

EXPERIMENT IN IRELAND

By DOROTHY MACARDLE

DRAMA is not in its essence a subjective art; a purely individual impulse more often expresses itself in a poem or a novel than in a play. The theatre, communal in its origins and in its appeal, remains sensitive to communal moods and the mind of the dramatist is a kind of weather-vane. It may be a weather-vane that works contrariwise, for the dramatist more often than not writes out of feelings of discovery, iconoclasm, protest or revolt; the prevailing wind, all the same, governs his choice or treatment of a theme. This was as true of Euripides as of Ibsen and Tchekov; it remains true of Noel Coward and Bernard Shaw. However universal may be the ideas and emotions explored by the writer, his play's surface as a rule reflects his own place and time. *The Trojan Women*, although all womanhood cries out against all war in it, was a tract against one campaign and *Peer Gynt*, although the world sees in it a parable for all humanity, was a satire on some Norwegian nationalists.

Irish drama, even more than that of most countries, has been conditioned by the nation's history. Today our history and our drama with it seem to be entering on a new phase; in Dublin there is a quickened interest in the theatre; dramatists are experimenting with new methods; plays by new writers appear. It looks as though a sudden and remarkable advance is about to be made in our drama; if not, lack of talent alone must be to blame; all the conditions for a period of fresh creativeness—national, social and artistic conditions—are here.

In order to interpret the forces at work at the moment and forecast the direction in which they are likely to move, it will be helpful briefly to review the phase that seems now to have come full circle, the dramatic movement that began a generation ago.

That was the beginning of our drama; Ireland, which for centuries had music and poetry, scholarship and craftsmanship, had no national theatre until then. During the later decades of the nineteenth century, when nearly every European country had dramatists

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who sooner or later became world-famous, Ireland had one maker of melodrama and no other writer for the stage. Our Wilde and Shaw, like our Sheridan and Goldsmith before them, wrote in England for the English public, while Ireland was represented in the theatre by Boucicault's *Colleen Bawn*. It seems almost unaccountable. The Irish temperament, with its nervous and emotional vitality, quick sense of incongruity, enjoyment of free expression and relish of colourful speech, should produce dramatists in every generation, one would suppose. No doubt the cause of that barrenness lay in our history, for in Ireland those were distressful years; Irish men and women of talent and ability who cared for the country and understood its problems had not peace of mind or leisure for writing plays; their energies were given to revolution or politics.

When, in the last year of the century, the Irish Literary Theatre was founded it was as a deliberate contribution to the resurgence of the national life; its founders consciously endeavoured to redress the balance, and its founders were its principal dramatists. Irish legend had been neglected, therefore Mr. Yeats and A.E. and George Moore wrote plays of Deirdre and Cuchullain; the Irish peasant had never been portrayed with any truth in the theatre: Lady Gregory and Synge wrote comedies and tragedies of Irish peasant life. The gods and heroes fretted their little hour upon our stage and departed; the peasant play remained.

One of the founders of the movement was disappointed. Edward Martyn had hoped for the production of intellectual plays with characters representing the Irish professional or land-owning classes. He wrote two or three himself, interesting to read but not successful on the stage. No one else attempted them. There was one difficulty, at that time also rooted in our history, which is now passing away: there scarcely existed in Ireland a propertied or professional class with national individuality of its own. The members of those classes, educated, for the most part, in England or in Trinity College, Dublin, were so imitative of English ways that a play concerned with them would seem to have little reason for being set in Ireland at all. A second difficulty existed—a technical one; our dramatists were without models of form. To give them such models Mr. Martyn opened his "Irish Theatre" in a small, dilapidated hall in Hardwicke Street, and there trained a company and gave performances of foreign intellectual plays. There was talent and enthusiasm among his players, but the time for this adventure was not ripe; his

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company broke up during "the troubles"; many of the actors left to play parts on a greater stage; his stage-manager was executed as a Revolutionary leader after the Rising of Easter 1916.

The little "Irish Theatre" failed, but the Abbey Theatre remained. During the times of conflict it avoided becoming identified with either the Irish or the English side. The policy of the directors was one reason; revival of interest in the Irish language was no doubt another; and there was the fact that, as in earlier generations, ardent nationalists were otherwise engaged than in writing plays. Mr. Yeats' *Cathleen ni Houlihan*, symbolizing Ireland in her suffering, had a profound appeal to generous and fearless youth, but it remained without a successor. Save for that one-act play and a few somewhat non-committal tragedies the national struggle in our own generation may be said neither to have inspired the Abbey dramatists nor to have drawn any direct inspiration from them.

The Theatre did its own work and advanced from success to success. In comedies and tragedies concerned, chiefly, with the lives of the Irish agricultural people, it achieved the perfection of naturalism. Lady Gregory and Synge had discovered "Gaeltacht English" as a dramatic speech, thus opening resources of immeasurable expressiveness to writers for the Irish stage; later Mr. T. C. Murray and others evolved a simple model of construction for naturalistic tragedies of family life; a vein of comedy was developed, more or less satirical and not far removed from farce, and meanwhile a company had been trained which created a style and established a tradition of acting unsurpassed for native vigour and life-like ease. Interest in the theatre became so eager that almost everyone who wrote at all in Ireland sooner or later attempted to play for the Abbey stage. The balance had been adjusted, indeed.

But all this success came a little too easily and was too soon complete. The danger that besets all repertory work was not escaped. In order to change their programme every week the company resorted to frequent revivals at short intervals and to the revival of those plays which they could perform with most facility. Their range became restricted; their excursions from the cottage interior rarely led them farther than to a tenement room, a lodging-house bedroom or a "parlour" in "the suburban groove", and the dramatists followed suit. For years we have seen plays performed which, quite obviously, have been written, not only for the Abbey Theatre, but for the Abbey players—for this actor's lift of the eyebrow and

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that actress's toss of the chin—and even for the Abbey property-room. I have heard the property man, in a tone of indignant protest, rebuking a new author who had made a demand considered exorbitant—"a mug with a black pig on it" was the direction in the script. The author was categorically instructed as to what was and what was not in the property-room, "So that another time you won't write ad lib."

And in these years, while our Irish dramatists were cutting their coats to a meagre allowance of cloth, experiment was rampant abroad. We knew this, not from the productions of touring companies from England, but from reading the lectures and occasional productions by valiant unattached Dublin players like Paul Farrell and Miss Elizabeth Young. New methods, we were aware, were being attempted to the east and the west of us, and we would have liked to experiment ourselves.

To one aspect of the Irish imagination the Abbey drama gives expression—the brooding despondent disposition, resigned to misfortune, ironical in humour, not averse to intrigue, opposing realism and cynicism to romantic and idealistic notions alike. Sean O'Casey's plays are the distillation of all this. But there are, in the Irish imagination, other attributes, a roving buoyant quality, ranging lightly into the regions of fantasy, speculative, impatient of fact. This spirit likewise needed expression and it had found none in drama as yet. New and varied forms were necessary for its embodiment; we had little knowledge of forms and we were not in the mood to evolve forms for ourselves. Interest in structure seems rarely to coincide with the impulse of creativeness; it belongs perhaps to the less germinant periods of a nation's or an individual's life. Our writers needed the stimulus of seeing what new and strange shapes drama had taken already before they could work in experimental forms themselves, but we had no theatre showing us foreign plays, and we had no theatre in which a new unconventional play had much chance of being produced.

It was at the psychological moment that Hilton Edwards and Micheál MacLiammóir began to produce in a Dublin theatre (which, at capacity, perhaps pays for the grease-paint), plays by Tolstoy, Ibsen, Evreinov, Capek, Greensfelder, Paul Raynal, Elmer Rice, Eugene O'Neill. They produced also the first plays of two Irishmen, David Sears and E. W. Tocher.

E. W. Tocher's play was like nothing attempted by an Irish writer

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before. He had called it *A Symphony in Green* and sent it to the Abbey Theatre. The directors rejected it, and its title, when played at the Peacock, was *The Old Lady Says "No"*. That first night was a disturbing experience. We saw a "rehearsal" of a play about Robert Emmet and saw the actor of the chief part fall with a crash, apparently hurting his head. Then came delirium, the relentless rhythms that pursue a patient going under an anaesthetic, throbbing noises and nightmarish scenes. We saw Emmet wandering in and out of pitiful encounters, disoriented in space and time.

The play was disliked by many and by many vehemently admired. This company had given Dublin something to talk about.

Just four years ago these players established themselves in the Rotunda and lit up their sign: "The Dublin Gate Theatre". They have here a proscenium curtain with a curious design—waves surge and break against a barred gate; it is opening and the tide flows in. Whether or not the symbol was intended, that design symbolizes a fact. The tide of Irish drama had turned; after a long, slow ebb it was rising; a force already in being had been given direction and release.

It is the poorer theatres which can afford to experiment, provided they are not too poor. The Gate Theatre is poor in money but wealthy in personnel. It has a producer who is in himself a powerhouse of energy; a teacher who can make an actor out of any man called in from the fields; and a lighting-director whose art is as potent as Prospero's. It has a designer whose sets have a quality of interpretive imagination which enhances every play; a writer of plays in English and in Irish and a producer for the plays which are given in the Irish language from time to time; and all these artists are two men—the two who divide between them the leading male parts, Hilton Edwards and Micheál MacLiammóir.

They are men of the theatre in the fullest sense, rejoicing in novelty and in straining all the resources of all their arts and crafts. Every two weeks the Gate changes its programme and it is rarely that in one season it presents two plays of similar type. A dozen nations have been laid under tribute for this company's productions; they have performed plays in almost every conceivable style.

They gave us what we had lacked. The Abbey Theatre had taught us how, in the life of our country, themes for drama might be found; we had needed to realise new ways in which subjects could be used. At the Gate Theatre we saw dramatic conceptions shaped in an infi-

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nite variety of methods, and saw, also, new regions explored for themes. We saw naturalistic plays made out of history, out of superstition and obscure aspects of life, out of the lives of barge-men, witches and czars; we saw classical themes used to illuminate modern problems, comedy made out of horrors, tragedy out of inaction, time juggled with, personality divided, inanimate things and abstract concepts playing parts; we found thoughts and emotions evoked in us without speech or action, the audience projected into a character's brain, symbol and suggestion powerfully used.

This heady heaven could not but work. Within four years more than a dozen new plays by Irish writers have been produced at the Gate Theatre; six of these have been produced within the last year and every one of the six has in it some pioneer effort either in technique or in choice of theme.

In comedy, Mary Manning and the Countess of Longford have broken new ground. The former, in her *Storm Over Wicklow*, satirizes a certain type of tourist who occasionally patronizes the Emerald Isle and has hitherto escaped scot free. Lady Longford's *Mr. Jiggins of Jigginstown* is a study from life; the eccentric, ridiculous, rather noble old patriarch is seen with sympathy, but the absentee heirs to his Irish property are observed with humour by no means untouched with malice. Never has such fun been made of the land-owning class on our stage, for neither Lady Gregory nor Edward Martyn, although they belonged to that class "with a difference", found matter in it for mirth.

Lord and Lady Longford are versatile writers. A month before this production the Gate Theatre presented a translation made by them of *The Oresteian Trilogy*, condensed so as to be performed in one evening—a rendering full of poetic power.

At Easter a revised version of Micheál MacLiammóir's *Masque of Dublin, the Ford of the Hurdles*, was produced in commemoration of the Insurrection of 1916. In the last scene, by means of a strange medley of naturalism and symbolism, the whole atmosphere and mood of that Easter Week is recalled. In the background, against a sky reddened by the fires from the burning buildings, stand the shapes of the Nelson Pillar and the Post Office roof. That is Dublin, to a citizen's eye and mind. In the space between stands silhouetted a young sentry in the uniform of the Irish Volunteers. The shadowed scene is filled with hurrying figures; we hear cries, laughter, snatches of familiar music, the clatter of holiday makers,

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the shouts of men selling cards for the races, the voice of the Commandant giving orders, snatches of speeches of the leaders, phrases which are household words with us now. There is the confusion of battle, desperation and surrender, then silence. Across the lighted space men walk, one by one, into the darkness—The Leaders going to execution. When the last was carried across the stage on a stretcher the audience hardly breathed; the very air and spirit of that tragedy were evoked.

More novel in method than any of these is E. W. Tocher's third play, *A Bride for the Unicorn*. Of plot it contains very little. To a timid tailor's assistant comes a masked lady who woos him and eludes him, leaving him wild with hunger for something in life or in death never to be comprehended or attained. The treatment is extravagantly fantastical and bewilderingly suggestive, like a score of allegories commingled in one dream. It starts in the audience curious trains of thought but each scene excites some fresh conjecture and all seems elusive and inconsequent. One scene, the simplest, perhaps owes something to Eugene O'Neill's experiments with dialogue. The deserted lover and the commonplace girl whom he has married sit at evening in their cramped and commonplace home. They do not exchange one word but each speaks aloud the bitter comments that their minds are forever revolving on the miseries of their married life. The dual effect of the small irritated gestures that we observe and the thoughts to which, apart from there, we listen, is poignant and memorable.

A play of straight and sturdy simplicity was the next creation at the Gate. Mr. David Sears found his subject in the character of Grania O'Malley, that Amazon of Clare Island who led her men against Queen Elizabeth's and gained the day. Of the story of her pride and her love he made a richly-coloured romantic drama full of action and forthright talk. It was hard to understand why so few Irish dramatists before him had taken the great figures of that resounding period of our history for a theme.

Grania of the Ships, which opened the autumn season, was followed by *Yahoo*, a tragedy written around that giant of eighteenth century letters, Dean Swift. Again, when the thing was done it seemed unaccountable that it had not been done before, so tense with tragic drama were the circumstances of this man's life—his relations with Stella, the tangle of Vanessa's passion, the shadow of madness whose approach, foreseen, dominated his outlook and actions, his feeling

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for the Irish people, savage with indignation, pity and scorn. Mr. Yeats, in his one-act play, *The Words Upon the Window Pane*, performed at the Abbey Theatre, had shown a psychic medium possessed, in turn, by the spirits of Swift and of the women who loved him. Lord Longford was the first to bring Swift in life on to the stage; he made him the centre of an absorbing and original play. The unanswered question whether Swift ever married Stella was imaginatively answered in one of the finest first acts ever written for the Irish stage, an act that slowly filled to the brim with emotion which trembled but never overflowed. The second act, showing Vanessa's desperation, was naturalistic like the first, but with the final act and Swift's descent into madness, naturalism was abandoned; the audience, projected into the vortex in which his mind was lost, saw nightmare figures gibbering in the darkness and the hideous mask of the ape-like Yahoo, Swift's image of the animal in man. It was "projectivism", but not consistent projectivism, for in the midst of these visions we saw Swift sitting huddled and staring in his chair. Then we were thrust forward in time and saw, in brief, half-lit scenes, children being given *Gulliver's Travels* to read, a psychoanalyst lecturing on Swift's complexes, a Dublin street-orator protesting against an avenue being named after this irreligious man. These scenes made a powerful protest against the under-valuing of a great man which had impelled the author to write his play, but they sacrificed illusion to an idea.

No doubt all these new plays, written by dramatists without many years of experience, have faults: there is a lack in most of them of that consistency which should be maintained even in the very exuberance of fantasy; but this is a fault of vigorous and confident adolescence—a fault on the right side.

During this prolific year the Abbey Theatre also has produced new plays. Mr. Lennox Robinson, who besides being producer at the Theatre is the most enterprising of its dramatists, found a brilliant plot for comedy in the effects of plays by Tolstoy, Tchekov, Ibsen and their intellectual kindred on the inhabitants of a remote sea-side town—*Drama at Inish* (produced in New York, in London, and published under the title *Is Life Worth Living?*), and Mr. Peadar O'Donnell wrote a tragedy, *Wreck*, on the lives of the fishing people of Donegal; a sincere and moving piece of work; a novelist's first play, however, lacking in point and form. *Men Crowd Me Round* was the first play of another distinguished novelist, Mr.

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Francis Stuart—one of those writers who use Ireland as a new Ruritania and the Republican Volunteers as a picturesque band of outlaws to whom the most fantastical speeches and actions may be attributed. This was sure to become a fashion, but the stage of the Irish national theatre is not the place where it might have been expected to prevail. The play was not convincing to the Dublin audience.

It is becoming apparent that the Abbey Theatre, in holding aloof from the popular movement, though it gained something also lost much. There is a failure to reflect the changing life of the country and a lack of realism in the portrayal of many types. There are Abbey plays whose characters are no better than "stage Irishmen". It is unfortunate.

When a nation is advancing its theatre may not stand still. The Abbey Theatre has a unique function which remains its own. Its company is without a rival in the performance of plays of a certain type—plays in which the situations and problems are peculiar to Irish life. Such plays are national in a particular sense and require Irish players. Foreign theatres can scarcely hope to produce them with the proper accent and discretion; foreign audiences, who delight in them when the Abbey company tours abroad, enjoy them chiefly as portraying a life remote from their own. Plays of this kind will continue to be written and as the life of the Irish people grows more complex the themes of drama will be varied and enlarged. The Abbey Theatre is bound to enlarge its scope to interpret them, otherwise it will lose its place in the life of the nation, and that is unthinkable.

Meanwhile, Irish dramatists are writing plays of other kinds, varying in method, mood, and theme; for there is leisure to write now and stimulus; fresh interests and ambitions are stirring and there is the Dublin Gate Theatre to produce all sorts of new plays. These plays are Irish because their settings and characters are Irish and because the minds of their authors have the colour and temper of their race, but the problems and conflicts in them, the ideas and emotions that inform them, are such as we share with the rest of humanity.

We are emerging from centuries of a strange intellectual isolation caused, first, by the repression of nationalism and then by its intensive assertion. Our drama will surely emerge from its own isolation also and, while we borrow from the whole world's stage for our pleasure and interest, will contribute to the world in return.

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YAHOO

The Dublin Gate Theatre has provided fertile ground for experiments by Ireland's newer playwrights. One of its recent productions was *Yahoo*, a tragedy written around the life of Jonathan Swift by Lord Longford. Its last act projected the audience into the protagonist's insane mind, peopled by nightmare figures and overshadowed by the hideous mask of Yahoo, Swift's image of the animal in man.

DOROTHY MACARDLE, who writes about notable new plays in Ireland, says in a letter to us: "Perhaps I should mention my qualifications for pronouncing judgment. I am chief dramatic critic to the *Irish Press*—a Dublin and national daily paper—and have had three plays produced at the Abbey Theatre and one at the Gate." She is chairman of the Irish Women Writers' Club and has written for this magazine before.