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# IRISH PLAYS

*The Playboy of the Western World*

BY JOHN M. SYNGE

*Juno and the Paycock* BY SEAN O'CASEY

*Riders to the Sea* BY JOHN M. SYNGE

*Spreading the News* BY LADY GREGORY

*Shadow and Substance* BY PAUL VINCENT CARROLL

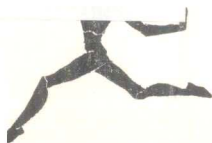
WITH A FOREWORD BY

GEORGE JEAN NATHAN

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# *Foreword*

BY

GEORGE JEAN NATHAN

**I TAKE** it there is small critical question, save alone in the lands of dictated appraisal, that the modern Irish drama leads what is left of the European theatre. Even here in America, where the theatre enjoys a vitality unimpaired and ever increasing, there are with one or two exceptions—O'Neill the foremost—nevertheless no playwrights who have in them the rich singing humor and beauty of an O'Casey, the mordant lyric passion of a Synge or the spiritual current of even a Carroll. Our theatre is quick and alive and in many ways admirable, but its plays come mainly out of galvanic impulse rather than deep meditation. And only out of such meditation is true drama born.

Surely, in searching the stage of the world theatre of the later years it is difficult to find a body of drama possessed of the Celtic's poetic pulse. Surely, except in sporadic instances, that quality which insinuates into the mind and emotion its peculiarly lingering after-image is rare in the plays of men nurtured by other soils. It isn't, certainly, that all the plays that are coming out of the Eire soil are masterpieces. Very, very far from that. But, as I have written in the past, in even the poorest of them one finds a probity, a passionate undertone, a brave resolve, and a hint of spiritual music that one all too infrequently encounters in the present dramaturgy of other peoples. And in the finer plays there is a poetic sweep, a surgery of human emotions and a warm golden glow that even the best drama of other countries most often lacks.

Perhaps the outstanding mark of the Irish dramatists by and large is their shameless emotional candor. They write what they honestly feel, however possibly embarrassing. Other playwrights will sometimes not hesitate to write what they honestly think, however in turn possibly embarrassing, but when it comes to exposing their fundamental, naked emotions they often, fearful of being taken for too sentimental souls, equivocate and indulge themselves in a superficial protective coloration of wit, humor, oblique apology and extenuation, and even extra-character ridicule. But seldom the Irish. The Irishman wears not only his heart on his coat-sleeve but this very emotional gizzard as well. And that, unless I am mistaken, is where any genuine dramatist must wear his heart and even his gizzard. For it is hardly news that the drama is primarily an instrument of emotion and that thought is merely the occasional lubricating grease.

While on the subject of the heart, previous words may be paraphrased. The latter-day English playwrights have seldom plumbed it much beneath the modish Bond Street waistcoat that covers it. The latter-day French, with but few exceptions, traditionally and habitually appear to confuse it with an organ biologically somewhat less ecclesiastical. The Nazi aesthetes identify its beat with that of a military drum and its contour with that of the swastika. The aesthetes of the Soviet generally either view it as a political organ or loftily dismiss it as an uneconomical wart; the Hungarians, before racial edict robbed them of their pens, seemed to think that its beat was most often in three-quarter time and that every pale boulevard Emperor Jones was helplessly tomtomed by it into a lady's arms; and our American playwrights usually interpret it either in terms of Cab Calloway's baton or a lace valentine, or make wisecracks about it. The Irish alone as a playwrighting nation appear to

appreciate it for what in all its strange and various moods it is, and the Irish alone with a profligate beauty and a lyric artlessness permit it to tell its true and often aching story.

To the great witty line of Congreve and Farquhar, of Sheridan and Wilde and Shaw, the Irish drama has added in our modern times the profound emotional dynamics of such further notables as Synge and Yeats and the earlier St. John Ervine and Sean O'Casey. Of all the still living, this O'Casey, Shaw aside, is in every respect the foremost. Not only is he at his best the best of all the Celts but even at his worst so much better than three-fourths of them at their best—and some of them are surely not to be sniffed at—that to fail to perceive it must remain the privilege of amateur criticism. If *The Plough And the Stars* is not one of the finest dramas in the modern theatre, if *Juno and the Paycock* is not one of the richest human comedies, if *The Silver Tassie* with all its admitted deficiencies is not one of the most honorable experiments, if *Within the Gates*, for all its lapses, is not beautiful, brave and thrilling song, if *Purple Dust* is not a ringing, moving melody orchestrated with a resounding slapstick, and if even the incontrovertibly poor *The Star Turns Red*, the feeblest play O'Casey has written, is not oddly invested with what may conceivably turn out to be a poet's prophetic vision—if these plays are not these things, then I am not the man to have been engaged to write this foreword.

The derogation of O'Casey by certain critics, first among them his fellow countryman and fellow playwright, Ervine, as—in the instance of *Juno and the Paycock*—mere superb music-hall seems to me not only obvious critical snobbery, for superb music-hall remains nonetheless still superb, but equally obvious critical superficiality, inasmuch as it overlooks the play's rare comedy scenes' deep roots in dramatic character, their deep pene-

tration into human eccentricity, and withal their beautiful, drunken dramatic literature. They are Molière full of Irish whiskey, now and again Shaw off dietetic spinach and full of red meat, Flanagan and Allen (if such critics insist) in the classical garb of Falstaff and Dogberry. Furthermore, to derogate O'Casey as a mere hint of a poet, which these same critics do, is an even larger betrayal of critical sense. Where in the drama of living Irishmen is there greater and more genuine dramatic poetry than you will find in the mighty sweep of *The Plough and the Stars*, or in the boozy low measures of parts of *Juno*, or in the riff-raff of *Within the Gates* and their periodic utterance, or in the speech of the workmen in *Purple Dust*, or even in passages of the otherwise largely dubious *The Star Turns Red*?

The answer is: nowhere. Dunsany has his valued poetic moments, and so has Carroll, and so, at least in *The Moon in the Yellow River*, has Denis Johnston, but even at their most deserving and eloquent there is missing in them something of the profundity of feeling, something of the real pity and sorrow and pain and joy, something of the true, shooting beauty of life tragically experienced and life triumphantly lived that lies innermost in and is awakened by the O'Casey pen.

Of those who have gone to their Maker, Synge stands pre-eminent in after-glory. The two plays included in this volume represent him at his best, and at the opposite poles of his fulgent dramatic writing. *The Playboy of the Western World* has not its match in Celtic satirical drama, and one would have to search far and deep for an equivalent of the melodious pain in *Riders to the Sea*. Both are classics of the modern Irish—of the modern world—theatre. And both testify to the genius that combined in itself an ironic humor of rare and juicy puissance and a com-

passion for humanity drenched in the tears of a great pity's understanding.

Lady Gregory's moralized fables, folk comedies and little symbolical and allegorical plays constitute simpler theatre. They are agreeable and sometimes piquant pastimes with the occasional glint of a drollish mind. Intellectual vaudeville is a phrase that may perhaps best be used to describe a number of them. They are, often, trifles—but trifles of a peculiar sheen and glimmer.

Returning to the still living, there remains Carroll. His best plays, *Shadow and Substance* and *The White Steed*, indicate him to be the possessor of a sharp wit and a lyric spirituality, both of which he is expert in dovetailing into valid drama. In each of these plays he vouchsafes sufficient illustration of his skill, and in each of them, again, much of that precious quality which allows to the Irish drama its distinctive place on the stage of the theatre of us hitherward peoples.

*New York City*

*Fall, 1940*

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*The Playboy of the Western World*

A PLAY IN THREE ACTS

BY JOHN M. SYNGE



## PREFACE

IN WRITING *The Playboy of the Western World*, as in my other plays, I have used one or two words only that I have not heard among the country people of Ireland, or spoken in my own nursery before I could read the newspapers. A certain number of the phrases I employ I have heard also from herds and fishermen along the coast from Kerry to Mayo, or from beggar-women and ballad-singers nearer Dublin; and I am glad to acknowledge how much I owe to the folk-imagination of these fine people. Anyone who has lived in real intimacy with the Irish peasantry will know that the wildest sayings and ideas in this play are tame indeed, compared with the fancies one may hear in any little hillside cabin in Geesala, or Carraroe, or Dingle Bay. All art is a collaboration; and there is little doubt that in the happy ages of literature, striking and beautiful phrases were as ready to the story-teller's or the playwright's hand, as the rich cloaks and dresses of his time. It is probable that when the Elizabethan dramatist took his ink-horn and sat down to his work he used many phrases that he had just heard, as he sat at dinner, from his mother or his children. In Ireland, those of us who know the people have the same privilege. When I was writing *The Shadow of the Glen*, some years ago, I got more aid than any learning could have given me from a chink in the floor of the old Wicklow house where I was staying, that let me hear what was being said by the servant girls in the kitchen. This matter, I think, is of importance, for in countries where the imagination of the people, and the language they use, is rich and living, it is possible for a writer to be rich and copious in his words, and at the same time to give the reality, which is the root of all poetry, in a comprehensive and

natural form. In the modern literature of towns, however, richness is found only in sonnets, or prose poems, or in one or two elaborate books that are far away from the profound and common interests of life. One has, on one side, Mallarmé and Huysmans producing this literature; and on the other, Ibsen and Zola dealing with the reality of life in joyless and pallid words. On the stage one must have reality, and one must have joy; and that is why the intellectual modern drama has failed, and people have grown sick of the false joy of the musical comedy, that has been given them in place of the rich joy found only in what is superb and wild in reality. In a good play every speech should be as fully flavoured as a nut or apple, and such speeches cannot be written by anyone who works among people who have shut their lips on poetry. In Ireland, for a few years more, we have a popular imagination that is fiery and magnificent, and tender; so that those of us who wish to write start with a chance that is not given to writers in places where the springtime of the local life has been forgotten, and the harvest is a memory only, and the straw has been turned into bricks.

J. M. S.

*January 21, 1907*

## CHARACTERS

CHRISTOPHER MAHON

OLD MAHON (*his father, a squatter*)

MICHAEL JAMES FLAHERTY, called MICHAEL JAMES (*a publican*)

MARGARET FLAHERTY, called PEGEEN MIKE (*his daughter*)

WIDOW QUIN (*a woman of about thirty*)

SHAWN KEOGH (*her cousin, a young farmer*)

PHILLY CULLEN and JIMMY FARRELL (*small farmers*)

SARA TANSEY, SUSAN BRADY, and HONOR BLAKE (*village girls*)

A BELLMAN

SOME PEASANTS

*The action takes place near a village, on a wild coast of Mayo.  
The first Act passes on an evening of autumn, the other two  
Acts on the following day.*



# *The Playboy of the Western World*

## ACT ONE

SCENE. Country public-house or shebeen, very rough and untidy. There is a sort of counter on the right with shelves, holding many bottles and jugs, just seen above it. Empty barrels stand near the counter. At back, a little to left of counter, there is a door into the open air, then, more to the left, there is a settle with shelves above it, with more jugs, and a table beneath a window. At the left there is a large open fire-place, with turf fire, and a small door into inner room. Peggien, a wild-looking but fine girl of about twenty, is writing at table. She is dressed in the usual peasant dress.

PEGGIEN (*slowly as she writes*). <sup>hythm (poetic and sentimental)</sup> Six yards of stuff for to make a yellow gown. A pair of lace boots with lengthy heels on them and brassy eyes. A hat is suited for a wedding-day. A fine tooth comb. To be sent with three barrels of porter in Jimmy Farrell's creel cart on the evening of the coming Fair to Mister Michael James Flaherty. With the best compliments of this season. Margaret Flaherty.

SHAWN KEOGH (*a fat and fair young man comes in as she signs, looks round awkwardly, when he sees she is alone*). Where's himself?

PEGGIEN (*without looking at him*). He's coming. (*She directs the letter.*) To Master Sheamus Mulroy, Wine and Spirit Dealer, Castlebar.

SHAWN (*uneasily*). I didn't see him on the road.

PEGEEN. How would you see him (*licks stamp and puts it on letter*) and it dark night this half hour gone by?

SHAWN (*turning towards the door again*). I stood a while outside wondering would I have a right to pass on or to walk in and see you, Pegeen Mike (*comes to fire*), and I could hear the cows breathing, and sighing in the stillness of the air, and not a step moving any place from this gate to the bridge.

PEGEEN (*putting letter in envelope*). It's above at the cross-roads he is, meeting Philly Cullen; and a couple more are going along with him to Kate Cassidy's wake.

SHAWN (*looking at her blankly*). And he's going that length in the dark night?

PEGEEN (*impatiently*). He is surely, and leaving me lonesome on the scruff of the hill. (*She gets up and puts envelope on dresser, then winds clock.*) Isn't it long the nights are now, Shawn Keogh, to be leaving a poor girl with her own self counting the hours to the dawn of day?

SHAWN (*with awkward humour*). If it is, when we're wedded in a short while you'll have no call to complain, for I've little will to be walking off to wakes or weddings in the darkness of the night.

PEGEEN (*with rather scornful good humour*). You're making mighty certain, Shaneen, that I'll wed you now.

SHAWN. Aren't we after making a good bargain, the way we're only waiting these days on Father Reilly's dispensation from the bishops, or the Court of Rome?

PEGEEN (*looking at him teasingly, washing up at dresser*). It's