

THE CAMBRIDGE COMPANION TO



TWENTIETH- CENTURY IRISH DRAMA

Edited by Shaun Richards



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The Cambridge Companion to Twentieth-Century Irish Drama

The essays in this collection cover the whole range of Irish drama from the late nineteenth-century melodramas which anticipated the rise of the Abbey Theatre to the contemporary Dublin of theatre festivals. A team of international experts from Ireland, the UK, the USA and Europe provide individual studies of internationally known playwrights of the period of the Literary Revival – Yeats, Synge, Lady Gregory, Shaw, Wilde, O’Casey – contemporary playwrights Brian Friel, Tom Murphy, Frank McGuinness and Sebastian Barry, and emerging playwrights such as Martin McDonagh and Marina Carr. In addition to studies of individual playwrights the collection includes examination of the relationship between the theatre and its political context as this is inflected through its ideology, staging and programming. With a full chronology and bibliography, this collection is an indispensable introduction to one of the world’s most vibrant theatre cultures.

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CHRONOLOGY

- 1892: National Literary Society founded.
- 1899: First productions of Irish Literary Theatre: W. B. Yeats's *The Countess Cathleen* and Edward Martyn's *The Heather Field*.
- 1900: Founding of Inghinidhe na hÉireann (Daughters of Ireland).
- 1901: Douglas Hyde's *Casadh an tSúgáin* (*The Twisting of the Rope*) premiered by the Irish Literary Theatre.
- 1902: W. B. Yeats's and Lady Augusta Gregory's *Cathleen ni Houlihan* premiered by the Irish National Dramatic Company.
- 1903: National Theatre Society tours to London.
- 1904: Abbey Theatre opens with W. B. Yeats's *On Baile's Strand*, Lady Gregory's *Spreading the News* and their joint-authored *Cathleen ni Houlihan*.
- 1905: Founding of Sinn Féin.
- 1906: National Theatre Society Limited registers as a company.
- 1907: Premiere of J. M. Synge's *The Playboy of the Western World* (greeted by riots at Abbey Theatre).
- 1908: Founding of Cork Dramatic Society.
- 1909: Abbey stages G. B. Shaw's *The Shewing-up of Blanco Posnet* in protest over censorship. Death of J. M. Synge.
- 1913: Defeat of Home Rule Bill. Formation of Ulster Volunteer Force (January) followed by that of Irish Citizen Army and Irish Volunteers (November). Irish Transport and General Workers' Union calls strike in Dublin, which escalates into general lock-out.
- 1914: Outbreak of World War One.
- 1916: Easter Rising led by Irish Volunteers and Irish Citizen Army. The Rising (24–9 April) is followed by the execution of sixteen of its leaders.
- 1917: Sinn Féin wins four by-elections.
- 1918: End of World War One. Sinn Féin wins seventy-three seats (and becomes largest party) in general election.

- 1919: War of Independence (Anglo-Irish War, 1919–21). First meeting of Dáil Éireann; Eamon de Valera elected President. Dublin Drama League Founded.
- 1920: Black and Tans recruited. Six-county parliament and administration established in North.
- 1921: Truce between British Army and IRA. Anglo-Irish Treaty signed establishing Irish Free State (with six northern counties remaining part of United Kingdom).
- 1922: Anglo-Irish Treaty approved by Dáil Éireann. Anti-Treaty forces occupy Four Courts, Dublin, which is then attacked by Provisional government troops. Outbreak of Civil War (1922–3).
- 1923: W. B. Yeats awarded Nobel Prize for Literature. Film censorship law passed. Irish Free State joins League of Nations.
- 1925: Irish Free State begins subsidizing of Abbey Theatre. G. B. Shaw awarded Nobel Prize for Literature. Legislation prohibiting divorce in Free State passed.
- 1926: Eamon de Valera founds Fianna Fáil.
- 1928: Gate Theatre founded by Hilton Edwards and Micheal MacLiammoir; first production is Ibsen's *Peer Gynt*. Sean O'Casey's *The Silver Tassie* rejected by Abbey Theatre.
- 1929: Censorship of Publications Act passed.
- 1932: Fianna Fáil under Eamon de Valera wins general election (it remains in power until 1948). Amateur Dramatic Association founded. Death of Lady Augusta Gregory.
- 1933: Fine Gail formed.
- 1935: Sale and importation of contraceptives made illegal in Free State. Public Dance Halls Act passed.
- 1936: IRA declared illegal.
- 1937: New Irish Constitution. Ulster Group Theatre founded.
- 1939: Outbreak of World War Two. Éire states intention of remaining neutral. Death of W. B. Yeats.
- 1941: Ernest Blythe becomes Managing Director of Abbey; he remains in post until 1967.
- 1943: Eamon de Valera's St Patrick's Day radio broadcast evokes an idealized Ireland of 'frugal comfort'.
- 1945: End of World War Two. Eamon de Valera sends condolences to German embassy on death of Hitler.
- 1948: Ireland declared a Republic.
- 1949: Ireland leaves (British) Commonwealth.
- 1950: Death of G. B. Shaw.

Chronology

- 1951: Abbey Theatre building destroyed by fire. Belfast's Lyric Theatre founded. Republic of Ireland Arts Council established.
- 1953: Pike Theatre founded.
- 1954: Death of Sean O'Casey.
- 1955: Ireland joins United Nations.
- 1957: Dublin Theatre Festival established. Tennessee Williams's *The Rose Tattoo* closed under censorship law and director imprisoned.
- 1958: T. K. Whitaker's Report on Economic Development encourages economic modernization. Episcopal opposition forces cancellation of Dublin Theatre Festival.
- 1959: Eamon de Valera elected President (until 1973). Sean Lemass becomes Taoiseach.
- 1960: Radio Telefís Éireann (RTE) founded. Yeats International Summer School established.
- 1963: American President J. F. Kennedy visits Ireland.
- 1966: Opening of new Abbey Theatre.
- 1969: Samuel Beckett awarded Nobel Prize for Literature. People's Democracy March from Belfast to Derry attacked by Protestants at Burntoliot Bridge. British troops sent into Northern Ireland.
- 1970: IRA splits into Officials and Provisionals.
- 1972: 'Bloody Sunday' in Derry when British paratroopers kill fourteen people. Brian Friel's *Freedom of the City* (1973) clearly echoes this event.
- 1973: Ireland joins European Economic Community.
- 1974: Strike called by Ulster Workers' Council brings Northern Ireland to a halt (subject of Stewart Parker's 1987 play, *Pentecost*).
- 1975: Druid Theatre Company founded in Galway.
- 1977: *Crane Bag* journal founded.
- 1980: Field Day Theatre Company founded in Derry. Start of first hunger strike by Republican prisoners in Long Kesh/Maze Prison.
- 1981: Deaths of ten hunger strikers in Long Kesh/Maze Prison.
- 1983: Charabanc Theatre Company founded.
- 1984: Trinity College, Dublin establishes School of Drama and Theatre Studies.
- 1985: Anglo-Irish (Hillsborough) Agreement.
- 1990: Mary Robinson elected President.
- 1994: IRA ceasefire followed by that of Loyalist paramilitaries.
- 1995: Seamus Heaney awarded Nobel Prize for Literature. Divorce legalized in Republic after referendum.

Chronology

- 1997: Mary McAleese elected President.
- 1998: Good Friday Agreement. David Trimble and John Hume share Nobel Peace Prize. Arts Council budget for theatre in the Republic reaches £8 million.
- 2000: New building for Abbey Theatre projected with budget of £50 million.

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I

SHAUN RICHARDS

Plays of (ever) changing Ireland

The idea of 'nation', as both theme and setting, has haunted the development of Irish theatre. From the originary Irish National Theatre Society to the present National Theatre Society Limited, Irish theatre is marked by the 'national' appellation and all its implications. Whether the specific 'national' theatre is that of Britain, the United States, France or Ireland, the assumption is that its role is to stage the pressing concerns, or historical foundations, of the nation and, as in the case of the origins of the national theatre of Ireland, define the characteristics according to which the aspirant nation could be identified and distinguished. As observed by Lauren Kruger, the impulse to '*theatrical nationhood* manifests itself fully only in the course of the nineteenth century'¹ and particularly as 'representations of the ruling bloc confront the (counter) hegemonic claims of emergent groups' (*The National Stage*, 6). Ireland shares the nineteenth-century onset of this phenomenon, and while the Irish case differs somewhat from that of Europe and the United States in that the confrontation is of national rather than specifically class factions, it parallels their use of the stage in the contest for economic and political power. While Ireland had already enjoyed theatre as an art form and entertainment for several centuries, drama in its late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century manifestation sought to define and determine the basis of Irish claims for political independence from Britain. What this involved was a complex series of definitions and exclusions which resonate across the practice and criticism of Irish theatre. Any study of this terrain is necessarily engaged in a consideration of the basis for the original definitions and their implications for the theatre – and state – which subsequently evolved up to, and into, the contemporary moment.

The relationship between England and Ireland was for centuries one of ruler and ruled which, despite the advances made across the nineteenth century with regard to ameliorating its most negative aspects, continued up to the establishment of the Free State in 1922 and, from a republican/nationalist perspective, continues in Northern Ireland to the present day. At the heart of

this relationship were images circulated through 'histories', travel writings, 'scientific' studies of race, cartoons, and plays which suggested the inferiority of the Irish at worst, their infantile dependency at best. The late eighteenth-century image of Ireland portrayed in David Hume's *History of England* captures the brutal end of this spectrum: 'The Irish from the beginning of time had been buried in the most profound barbarism and ignorance . . . distinguished by those vices alone to which human nature, not tamed by education or restrained by laws, is for ever subject.'² In the same period an apparently less offensive portrayal is that of Sir Lucius O'Trigger in Sheridan's *The Rivals* (1775), but it is one whose comic illogicality makes it only a less condemnatory complement to Hume's derogatory judgement.

Late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Irish nationalist intellectuals were alert to the implications of such negative representations for any attempts to mobilize the population to assert its independence. In an explicit acknowledgement of the political dimension of theatre, the nationalist polemicist D. P. Moran asserted, 'The English mind has had for many years a mighty weapon in the stage for one of its great enterprises – the conquest of the Irish mind.'³ The fact that Irish audiences willingly attended the performances of plays which were exhibitions of 'vulgar, pointless, uninteresting drivel'⁴ only increased the demands for, and expectations of, a truly Irish national theatre. As declared by the founder of Sinn Féin, Arthur Griffith, in 1902, 'We look to the Irish National Theatre primarily as a means of regenerating the country. The Theatre is a powerful agent in the building up of a nation. When it is in foreign and hostile hands, it is a deadly danger to the country. When it is controlled by native and friendly hands it is a bulwark and a protection.'⁵ What was then required was a substitute for a theatre which was perceived as antinational and the institution of a stage which would cultivate 'Art as the handmaid of Irish nationalism.'⁶

It was against this backdrop of cultural-political expectations and the perceived inability of the contemporary stage to achieve their realization that Lady Augusta Gregory, Edward Martyn and W. B. Yeats met in 1897, when their 'talk turned on plays'.⁷ The result of this discussion was a letter composed by Lady Gregory and Yeats which sought funding for a theatrical venture whose stress is explicitly on the issue of representation: 'We will show that Ireland is not the home of buffoonery and of easy sentiment, as it has been represented, but the home of an ancient idealism' (*Our Irish Theatre*, 20). While the impetus behind the venture was perhaps more concerned with the perceived artistic inadequacies of a commercially driven mainstream theatrical world than it was with any overt political agenda, the political context of a frustrated demand for Irish Home Rule, coupled with the nationalist perception that theatre was a prime mover in the subjugation

of any separatist impulses, meant that whatever the intention, the initiative which was to culminate in 1904 with the establishment of the Abbey Theatre, Dublin, could not be immune to the complex political realities of the moment.

These were what D. P. Moran described as 'The Battle of Two Civilizations' in which the members of the Anglo-Irish Ascendancy, who enjoyed economic and political power as a result of their physical, property-based, representation of British interests in Ireland, would necessarily be removed. The full implications of this for theatrical representations of Ireland are revealed in the response to Yeats's *The Countess Cathleen* (originally *The Countess Kathleen*, 1892) which was to share the bill in Dublin on 8 May 1899 with Martyn's *The Heather Field* in the first performances to be realised after their initial 1897 discussions.

The play is set in a famine-struck Ireland of the sixteenth century which, although historically distant, is given a more contemporary charge by its evocation of the Potato Famine of the 1840s through images of people with mouths 'green from eating dock and nettles'.⁸ That the Famine was popularly believed to have been caused by British malevolence made it a highly emotive subject. In this politically charged context Yeats's drama concerned the attempts of two merchants who take advantage of the desperation of the starving peasants by offering them money to purchase food if they will only commit their immortal souls to their master, the Devil. Here, Yeats's play carried an allusion to the practice of 'Souperism' by which starving Catholics were offered sustenance at the price of converting to Protestantism. And as a final blunder into the sensibilities of a Catholic/nationalist audience Yeats had the Countess Cathleen offer her soul in place of those of her peasant tenants, who acknowledge the significance of this gesture of munificence because their souls 'are not dear to God as your soul is' (*Variorum Plays*, 146). Given that the landowners of Ireland were predominantly Anglo-Irish and Protestant, Yeats was exacerbating nationalist sensibilities by suggesting that the social hierarchies on earth were given divine confirmation in heaven. The response to the published version of play expressed in the pamphlet 'Souls for Gold' is a useful insight into the complexities of dramatic representation at the foundational moment of an Irish national theatre.

As summarized by the pamphlet's author, F. Hugh O'Donnell, 'Out of all the mass of our national traditions it is precisely the baseness which is utterly alien to all our national traditions, the barter of Faith for Gold, which Mr. W. B. Yeats selects as the fundamental idea of his Celtic Drama!' (*Our Irish Theatre*, 261). And following on from a scathing condemnation of Yeats's ignorance of Irish actuality, the extent to which O'Donnell's anger was derived from what has been termed 'colonial discourse' became clear:

‘Mr. W. B. Yeats seems to see nothing in the Ireland of the old days but an unmanly, an impious and renegade people, crouched in degraded awe before demons, and goblins, and sprites, and sowths and thivishes, – just like a sordid tribe of black devil-worshippers and fetish-worshippers on the Congo or the Niger’ (264).⁹ While Yeats and Lady Gregory were ‘confident of the support of all Irish people, who are weary of misrepresentation’ (20), O’Donnell’s pamphlet reveals the problematic nature of such claims.

Irish theatre, in Christopher Murray’s phrase, may be ‘a mirror up to nation’, but ‘the mirror does not give back the real; it gives back images of a perceived reality.’¹⁰ This is strikingly demonstrated in the scene in J. M. Synge’s *Playboy of the Western World* (1907) when Christy Mahon gazes into a mirror. Encouraged by the idolization (and idealization) he receives from the villagers as a result of supposedly killing his father, Christie rejects the mirror he had used at home as ‘the devil’s own mirror . . . would twist a squint across an angel’s brow’. Now he sees the ‘truth’: ‘Didn’t I know rightly I was handsome.’¹¹ However, the play’s comic celebration of savagery constituted the most fundamental challenge to what nationalist audiences deemed an acceptable representation of Ireland. Typical of the many letters of protest received by the Dublin press is that from ‘A Western Girl’ who claims that being as she was ‘well acquainted with the conditions of life in the West’ she could authoritatively assert that ‘this play does not truly represent these conditions’. Her rhetorical question, ‘Could any Irish person accept this as a true picture of Irish life?’¹² implied that to do so was to exclude oneself from all claims to being Irish. While riots greeted the inadequacy of representation in *Playboy*, Synge had first-hand experience of a performance which audiences did accept as an adequate representation of their reality: Douglas Hyde’s Irish-language play *Casadh an tSúgáin* (*The Twisting of the Rope*) (1901), in which it is the peasant community, rather than the savage outsider, whose success is celebrated. In his review of the evening for *L’Européen*, Synge noted that, during an interval, the enthusiastic nationalist audience reacted with emotional tears to the singing of old Irish songs, and he felt as if ‘the soul of a people’ had entered the theatre.

Here, theatre creates a self-enforcing loop in which image accords with audience desire for self-representation in which only validated images are deemed to be ‘in the true’. As defined by Marco De Marinis, these are ‘closed performances’ which ‘anticipate a very precise receiver and demand well-defined types of “competence” . . . for their “correct” reception.’¹³ The danger here is the potential for cultural and dramatic stasis in which the audience-stage loop permits no alternative images to those approved, and prescribed. Dipesh Chakrabarty poses the question which pertains to all decolonizing contexts: ‘How could one reconcile the need for these two