to what Greenblatt calls, 'questions of dynamic exchange' between the context and the text.<sup>896</sup>

The meaningful relationship the Abbey must offer its audience is complicated by circumstance: over the period considered in this thesis, Ireland went from an agrarian, conservative and traditional country, to one of the 'the most open, globalized societies in the world'.<sup>897</sup> Beginning with Ireland's entry into the EEC in 1973 and concluding with the Abbey's centenary celebrations at the height of the 'Celtic Tiger' phase of unprecedented economic growth, the period 1975-2005 is characterised by social and cultural transformation locally and globally, as national boundaries became more permeable. Classic plays, as this thesis has shown, take on new significance in any given context, and so even conservative touring decisions have repercussions.

In 1976, O'Casey's *The Plough and the Stars* was taken to the US as both a classic Abbey play which audiences expected and organisers requested, but it also was staged during what was for Ireland a moment of profound national tension, the increasingly violent Troubles in Northern Ireland. In one sense the quintessential Abbey Theatre play to take on tour, *The Plough* has consistently offered audiences a different experience: as a scandalous riot-causing play, as a popular repertory piece, and finally as an important timeless play through which to review changing Irish society and rewrite cultural assumptions.

As the 1981 tour of *Shadow of a Gunman* has shown, very often it is the political events that surround the performance that dictate the reorientation of the

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<sup>895</sup> Amy Garvey, 'A Warm Welcome for Abbey', *Irish Press*, 2 March 1990. In addition: 'There was much which left the Adelaide audience bemused. Unaware, perhaps, or the bone numbing chill of the Irish climate, they found it amusing that Seamus did not bathe but simply pulled his trousers over his long johns as he rose from bed.' Samela Harris, 'The Gunman: Professional and Sleek', *The Advertiser*, 2 March, 1990.

<sup>896</sup> Stephen Greenblatt, *Shakespearean Negotiations: The Circulation of Social Energy in Renaissance England*, (Oxford: Clarendon, 1988), p. 11.

<sup>897</sup> Tom Inglis, *Global Ireland: Same Difference* (New York: Routledge, 2008).

Abbey's reputation on global stages. There have also been frequent efforts to subvert expectations that have met with surprising and unpredictable results. *The Great Hunger* did not find a particularly open audience in Ireland, but the debate generated brought the role of the national theatre into sharp relief, particularly in its use of new formal techniques. This gave way to Patrick Mason's recovery of neglected texts, the recasting of the Abbey in an historical context as the end of the century approached, the performance of plays that reflected on repressed or hidden histories of Ireland.

*The Well of the Saints*, which won enormous critical acclaim overseas, could not profit from that praise in Ireland in the short term. A production of that sort was a financial burden, but that made room for a reappraisal of Synge's then neglected work on international stages, a very important achievement by the Abbey's standards.

*Dancing at Lughnasa* was one example of a play that was not designed for international tour. Through coincidences of professional relationships and timing, the play profoundly altered the Abbey Theatre's reputation for years to come, though in some ways merely replacing one monolithic set of expectations with another. In the outward-looking planning to recreate its success in the staging of *Wonderful Tennessee*, the Abbey made an expensive error of judgement.

The considerations of the Abbey's production and touring of the plays in this thesis demonstrate that, during the late 1990s the social and political intent driving the programming of the Abbey at home led to a significant revival of the Abbey's reputation for reflecting the changing social and economic circumstances in Ireland at the time. It is perhaps not coincidence that 1994 to 2000 was one of the Abbey's most overtly political periods as an international theatre, and also one of its most commercially successful. As Irish identity underwent a period of rapid change, the international output of the Abbey Theatre became even more driven by what was immediately relevant in contemporary Irish politics, as the theatre engaged with and interpreted this radically evolving Ireland.



Later as the country tried to settle into newfound wealth and an emerging political openness, the Abbey faltered when trying to stage for international audiences the country's evolving social and political character, with productions such as *Barbaric Comedies* and *Medea*. The Abbey struggled to internalise the recent success story and political upheavals in its new programming, and aesthetic mistakes were abundant. Subsequent tours, *Hinterland*, and especially the *abbeyonehundred* centenary tour all displayed shortcomings, as detailed in the preceding chapters, but what unifies these productions is the extent to which Irish audience and commentators seem to have felt alienated by the productions.

The undertaking for the Abbey in the centenary year was to commemorate the best of the theatre's repertoire, to showcase the best of new Irish writing and to do so in a manner befitting a contemporary international theatre. In failing to integrate local theatre practices and in alienating the national audience, the Abbey could not have succeeded with this programme on international tour. In touring *The Plough and the Stars*, however, in a localised, Irish production it achieved more sympathetic international relevance.

Plays that were not necessarily designated to tour internationally have dominated the success stories of the Abbey's touring in this period. By 'success' in this case, then, I suggest that they must achieve the following: to capture (for better or worse) the imagination of international critics and audiences; to offer meaningful commentary and insight into the relationship between the past and the present in Irish society; and, crucially, thereafter in this extended form to come to offer a new insight to Irish audiences. Productions initially designated for Irish audiences offer the most salient representation of the nation on international stages.

What this thesis has aimed to do is to create a sense of what constitutes the Abbey Theatre's international touring tradition and to argue for a shift in emphasis from text to the interactions of text and context in analysing theatre history. The phenomenon of international touring is a distinct and vital tradition for Ireland's national theatre, and that it provides a new platform both for the representation of the nation but also for the reframing of Irish theatre back



home. The theatre's engagement with audiences at home and abroad has played a significant part in the internationalisation of Irish drama.

Currently available archival material and scholarship on national touring in this same period is diffuse. Irish theatre scholarship would benefit from analysis of that area, which would not doubt yield important insight into recent Irish theatre, as well as complementing the material assembled and analysed here.

### **Spreading the News:**

As of Autumn 2011, 100 years after the Abbey's first international tour, their 2010 production of that Abbey touring staple, *The Plough and the Stars*, has been invited to undertake a seven-week tour of England and Scotland. In Wayne Jordan's production, Mac Conghail asserts, the intention was not to stage *The Plough* with touring in mind, as might have been the case in previous years; rather the chief design was in engaging a young director and a relatively young cast to interpret the classic. The local relevance of the production has been thoroughly asserted in positive reviews, box office and word-of-mouth, and this staging has also offered timely commentary on the state of the nation. Whether the play's popularity with Irish audiences will translate to those international stages is, as always, anyone's guess.

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Interview with Derry Power, Abbey Theatre actor, June 2009.  
Interview with Eamon Morrissey, Abbey Theatre actor, September 2009.  
Interview with Patrick Mason, Abbey Theatre Artistic Director, 5 August 2010.  
Interview with Fiach Mac Conghail, Abbey Theatre Artistic Director, 1 September 2011.



## Appendix: International Tours and Transfers by the Abbey Theatre, 1975-2005

This chronological table of international tours undertaken by the Abbey from 1975-2005 charts in as much detail as possible, given archival limitations, the different plays staged for international audiences, not all of which could be the focus of analysis in this thesis.

Year	Title	Author	Director	Country	Dates	Venue/City
1976	<i>The Plough and the Stars</i> (1926)	Sean O'Casey	Tomás Mac Anna	US	16-28 November	Brooklyn Academy of Music (New York)
1976	<i>The Plough and the Stars</i> (1926)	Sean O'Casey	Tomás Mac Anna	US	29 November-4 December	Shubert Theatre (Boston)
--	--	--	--	US	7-19 December	Zellerbach Theatre (Annenberg Centre, Philadelphia)
--	--	--	--	US	21 December-2 January	Harke Theatre (Catholic University, Washington D.C.)
1976	<i>In My Father's Time</i> (1975)	Eamon Kelly	Michael Colgan	US	30 November-5 December	Lepercq Space at Brooklyn Academy of Music (New York)
1977	<i>Talbot's Box</i> (1977)	Thomas Kilroy	Patrick Mason	UK	22 November-17 December	Royal Court Theatre (London)
1978	<i>You Never Can Tell</i> (1897)	GB Shaw	Patrick Mason	UK	29 May-3 June	Malvern, (England)
1980	<i>A Life</i> (1979)	Hugh Leonard	Joe Dowling	UK	4-16 February	The Old Vic Theatre (London)
1981	<i>Joycemen</i> (1980)	Eamon Morrissey	Eamon Morrissey	US	June-July	Baltimore

1981	<i>The Shadow of a Ginnam</i> (1923)	Sean O'Casey	Tomas Mac Anna	US	22-27 June	Mechanic Theatre (Baltimore)
--	--			US	29-2 July	John Houseman Theatre (Saratoga Springs, New York)
--	--			US	6-7 July	Civic Centre (Syracuse, New York)
--	--			US	9-12 July	Summerfare '81 (Purchase, New York)
1985	<i>Endgame</i> (1957)/ <i>Rockaby</i> (1980)	Samuel Beckett	Ben Barnes	Greece	12-13 November	National Theatre, Athens
--	--			Greece	18 November	Municipal Theatre, Agrinion
1986	<i>The Great Hunger</i> (1983)	Tom Mac Intyre	Patrick Mason	UK	8-18 August	Music Hall of Assembly Rooms (Edinburgh)
--	--			UK	September	Almeida Theatre (London)
--	--			France	September	Le théâtre de l'Alliance (Paris)
1988	<i>Mother of all the Behans</i> (1987)	Peter Sheridan	Peter Sheridan	UK	12-29 August	Assembly Rooms (Edinburgh)
--	--			UK	12-29 August	The Pavilion (Brighton)
1988	<i>The Great Hunger</i> (1983)	Tom Mac Intyre	Patrick Mason	USSR	10-12 February	Gorky Bolshoi Drama Theatre (Leningrad)
--	--			USSR	17-18 February	Moscow Arts Theatre (Moscow)
1988	<i>The Field</i> (1965)	John B Keane	Ben Barnes	USSR	13-20 February	Gorky Bolshoi Drama Theatre (Leningrad)
--	--			USSR	13-20 February	Moscow Arts Theatre (Moscow)
1988	<i>The Great Hunger</i> (1983)	Tom Mac Intyre	Patrick Mason	USSR	10-12 February	Gorky Bolshoi Drama Theatre (Leningrad)

1988	<i>Playboy of the Western World</i>	J.M. Synge	Vincent Dowling	UK	May	Theatre Royal (Brighton)
--	--			US	March	Zellerbach Theater (Annenberg Center, Philadelphia)
1988	<i>Exit/Entrance</i> (1988)	Aidan C Mathews	Ben Barnes	UK	March	Donmar Warehouse (London)
1988	<i>Playboy of the Western World</i>	J.M. Synge	Vincent Dowling	US	9-12 June	Stamford Center for the Arts (Connecticut)
1989	<i>A Whistle in the Dark</i> (1961)	Tom Murphy	Garry Hynes	UK	5-29 July	Royal Court (London)
1989	<i>I Am Of Ireland</i> (1988)	Edward Cullin	Kathleen Barrington	UK		
--	--			Italy	4-6 May	Teatro Trianon (Rome)
--	--			US	13-20 September	Western Michigan University Campus (Michigan)
1989	<i>The Playboy of the Western World</i> (1907)	J.M. Synge	Vincent Dowling	China	15-18 February	Lyric Theatre at the Academy for Performing Arts (Hong Kong)
1989	<i>Joycivity</i> (1989)	Ulick O'Connor	Caroline FitzGerald	France	December	Agen sur Gironde
1990	<i>Ghosts</i>	Thomas Kilroy	Michael Scott	US	12-16 June	The Staller Center for the Arts (State University of New York)
1990	<i>The Shadow of a Ginnian</i> (1923)	Sean O'Casey	Ben Barnes	New Zealand	14-17 March	Wellington (New Zealand)
1990	<i>The Playboy of the Western World</i> (1907)	J.M. Synge	Vincent Dowling	US	September	The Kennedy Center at Eisenhower Theater (Washington DC)
1990	<i>The Shadow of a Ginnian</i> (1923)	Sean O'Casey	Ben Barnes	Australia	01-10 March	Adelaide State Opera House



1990	<i>Joycity</i> (1989)	Ulick O'Connor	Caroline FitzGerald	UK	13 August-1 September	Assembly Rooms (Edinburgh)
1990	<i>The Shadow of a Ginnian</i> (1923)	Sean O'Casey	Ben Barnes	UK	08-12 May	King's Theatre (Glasgow)
1990	<i>Moon for the Misbegotten</i>	Eugene O'Neill		US	March	New York
1990	<i>Dancing at Lughnasa</i> (1990)	Brian Friel	Patrick Mason	US	October 24 [1991]-October 25 [1992]	Plymouth Theatre (New York)
--	--			Australia	31 November-3 April	Melbourne theatre company at the Victorian Arts Centre)
--	--			Australia	02 January-3 April	Sydney Opera House Drama Theatre
--	--			Australia	02 January-3 April	Adelaide Playhouse
1990	<i>Joycity</i> (1989)	Ulick O'Connor	Caroline FitzGerald	UK		London
1990	<i>The Playboy of the Western World</i> (1907)	J.M. Synge	Vincent Dowling	US	December	Colonial Theatre (Boston)
--	--			Canada	22-25 November	The Elgin and Winter Garden Theatres (Toronto)
1990	<i>Dancing at Lughnasa</i> (1990)	Brian Friel	Patrick Mason	UK	15 October-1 January	NT Lyttleton Theatre (London)
1991	<i>Hedda Gabler</i> (1890)	Henrik Ibsen	Deborah Warner	UK	28 August-5 October	Playhouse Theatre, (London)
1991	<i>Joycity</i> (1989)	Ulick O'Connor	Caroline FitzGerald	US	October 30-3 November	The Hasty Pudding Theater (Harvard)

Year	Title	Author	Director	Country	City	Theatre
1991	<i>Dancing at Lughnasa</i> (1990)	Brian Friel	Patrick Mason	UK	July	Phoenix Theatre (London's West End)
1991	<i>Joycity</i> (1989)	Ulick O'Connor	Caroline FitzGerald	Canada		Toronto
1991	<i>The Patriot Game</i> (1991)	Tom Murphy	Alan Gilsenan	UK	17-21 September	Glasgow
1992	<i>Faith Healer</i> (1979)	Brian Friel	Joe Dowling	UK	January-February	Royal Court Theatre (London)
1992	<i>Dancing at Lughnasa</i> (1990)	Brian Friel	Patrick Mason	Australia	30 November-23 December	Playhouse Theatre (Melbourne)
1993	--			Australia	January 2	Sydney Opera House
	--			Australia	January	Adelaide Festival Centre
1993	<i>Wonderful Tennessee</i> (1993)	Brian Friel	Patrick Mason	US	24-31 October	Plymouth Theatre (Broadway)
1994	<i>Faith Healer</i> (1979)	Brian Friel	Joe Dowling	US	April-May	Long Wharf Theatre (New Haven)
1994	<i>The Cavalcadars</i> (1993)	Billy Roche	Robin Lefevre	UK	6 January-5 February	Royal Court Theatre (London)
1994	<i>The Well of the Saints</i> (1905)	J.M. Synge	Patrick Mason	UK	24-28 August	King's Theatre (Edinburgh)
1995	<i>Observe the Sons of Ulster Marching Towards The Somme</i> (1985)	Frank McGuinness	Patrick Mason	UK	18-23 August	King's Theatre (Edinburgh)
1996	--			UK	06-16 March	Barbican Theatre (London)
1996	--			UK	19-23 March	Blackpool Grand (Blackpool)

									Warner
2002	--								Deborah Warner
2002	--	Euripides	US	1-12 October	Brooklyn Academy of Music (New York)				
2002	--		US	October	Kennedy Center (Washington)				
2002	--		US	17-20 October	Ann Arbor Power Center (Michigan)				
2002	--		US	October	Wilbur Theater (Boston)				
2002	--		US	14-24 November	Zellerbach Playhouse (Berkeley)				
2002/3	--		US	4 December-22 February	Brooks Atkinson Theatre (New York)				
2003	<i>Medea</i>	Euripides	France	March	Le Théâtre National de Chaillot (Paris)				
2004	<i>The Playboy of the Western World</i> (1907)	J.M. Synge	US	24 September	The Shubert (New Haven, Connecticut)				
2004	--		US	19-24 October	Stamford Rich Forum, (Connecticut)				
2004	--		US	26-31 October	Skirball Center (New York)				
2004	--		US	30 November-12 December	Chicago Shakespeare Theater (Chicago)				
2004	<i>The Gigli Concert</i> (1983)	Tom Murphy	Australia	3-9 September	Suncorp Theatre (Brisbane)				
2004	--		Australia	12-18 September	The Sydney Theatre (Sydney)				
2004	<i>The Playboy of the Western World</i> (1907)	J.M. Synge	US	12-17 October	Zellerbach Theater (Annenberg Center for the Performing Arts, Philadelphia)				
2004	--		US	2-21 November	The Wilbur Theatre (Boston)				



2005 *The Plough and the Stars*  
(1926)

Sean  
O'Casey

Ben Barnes UK

18-29 January

Barbican Theatre (London)