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ABSTRACT

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Anne M. Pulju

This dissertation argues that theatre was a vital element of postcolonial culture in Ireland in the years 1919-1932, the period in which the Irish nation emerged from revolutionary war to become a stable postcolonial state. Although critics have bemoaned the rising dominance of conservative, anti-modernist playwriting and production in Ireland's post-independence period (drawing unfavorable contrast with the early years of the Abbey Theatre), a more productive approach is to ask *why* such styles were popular in these particular historical moments. Examining a range of theatrical productions throughout Ireland in the period, I contend that postcoloniality was the crucial influence upon Irish theatrical discourses during these years, resulting in theatrical formations centered upon realism, escapism, domesticity, and nostalgia for a particular vision of a safe, rural life. Through these formations, Irish theatre of the 1920s reflected, circulated, and helped to create cultural discourses that contributed to the stabilization of the new Irish state. Thus, 1920s theatre functioned as a potent element of nationalist culture, and should not be dismissed.

Plays like P.J. Bourke's melodrama *Kathleen Mavourneen* and George Shiels's comedy *Paul Twyning* exemplify the mainstream theatre's contributions to the stabilizing cultural discourses of the Irish Free State. Theatre was also involved with political issues like the revival

of the Irish language (in the founding of Galway's state-supported An Taibhdhearc theatre) and censorship (manifested in unofficial but intriguing ways in regard to works like Sean O'Casey's *The Plough and the Stars* and *The Silver Tassie*). Because postcoloniality, with its driving impulse toward unity, was the dominant cultural influence, modernism could have little role in the Irish theatre. Productions like W.B. Yeats's *The Player Queen*, the work of the Dublin Drama League, and three early productions of the Dublin Gate Theatre – *Peer Gynt*, *Diarmuid and Gráinne,* and *The Old Lady Says "No!"* – demonstrate the ways in which modernism was sequestered as (at best) a niche element in Irish theatre. Drawing upon theories from the fields of historiography and literary and performance studies, this dissertation analyzes theatrical productions as case studies of the ways in which culture and the state interact in postcolonial societies.

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Chapter One

Introduction

I

Significance

A: The case for Irish theatre studies

Theatre historians have always found the Irish drama attractive, to an extent that can seem rather out of proportion to the size of the dramatic literary canon. In this limited field, however, critics find not only plays that are hailed as great works of literature, but also riots and revolution, events that according to theatre annals constitute compelling evidence that the arts can be a part of the grand changes of history in ways that go well beyond the merely reflective. It is no coincidence that so many theatre historians have quoted lines from William Butler Yeats's comparatively minor poem, "The Man and the Echo": "Did that play of mine send out/Certain men the English shot?", which Yeats wrote in the aftermath of the Easter 1916 Rising, a watershed in the Irish independence movement (*Last Poems* 83). If the answer to that question can be a "yes" (even if a qualified one), scholars of the drama have substantive evidence for the societal significance of their chosen field. And indeed, while a direct causal relationship between the Rising and *Cathleen ni Houlihan*, the landmark play to which the poem refers, is hardly evident, it is safe to say that there is *some* degree of vital relationship between the Irish dramatic movement and the most decisive events of the nation's modern history.

This sense that the theatre played a substantive role in the emergence and definition of the modern Irish nation has made Ireland a remarkable case not only for theatre historians but

also for a range of individuals and institutions with vested interests in demonstrating the importance of Irish cultural phenomena. Lady Augusta Gregory herself, one of the Abbey's Theatre's founders and directors, wrote that her little theatre's actors had not only "won much praise for themselves" but had actually "raised the dignity of Ireland" (quoted in Una Ellis-Fermor, *The Irish Dramatic Movement* vii). Some sixty years later, Sanford Sternlicht's general introduction to the Abbey Theatre's early days encapsulated commonly held viewpoints of the Irish theatre's role:

> At the very beginning of the twentieth century, a handful of patriotic would-be playwrights and actors in a small country working in a makeshift theater . . . created one of history's great national repertory theaters and a dramatic tradition that is a wonder of modern culture. (*A Reader's Guide to Modern Irish Drama* 26)

A theatre whose art has been acclaimed both for inspiring nationalists and for defying conventional mores has obvious attractions. Robert O'Driscoll states that the early Abbey playwrights "moulded the mind of modern Ireland" (9), based on the presumption that "In times of acute national consciousness the theatre is the form of literature which makes the most direct impact on the people, becoming at times a means for propaganda, but ultimately the means by which the deeper life of the people is expressed" (12). Mary Trotter argues that "Amid the intense excitement of the Irish cultural revival, the Irish National Theatre Society, Ltd., did not serve as a monument to Irish culture, but as a creator of it, a site of resistance against English domination and a forum for debating identity and culture within the movement" (135-36). Brian Singleton, while ruing the long-term dominance of particular performance styles, concurs in the

assessment of the early Abbey's cultural significance: "as a new nation emerged and was forged, the drama from that early period became enshrined as the new national culture" (265).

Valorization of Irish drama has its limits, however. While the drama of the Irish cultural renaissance in the two decades around the turn of the twentieth century is credited with not only literary quality but also cultural significance, enthusiasm for the ensuing decades is less than overwhelming. The plays of the years leading up to Irish independence (including key works of William Butler Yeats, John Millington Synge, and Augusta Lady Gregory among others), like the theatrical work of the actor-directors Frank and William Fay, are not only lauded for their own worth, but also also praised in comparison to the less innovative theatre of the years after the literary revival. Similarly, the early plays of Sean O'Casey, generally considered among the greatest of Irish dramatic works, are sometimes considered even more remarkable because of the otherwise theatrically sterile decade in which they were written.

Robert Hogan, for example, notes in *After the Irish Renaissance* that "the first twenty years after O'Casey's departure are usually considered barren ones for the Abbey; a favorite amusement of the Dublin literati has been to revile the poverty of the company's repertoire" (21). In this perspective on Irish theatre, the post-"Renaissance" period that coincides with the post-independence period is denigrated. The general conception of the Free State is that it was a bastion of conservatism and censorship, and the conception of its literature is the same, to the extent that great modernist writers like James Joyce are seen as so anomalous, so antithetical to the state, as to have been forced into foreign exile in search of more fertile creative ground. Among dramatic critics, the idea that the Irish drama lost its vitality after the death of J. M. Synge was stated early and often. D. E. S. Maxwell quotes critics lamenting the Abbey

Theatre's decline as early as the teens: "'The Abbey is exhausted', Brinsley MacNamara wrote in the *Independent* on 9 May 1913; and on 4 March 1916 *New Ireland* pronounced, 'The Abbey is mortally sick'" (*A Critical History of Modern Irish Drama* 84). Ernest A. Boyd, in 1928's *The Contemporary Drama of Ireland*, disparaged what he saw the theatre's descent into the lowbrow:

> So long as the folk drama and the poetic drama of Irish legend were encouraged, there was a certain homogeneity of purpose and spirit, but the complacent substitution of melodrama and farce made for disintegration. Intelligent playgoers could not be found to tolerate the eternal repetitions of the popular playwrights . . . (194)

In this view, the Abbey's directors and playwrights are faulted for a supposed lack of ambition and attempts to please, rather than challenge, audiences.

Commentators in later decades shared this perception of the Abbey's decline. Writer Frank O'Connor, reflecting on his experience with the theatre in the 1930s, wrote in 1950's *Leinster, Munster and Connaught*:

> When I first knew the Abbey Theatre it was already drifting rapidly to the devil. After the Civil War there was a complete change of mood throughout the country, which gave rise to a realistic movement of which O'Casey and O'Flaherty were the leaders. Synge was dead, Lady Gregory was dead, and there was no one connected with the theatre who understood what the realistic movement implied or how it could be directed. Yeats was completely at sea. (34)

Peter Kavanagh, whose *The Story of the Abbey Theatre* was likewise published in 1950, argued that the early 1920s delivered a blow to the theatre which "turned out to be mortal" (117). Harold Ferrar, in his 1973 book on playwright Denis Johnston, writes:

> After Synge's death in 1909, [the Abbey] hovered near its own artistic death in the throes of seemingly endless repetitions of peasant plays acted in what Oliver Gogarty called the "begorrah" style. . . . For a theatre to take no risks is to regress, and the Abbey in the post-Synge years stood depressingly still. By the early twenties, prospects were dim for a vital, contemporary theatre in Ireland. The Abbey held undisputed reign with no challengers in sight, but she was a tired champion. (*Denis Johnston's Irish Theatre* 7)

Chief among critics' complaints is the lack of brilliance among Irish playwrights, who, one after another, adhered to a realist, often comedic mode. As Maxwell writes, "Critical opinion, after Synge's death, tended to see this line [of successive dominant realist playwrights] not as one of descent in a neutral, genealogical sense, but as a deterioration" (*Critical History* 88). These opinions have proven highly influential over the succeeding decades of scholarship. The critical tendency to equate the Abbey Theatre with all of Irish theatre has also meant the extension of this notion of "deterioration" to all forms of Irish theatrical entertainment. Little of value is seen after the teens, and the 1920s, with their conservative political and sociocultural trends, are held largely to blame.

B: The case for the 1920s

Perhaps there is some validity in considering this era a twilight for Irish drama, for it did lead into what might be called a cultural night – the Ireland of 1940s and 50s, which saw very few plays to excite the literati. Admittedly, upon first glance, Irish theatre of the 1920s does seem to be less *consciously* engaged with the nationalist project than was the earlier work of the Abbey and other nationalist drama organizations. Yet even that which initially seems sterile can in fact be highly productive, once the criteria with which we assess are shifted. In researching this dissertation, my criteria are not those of artistic value, or of worthy contribution to a politics of my liking. Rather, I have asked what trends the theatre of independence-era Ireland exhibited, why those trends appeared, and what effects they produced. That they did have effects, as much as those of any other period, I have no doubt, and thus they are worthy objects of analysis. Conventional critical opinion is shot through with references to sickness, exhaustion, and malaise; the conventional narrative describes a once-living body slowly but inexorably taken over by death. In contrast, it is my contention that the Irish theatre in the 1920s, even without fostering a great corpus of groundbreaking drama, nonetheless possessed vitality. Not only the Abbey but also a diverse range of theatrical groups of varying status and purpose were actively engaged with societal needs, producing theatre that was an important part of Irish cultural life.

Certainly, powerful religious influences and other conservative cultural forces exerted profound effects upon the Irish Free State. These forces were not just reflected in but circulated through the theatre. It is because of this circulation that we must recognize that merely condemning Free State drama for its conservatism denies the theatre its full due. Whether or not we like the effects, the theatre, like other cultural elements, exercised political power in the

temporally post-colonial moment that saw the Irish revolution take a sustaining turn toward conservatism, just as it had wielded power within the more superficially dynamic revolutionary instant itself. For many artists and nationalists alike, the culture of Saorstát Éireann in both its early and late years left something to be desired; but it played an important role in the evolution of the Irish nation-state.

I believe that theatre and drama not only reflected but also contributed to the growing stability of the modern Irish state through its participation in cultural discourses, systems of language and representation that circulate ideas. This achievement is somewhat less romantic than the Celtic Renaissance's helping to define a *nation*, but perhaps even more significant. Theatre was a potent element of the Irish cultural discourse. Hence, I look to the cultural activity of the theatre in order to interrogate the imaginative processes by which this new Irish nation-state and its government defined its "Irishness," finding that the relationship between theatre and the postcolonial nation was actually beneficial to the developing state. I have selected the time period 1919-1932 partly because the period's historical demarcations make it possible to delve deeply enough, in one dissertation, to provide a reasonably full analysis of a diverse, multifarious theatrical culture. Most crucially, however, this period was one of change, demonstrating the emergence and consolidation of cultural tropes and discourses that would prove highly influential over several decades.

As the Free State emerged in this period between the world wars, its developing artistic culture was influenced by two modes of thought which often conflicted: modernism, influenced by continental currents in the arts, and postcoloniality, with its ideological demands. Tracing these two forces through theatre and drama, I argue that the growing conservatism and insularity

of Irish culture actually had highly productive effects for the embryonic nation-state. Thus, the predictable realistic comedies that came to dominate the Abbey Theatre should not be dismissed but accorded the significance that the Free State government saw when Ireland made the Abbey the first state-sponsored theatre in the English-speaking world. The apparent conservatism of Free State theatre, as well as divergences from that conservatism, was part of a necessary process of nation-building for the decolonizing state, and as such ought to be regarded as a continuation rather than a refutation of the inspiring drama of the Celtic Renaissance.

To substantiate this argument, I weave together chronologies of theatre, nationalism, and modernism. By way of offering a "thick description" of the period, I offer analysis both of broad historical developments and of the minutiae of individual theatre productions. In order to present a complete picture of Irish theatrical culture, the dissertation discusses each of the major (and many minor) theatre companies throughout the Irish island. Taking a chronological approach, I consider theatrical life in three periods described in three main chapters, each of which is framed by the differing political circumstances of the developing nation. Specific plays and productions that are analyzed in detail include the working-class melodrama *Kathleen Mavourneen*, popular in time of war; the work of two groups that died out in this period, the Ulster Literary Theatre and Dublin's British Empire Shakespeare Society; W.B. Yeats's *The Player Queen*, one of the few experimental pieces to find mainstream success in the early 20s; the prototypical "Abbey comedy" *Paul Twyning*; Sean O'Casey's rejected modernist play, *The Silver Tassie*; a successful Irish-language mythic drama, *Diarmuid agus Gráinne*; and two groundbreaking productions at Dublin's Gate Theatre, *Peer Gynt* and *The Old Lady Says "No!"*.

This is an interdisciplinary undertaking: among the tools I use in analyzing the above-named works are historiography, discourse theory, and postcolonial and modernist theory. In addition to this range of theoretical influences, the project incorporates methodologies from a variety of academic models, in the hope that it may prove useful to scholars in diverse fields. In the following introductory pages, I will briefly discuss my influences and terminology drawn from (A) the social sciences; (B) discourse and performance theory; (C) postcolonial theory; and (D) modernist studies. Following upon this background discussion is a further explication of my particular subject matter, including an outline of the dissertation's body chapters.

II

Theory and methodology

A: Historiography and the social sciences

To some extent, my method is that of a traditional historian, inasmuch as I use a narrative approach, relating "national **development**." I believe this is a story that does indeed exhibit and explain change over time, even if the narrative exhibits gaps and irregularities that prevent it from being entirely seamless.

There are difficulties in interweaving cultural history and political history, especially when potential readers are envisioned; for one, a lack of traditional empirical evidence can mean that connections and conclusions drawn by interdisciplinary cultural scholars may strike traditional historians as tenuous. Modern Ireland offers a better case than many for demonstrating relationships between theatre and social history (hence the attraction to theatre scholars discussed previously), but even so, historians are likely to question the extent to which the culture of a nation, and the course of its history, could be molded by artistic events and individuals. Scholars in cultural studies fields have presented ample evidence of the ways in which the seemingly most trivial phenomena of culture, media and the arts can reflect tremendously important issues and events. The reciprocal relationship by which the trivial and ephemeral actually influence those happenings which eventually come to be recorded in the history books is more difficult to establish objectively. Despite the fact that there is no clear cut cause-and-effect transmission process, however, I believe the communal methods by which theatrical works are both created and received function within relational networks that result in

theatre's being simultaneously reflective and productive of popular opinion. One scholarly model for negotiating this tension between apparently ephemeral evidence and global ideas can be found in the work of anthropologist Clifford Geertz, who employs ethnography and "thick description." Geertz writes of these techniques: "the aim is to draw large conclusions from small, but very densely textured facts; to support broad assertions about the role of culture in the construction of collective life by engaging them exactly with complex specifics" ("Thick Description: Toward an Interpretive Theory of Culture," sec. VII, par. 13), while being careful to maintain contact "with the political, economic, stratificatory realities within which men are everywhere contained – and with the biological and physical necessities on which those surfaces rest" (sec. VIII, par. 6). Even so skilled an analyst as Geertz must note, however, that "cultural analysis is intrinsically incomplete" (sec. VIII, par. 2).

Geertz is not alone among social scientists in traversing disciplinary boundaries. Sociologist Vera L. Zolberg, whose *Constructing a Sociology of the Arts* emphasizes canon formation and the fine arts, writes of the intersections between disciplinary branches:

> In recent years anthropology has had an important impact on sociologists, either directly or in conjunction with related influences derived from literary criticism or structural linguistics. Both sociologists and anthropologists are reorienting their approaches, in line with ideas derived from literary sources on the one hand, as in the dialogic form of discourse analysis (Lukacs 1963; Bakhtin 1968; Clifford 1983), through symbolic analysis based on a rereading of pragmatist philosophy (Rochberg-Halton 1986), as well as through the "thick description" of Clifford Geertz (1973 Chapter 1). In so doing they surmount rigid empiricism by

> incorporating imaginative if risky methods of interpretation to explicate aspects of art objects themselves in relation to other cultural structures of society (Geertz 1980; Sahlins 1985). They treat art objects as texts to be read, in order to tease out meanings from them that are not immediately evident when using more direct means. (19)

Her account of the ways in which sociologists of the arts adopt interdisciplinary strategies is aimed at scholars within that field, but is useful for anyone conducting research in an area where aesthetics plays a role:

> [Recent sociological] scholars attempt to surmount the limitations of the conventional aestheticist view of art by one or more of the following strategies: contextualizing the art form, so that its aesthetically-based aura is reduced; choosing art forms marginal to conventional categories of art on which to focus, thus carving out a new field for themselves without threatening the existing aesthetic paradigm; importing and employing methods or techniques generally associated with another discipline. (57)

I am not a sociologist, but I employ each of the strategies Zolberg describes to varying degrees within the dissertation, with the exception that I am not troubled by a need to protect an "existing aesthetic paradigm." This dissertation discusses theatrical events and objects both marginal and conventional, sometimes reading them – and, obviously, their scripts – as texts, yet attempting to analyze an inherently interdisciplinary subject in interdisciplinary fashion. While this dissertation is not an ethnography, and I am not so concerned with semiotics as is Clifford Geertz, I, like many theatre scholars, find Geertz's notion of "thick description" to be a useful

strategy for negotiating the demands of empiricism. In addition, as is discussed below, I employ certain aspects of discourse analysis, a uniquely powerful body of interdisciplinary theory.

B: Discourse and performance theory

In choosing to use the term "discourse" in the title of this dissertation I have made a conscious choice to align myself with a body of theory that may be off-putting to more conservative scholars in the Irish Studies field, but which to my mind is very useful in helping to understand the extraordinary circulation of ideas which created the modern Irish nation-state. Chris Weedon writes, "Discourses, in Foucault's work, are ways of constituting knowledge, together with the social practices, forms of subjectivity and power relations which inhere in such knowledges and the relations between them" (*Feminist Practice and Poststructuralist Theory* 105). In adopting the term "discourse" to describe the circulation of ideas around theatrical culture, I mean something more than linguistic analysis, although I do not apply the whole body of Michel Foucault's philosophy to this type of study. Foucault is very useful, however, in providing a set of tools with which to examine and discuss the very real power relations involved in what might seem, on the surface, to be inconsequential or ephemeral phenomena. As Paul Rabinow writes in his introduction to *The Foucault Reader,* "Foucault has been consistently interested in the shifting ways that the body and the social institutions related to it have entered into political relations" (10). Foucault's concerns with materiality, with the body, and with historical specificity have powerful resonances with the work of theatre historians (versus the frustrations of more abstract literary theory or of purely narrative-driven social history). In

particular, considering theatre's relationships to politics and states bears obvious relation to Foucault's attempt at determining "limits of expressibility" and the socio-historical functioning of "statements," powerful expressions of knowledge which are neither purely linguistic nor purely material. In the case of Irish culture, analysis of performances as statements helps to reveal the discursive limits of expressibility, through which censorship, public approval, and institutional theatrical arrangements helped to determine the types of drama that functioned as part of the Irish imagination at this time.

Within the pages of this dissertation, I focus upon performance as one means by which discourses are circulated. Questions arise: how is performance relevant to historians and social scientists? Of what evidentiary use are analyses of performative moments when constructing a narrative? Some answers to these questions can be found with performance studies theorist Joseph Roach, who, in his seminal book *Cities of the Dead: Circum-Atlantic Performance*, writes about "the relationship between memory and history" as "a key issue in the field of performance studies as I see it now" (xii). For Roach, performance (a concept which goes well beyond any traditional sense of theatre to encompass events such as carnivals, religious rituals, and even "the invisible rituals of everyday life"), "means to bring forth, to make manifest and to transmit. To perform also means, though often more secretly, to reinvent" (xi). Thus, performance facilitates "the social processes of memory and forgetting, familiarly known as culture (xi)," and "internal cultural self-definition . . . by making visible the play of difference and identity within the larger ensemble of relations" (4). In the years of nascent independence, Ireland was consumed with reinventing and self-defining its culture, and performance was a

significant method both of manifesting key cultural tropes and of aiding the passing of others from the cultural memory.

In applying Foucault's idea of discourse to theatre history, I also incorporate Bruce A. McConachie's notion of the "theatrical formation." In *Melodramatic Formations: American Theatre and Society, 1820-1870*, theatre historian McConachie theorizes a "mutual elaboration" of audiences and practitioners that "requires the historian to dive into the apparent chaos of theatrical events and to emerge with regularities of production, genre, and audience over a significant stretch of time" (xii). Theatrical formations can then themselves be seen as part of what I term a "cultural formation," a regular pattern circulated by discourse and both produced and consumed by individuals throughout a society, contributing to that society's development. Cultural formations allow us to describe the social historian's "change-over-time." In this case, I am primarily concerned with the changes in a culture that went from war against both foreign and domestic enemies to a stable democratic change of government in one highly significant decade.

Some readers might feel that I neglect the role of the individual playwrights in the following analyses, especially considering the dominance of author-centric literary criticism in the Irish drama field. Even a crucial commentator like D. E. S. Maxwell puts playwrights at the center of his analyses: "At the heart of the matter, and so attracting the emphasis, are the playwrights rather than the theatres and players whose part it is to supply the necessary stage, at their most enterprising when they beckon to a continuing line of dramatists" (*Critical History* 7). Certainly, mustering evidence for arguments that go beyond the textual can be difficult. (One of the few to have done so on a large scale in Irish drama studies is Lionel Pilkington, whose recent

Theatre and the State in Twentieth-Century Ireland presents a range of empirical evidence in support of his long-range historical narrative; a different historiographic approach is seen in Adrian Frazier's *Behind the Scenes*, which uses documents and letters to focus upon the early history of the Abbey.) The dominance of play- and playwright-focused perspectives in a field that, as I have noted, finds much of its claim to fame in its historical relevance is reason enough for turning the emphasis to the societal, particularly considering that theatre is even more collaborative than most cultural arts, with its meaning created not just in writing but in rehearsal, performance, and most of all, in reception. Although I do believe authors retain agency even while caught within the forces of history and discourse – after all, it is individual human beings who ultimately transmit ideas – it is also true that, as Vera Zolberg says, "just as art is a social-historical construction, so is the artist" (111). Thus, it makes little sense to devote an extraordinary degree of attention to individual writers when the overall intent is analysis of cultures; to do so would diminish the scope of this project.

C: Postcolonial theory

It is possible to gain a deeper understanding of culture in Ireland by employing certain key concepts used by important postcolonial theorists, scholars whose work is centered on theorizing the impact of the colonial experience upon the culture, literature and history of colonized peoples both before and after the moment of "liberation." The extent to which Ireland can be viewed as "postcolonial" in the ways that theorists regard such colonized areas as Africa, the Indian subcontinent, and the Caribbean, however, is a subject of ongoing and thorny debate. It is essential, in my opinion, for scholars using postcolonial theory in analysis of Irish culture to

acknowledge certain limitations in applying the work of the major postcolonial theorists to Irish topics. To my mind, one of the most attractive things about postcolonial theory is its applicability to actual historical events, making it a means of illuminating and analyzing the experiences of real embodied agents in real time. Such historicity, however, also demands careful attention to the particular circumstances in question. In the case of Ireland, particularity means the extent to which postcolonial theorists can be used does have limits, but there are some very useful concepts, particularly for an interdisciplinary project such as this.

One of the chief concerns of postcolonialists is the notion of the "Other:" that which is seen as the opposite to, and thus defines, the Self. Striking examples of the role of the Other in British colonial discourses about Ireland include the use of images of animalistic "savages" to represent the Irish in periodicals like *Punch* (see, for examples, Vincent Cheng's study *Joyce, Race, and Empire* and Kevin Dettmar's essay "Joyce/'Irishness'/Modernism"). Part of this vilification was due to the fact that Irish/British postcolonial relations do not, however, fit neatly into any dialectical model of colonization. Ireland was simultaneously both a settler and colonized society; the oldest and nearest of England's colonies, it experienced historical events dissimilar to those more far-flung places conquered in the nineteenth century; it largely lost its native language comparatively early, complicating discussions of linguistic "creolization" as a subaltern resistance strategy; and, perhaps most importantly, despite the frequent use of the term "Irish" to signify "non-white," the bodies of Irish natives were white-skinned, and thus capable of a degree of assimilation over time.

Because of all these issues, the notion of "hybridity" is perhaps the most useful term in understanding modernizing Irish society. Homi K. Bhabha describes the function of hybridity in creating a liminal "third space" of transformative possibilities:

> Terms of cultural engagement, whether antagonistic or affiliative, are produced performatively. . . . The social articulation of difference, from the minority perspective, is a complex, on-going negotiation that seeks to authorize cultural hybridities that emerge in moments of historical transformation. ("Introduction: Locations of Culture" 2)

Bhabha's emphasis on performativity makes his work even more obviously attractive in analyzing postcolonial drama, even though his own focus is upon literature on the page. Performance and hybridity remind us that even the resistant myths and discourses employed by revolutionary nationalists can be potentially damaging in their hegemony:

> It is only when we understand that all cultural statements and systems are constructed in this contradictory and ambivalent space of enunciation, that we begin to understand why hierarchical claims to the inherent originality or 'pur ity' of cultures are untenable, even before we resort to empirical historical instances that demonstrate their hybridity. ("The Commitment to Theory" 37)

This reminder of the ambivalence of cultural narratives is appropriate not only when analyzing Irish history, but in relation to the field of Irish historiography itself, which has seen politically charged debates over "revisionist" histories and their nationalist politics (or lack thereof). One caveat: while Bhabha primarily employs the concept of hybridity in pursuit of recuperating minority discourses, with a multivalent/multivocal politics, my project here is more generally

concerned with the mainstream, and with what came to be dominant cultural tropes. I view this narrative as an intervention, however, into the current commonplace understanding of the Free State as a culture of decay and betrayal of earlier ideals; thus ambivalence is crucial to this story and its import.

In the field of postcolonial theory, Bhabha is not alone in his interest in the relationships between culture and history. One of the key figures of the field, Amilcar Cabral, wrote of the crucial relationships between culture and history, "Whatever may be the ideology or idealist characteristics of cultural expression, culture is an essential element of the history of a people." He saw a "reciprocal relationship between history and culture to a point that both categories become hardly distinguishable" (qtd. in Amuta 160). Frantz Fanon was similarly concerned, in *The Wretched of the Earth,* with the role of culture in the definition and liberation of nations, defining a national culture as "the whole body of efforts made by a people in the sphere of thought to describe, justify, and praise the action through which that people has created itself and keeps itself in existence" (233).

As I will discuss further in Chapter Two, the Irish Studies field's implication in ongoing negotiations of postcolonial Irish identity often leads to a focus upon defining categories of "Irishness" and the assignment of writers, artists and the like to those categories. One example is the continued debates over and attempted reclamations of the works of such writers as Samuel Beckett and Oscar Wilde (debates which in themselves constitute resistance strategies, part of a Fanon-ian "body of efforts"). A similar concern with authenticity and the native was certainly evident in Irish politics and arts during the early independence period, as definitions of the terms underwent significant revisions. Yet, as Benedict Anderson writes in *Imagined Communities*:

"Communities are to be distinguished, not by their falsity/genuineness, but by the style in which they are imagined" (6). Thus my concern is less with evaluating works as "authentically" Irish or not than with identifying the imagined Irelands from which they were born and helped to give birth. For my purposes, "Irish" theatre in this dissertation constitutes theatre produced within the Irish island (north as well as south). For the most part I am concerned with work by Irish authors, since its creation is generally the most organically connected to discourses of Irish identity; this is not to say, however, that others are not relevant (and indeed, the hybridity of the Irish nation has sometimes made determining "Irishness" so difficult as to be almost pointless, seen for example in the case of Irish-English theatre practitioner Micheál Mac Liammóir, discussed in Chapter Three).

D: Theories of modernism

Another major theoretical concern of this dissertation is the impact (or lack thereof) of modernism, especially theatrical movements such as Expressionism, in the Irish setting. One of the things that is initially most intriguing about this period is the fact that while the drama of most Western nations was characterized by modernist experiments in style and technique, from the work of the United States' O'Neill to that of Italy's Pirandello, the Irish canon has very little that is comparable. The one Irish playwright of this period now universally admitted to the international pantheon of greatness is Sean O'Casey. While O'Casey's late work was often distinctively modernist, his most famous (and most obviously Irish) plays, the three 1920s works upon which his reputation was made, partake essentially of the realist tradition, displaying few experimental tendencies. If we take up certain of Malcolm Bradbury and James McFarlane's broadest definitions for modernism, that of an individualistic search for style in an age that has

no determined style, or of exhibiting a sense of a radical break with the past, it quickly becomes clear that the vast majority of modern drama in Ireland has not been modernist (19-29).

In the 1920s, Irish theatre was not only thoroughly connected to past traditions, but also was dominated by one style: realism. As D. E. S. Maxwell writes: "Yeats aside, the work of Irish dramatists just before and for most of the 1920s shows no trace of the messianic attack upon the orthodoxies of stage form popular in Europe and America, where expressionism was the *avant-garde* fashion" (*Critical History* 89). Maxwell goes on to describe a conservative culture, in which the term "expressionist" was often used to describe any type of non-traditional drama:

> In its heyday . . . expressionism made no impact on Irish drama, though Lennox Robinson, as already remarked, in mid-career and past expressionism's prime, tinkered with it. Apart from the towering figure of James Joyce, who anyway, in a sense, never left Dublin, and Yeats's intellectual excursions, the Irish imagination, especially in theatre, lived with its creative insularity. . . . The Abbey had never done much to invade that insularity. (91)

The images of Ireland circulated by plays by Irish dramatists (and other plays that found favor in Ireland) were not necessarily uniform, but the manner in which they were presented was. Any contests over the meaning of "Ireland" found in the drama took place through content, rather than stylistic or formal experimentation. The drama of the early Free State was not realist in the sense of probing for psychological insight, but realist in its general adherence to simple dramatic conventions such as "well-made play" construction, largely continuing a nineteenth-century dramatic tradition of emphasizing entertainment. This crowd-pleasing form was often

melodramatic in nature. As my analyses of audience response to theatrical productions will show, even some plays we now consider modernist succeeded in production only insofar as they appealed to the Victorian preferences of audiences.

This is not to say that there was no modernist thought in Ireland during this period. In fact, the lack of modernist drama initially seems even more perplexing in the light of the fact that Ireland helped give the world the monumental novels of James Joyce, the groundbreaking poems of W. B. Yeats, and the intricate fiction of the local genius Flann O'Brien (pseudonym of Brian O'Nolan). Terence Brown points out that 1922 was not only the year of the founding of the Free State but also the year of publication of *Ulysses* and *The Waste Land*, "a coincidence of chronology that ought to have stimulated more reflection than it has" ("Ireland, Modernism" 24). Both Terry Eagleton and Frederic Jameson, in their essay contributions to the Field Day project, use Joyce, and especially *Ulysses*, as the singular, perfect exemplars of their arguments about modernism and the unique postcolonial situation in Ireland. In Irish theatrical circles, however, there was some curiosity about modernist developments in the arts, but no outpouring of new styles and experimental writing like that which occurred on the European continent. One reason for this was the Irish theatre's close relationship to, even dependence upon, British (and to a lesser extent American) popular entertainment forms. Another may have been the Irish drama's role as the written expression of a communal art form, which possibly made it less likely to focus upon the individual exploration of consciousness that characterizes modernist texts. This degree of difference between Irish drama and other forms of writing could actually be evidence for the vitality of theatre's relationship with the changing society.

Even aside from the definition of modernism, the question of labelling "Irishness" in many writers is vexed; for example, one obvious issue lies in the fact that Joyce, although inspired by Ireland, had left Irish soil and the constraints of Irish society behind him when he produced his greatest works. One complex point of view is that of John Wilson Foster, who in his reconsideration of the nature of modernism and the Irish Literary Revival "stress[es] Joyce's realism and naturalism, his laureateship of O'Connellite Ireland" ("Irish Modernism" 57). Another question is the extent to which Yeats – naturally one of the central figures of this dissertation – can truly be considered a modernist playwright. He was one of the few Irish dramatists of the period to experiment seriously with style and technique. Automatically stamping Yeats's work with a modernist label is problematic, however, especially when it comes to the theatrical efforts that were so close to his heart. Critics struggle with the problem; for example, Debra Journet writes in her essay "Yeats's Quarrel with Modernism," 'Yeats himself "deliberately" severed his work from the tradition, not only because the writer retained a social consciousness and desire for "conceptual intelligibility" (53), but also, in her opinion, for reasons of national identity, because "he was always conscious of being Irish and, despite its French roots, Modernism is Anglo-American" (46). On the other hand, Christopher Murray paints Yeats the playwright as a modernist in technique, despite being retrograde in subject, in contrast to a Free State society that, despite embracing many of the trappings of modern life, refused to admit cutting-edge belief systems. Murray's argument in *Twentieth-Century Irish Drama: Mirror up to Nation* illustrates the fact that even defining the "modern," "modernism" and "modernity" in postcolonial Ireland is difficult:

> Yeats was keen to do something to meet the competition being so stylishly offered by MacLiammoir and Edwards at the Gate Theatre. His own new plays, accordingly, were provocative and experimental. Ireland had opted for modernity**,** and this was something Yeats could not forgive. (29)

This quote also points to the fact that part of the critical disagreement over Yeats's modernist status is due to the substantial length of his career, the variety contained within it, and his changing cultural affiliations; one interpretation was that of Pound and Eliot, who suggested that Yeats became a modernist after Irish nationalists disavowed his right to membership in their movement. Inarguably, Yeats's playwriting styles were diverse. This dissertation looks at varying plays that can be called modernist, including Absurdist experiment and the more intimate Japanese-influenced work, and finds that none of these attempts struck a chord with the mainstream of Irish culture.

Finally, a basic answer to the question of Ireland's lack of modernist drama can be found in the nature of postcolonial culture and the nature of the theatre itself. Debra Journet notes:

> Modernism is often distinguished from the Victorian realism which preceded it by the twentieth century's greater emphasis on subjective experience. . . . That the Modernist writer has shifted attention from the world of social experience to the world of human consciousness is a generalization often made about Modernist literature. (43-4)

In this generalization we can find the root of the answer to the question of why Ireland fostered little modernist drama. The simple fact was that Ireland was too much concerned with defining itself as a nation, a state, and a culture to afford much prominence to individualistic or

cosmopolitan discourse. Terry Eagleton describes a causal relationship between Irish exceptionalism and literary aesthetics, writing that in Ireland, "the aesthetic tends to emerge as . . . expressive of the lived specificity of a unique people in the teeth of that abstract universalism that is taken to be the very mark of modernity" ("Nationalism, Irony, and Commitment," 33). As long as establishing the uniqueness of an Irish people was paramount, the theatre, an inherently more collaborative art form than the novel, could not help but be engaged with and implicated in social concerns.

This conjunction – and disjunction – of postcolonialism and modernism in Ireland is at the heart of this dissertation. Successfully describing this clash of forces requires defining what "modern" meant to cultural producers and receivers at the time: my research suggests that predominant discourses equated "modern" with "foreign," and thus a cosmopolitan culture was to be avoided if the decolonizing project was to succeed. Essentially, modernism clashed with Ireland's postcoloniality in this time period, and the demands of postcoloniality won. For the Irish island and its internally conflicted society, the international upheaval of World War One had primarily domestic repercussions, filtered through the local violence of the Easter Rising, War for Independence, and Civil War. Thus, Irish culture makers and producers remained primarily influenced by the nationalist struggle; even when that influence resulted in turning *away* from conflict, it still meant a pull toward singular meanings and stabilization, in contrast to European modernists' sense of societal fracture and destabilization of certainty. A state was created; stylistically innovative and provocative cultural artifacts were not. As theatre participated in the processes of cultural and social stabilization, Ireland failed to produce formally experimental plays in this period. The majority of Irish theatremakers looked

geographically inward and chronologically backward in response to the technological and psychological onslaughts of modernity.

Theatre practitioners were not alone in these tendencies. S. B. Kennedy writes in the introduction to *Irish Art and Modernism 1880-1950*:

> That Modernism did not have a more immediate appeal in Ireland is surprising for it was the art of a rapidly changing world which saw many of the social characteristics of the preceding age disappear and one would imagine that this momentum might have been seized upon by the architects of revolutionary Ireland. But perhaps the ambiguity inherent in its pluralism was too unsettling for them. . . . Moreover, and again surprisingly for the times, unlike their contemporaries elsewhere, Irish artists never saw Modernism as an expression of a socialist utopia; in Ireland the debate surrounding it was smothered by the quest for national identity. (3)

Not all cultural critics agree with this point of view, however – particularly those who have a desire to valorize Irish culture.

Going beyond Kennedy's position that modernism *should* have appealed in Ireland but did not, literary scholar Declan Kiberd argues a stronger case for the presence of Irish modernism amongst the literary. For Kiberd, in a sentiment he descries in James Joyce, "to be Irish was to be modern anyway" (*Inventing Irelands* 267). Kiberd's succinct description of the Free State conservatism that led to so many writers' relocation to more art-friendly countries is compelling. I believe he goes too far, however, when he implies that these émigrés embodied the quintessence of what it means to be Irish. So Irish were they, to Kiberd, that their opposites –

the politicians whose policies encouraged the artists' departures – cannot even be granted the name of Irishness. In this construction, since Irishness and modernity are synonymous, the governors of the Irish Free State were not, by extension of Irish: "It was the politicians who, in cleaving to tired, inherited forms, failed to be modern and so ceased being Irish in any meaningful sense" (267). Yet the politicians were not alone; most Irish plays during this period certainly adhered to the "inherited form" of the realistic style. Does this mean that they were devoid of meaning in their country?

In an unpublished lecture given at the Royal Dublin Society Showgrounds on 27 February 2002, Kiberd refined his earlier equation of Irish modernism with "formlessness," suggesting that it was after all possible for artist and writers to use "tired, inherited forms" and yet be modern (and thus genuinely Irish) if they combined the old forms with "radical" new content. Or, conversely, an Irish modernist could use "radical" new forms with "old" content, such as Joyce's reworking of Greek epic into *Ulysses*. While I share Kiberd's fascination with the disjunctions in form, style and content seen in Irish works of the modern era, I do not share his apparent desire to identify great Irish modernism. Kiberd's argument does make a forceful counterpart to those literary nationalisms that would present a romanticized version of the Irish past as the exemplar of "Irishness." In its own way, however, it is also a romanticization.

In the same talk, Kiberd also suggested that the literary movement commonly known as the "Irish Revival," might better be called "Irish modernism," or alternately as the "Irish Renaissance," an argument I find perplexing on both semantic and philosophic levels. There may well be, however, room to arrive at a more exact definition of Irish modernism. To my mind a more accurate term for what Kiberd describes might be "partial modernism," inasmuch as

it was deeply tied to a sense of the past (hence "Renaissance"), in contrast to the European form, which more often included radical change in both style and content and a radical rejection of the past. In addition, if we are to search for a particularly Irish variety of modernism I would not necessarily exclude politicians from the arena. After all, what the politicians were after was, in many ways, a radical new state – bolstered by tradition. In the same vein, even the "tired, inherited form" of realist drama was not without vital power. Critics lose sight of the productive aspects of this actually-existing Irish modernity when they valorize the few conventionally modernist Irish writers as exemplifying an ideal Irishness.

III

Dissertation project

A: Selection and scope

When I embarked upon this project, it was with the idea that it would be neatly organized around the three most commonly critically-praised theatre groups of the time: the Abbey Theatre, the Dublin Drama League, and the Dublin Gate Theatre. In these three groups, I thought, might be found the crux of an interesting dynamic tension between conservative realist and experimental modernist modes in Irish drama. This is indeed the case. In conducting my research, however, I found that the theatrical culture of the war and early Free State period was too complex and too rich to be thoroughly described through such simple divisions. In the research process, one of my new guiding questions expanded from "what is significant?" to "what is popular?", bearing in mind that the assignment of significance varies, depending upon the historical contingency of the observer. Certainly, popularity does not always imply significance – the question of what works do *not* find an audience is a crucial one – but I have found that the inclusion of popular works, however lowbrow, is essential when the project is an analysis of theatre's relation to broad societal issues. Thus, in an attempt to provide an analysis of theatrical culture that is as thorough as possible, I attempt to touch upon most of the major Irish theatre companies of the period, including theatrical organizations in regional centers like Cork, Limerick, Galway, and Belfast as well as Dublin. The Abbey is always important, however, especially considering its deep relationships with the particular entity that became the Irish Free State, an object of fascination for me.

What this is *not* is an analysis of literary greatness. It has more in common with sociologist Wendy Griswold's study of dramatic genre and society, *Renaissance Revivals: City Comedy and Revenge Tragedy in the London Theater, 1576-1980*, of which Vera Zolberg notes:

> Griswold's sociological imagination evokes a richness of insight on the basis of solid and careful discipline. What makes her study unconventional from a humanistic standpoint is that her subject is these genres, not from the perspective of "the great work," but as plays that have appealed to audiences at different moments. Even though her sample includes some of the best playwrights of the period (Ben Jonson, Christopher Marlowe, John Webster), it is not their aura of greatness that is central, but the (partly accidental) fact of the plays' survival and their impact and social use that count. (58)

In a similar vein, I have selected for analysis a variety of theatrical productions and events, most of which appealed to the public, but some that did not; some of which were assigned a high cultural value, but some that did not; yet all of which, I believe, have something to say about the cultures of the nascent states of the Irish island. I acknowledge, certainly, that other productions and moments might yield conflicting evidence or alternatively nuanced observations; ambivalence and fluctuation are, after all, intrinsic to both theatrical performance and historical development. I believe, however, that the preponderance of the evidence from the period points toward the argument I am concerned with in this dissertation, and I use a range of performative moments in support of that argument.

B: Chapter outline

In Chapter Two, "War, Escapism, and the Nostalgic Nation, 1919-1922," I focus upon the theatrical culture of the turbulent years leading up to the founding of the Irish Free State. The consequence of World War I, the Easter Rising, and the Anglo-Irish War on the business of theatre in Ireland was an explosion of native popular entertainment that participated in escapist, domestic and fantastic discourses. The chapter examines a successful melodrama with music, *Kathleen Mavourneen*, in depth, considering the ideology of nationalist working-class and mainstream entertainments in comparison to the better-known Abbey style. The chapter also discusses the formation of the Dublin Drama League, an exclusive, deliberately modernist attempt at encouraging "European" thought in Ireland. Furthering the analysis of Irish modernism is a reading of Yeats's *The Player Queen*, one of the few experimental productions to meet with a reasonable degree of popular success at the Abbey. Finally, the chapter discusses two organizations that were dying out in this period: the British Empire Shakespeare Society, Dublin Branch (inferences drawn from the group's name are probably not far off the mark), and the Ulster Literary Theatre (a Belfast group with a rational nationalist perspective that became less popular and less relevant as violence escalated in the North). The chapter ends with the ratification of the Peace Treaty that established the Irish Free State and precipitated the Irish Civil War.

Chapter Three, "Cultural Stabilization and the Triumph of Realism, 1922-1928," analyzes the cultural impact of the Civil War, the violent conflict between two strains of Irish nationalism. A major topic of the chapter is the rise of the "Abbey comedy," a type of domestic play that would come to dominate the national theatre for decades. As a case study of this

theatrical formation, I examine the 1922 George Shiels play *Paul Twyning*, arguing that it expressed a collective longing for security. The narrative takes up the 1925 government subsidy to the Abbey, analyzing the connections between the theatre and the new state as a function of their involvement in the same cultural discourses, with particular consideration of the role of international reputation in the temporally postcolonial society. As Irish politics stabilized in the mid-1920s, the supremacy of the realistic dramatic style, expressing conservative national politics, was cemented. The departure from Ireland of the one period dramatist heralded as a genius, Sean O'Casey, is evidence of the theatrical world's inability to accommodate modernist style. I discuss both the riots over the premiere of *The Plough and the Stars* and the Abbey's rejection of *The Silver Tassie* as modes of censorship that (to use the term of theorists David Cairns and Shaun Richards) contra-dict, or speak against, minority voices, exemplifying the power of the conservative Catholic-nationalist postcolonial discourse in the Free State.

In Chapter Four, "The Stable Culture and Modernist Marginalia, 1929-1932," I turn once again to theatre beyond the Abbey. A major focus is *Diarmuid agus Gráinne*, the first production (1928) of the Irish-language theatre in Galway that was founded as a project of the Free State minister for culture and financially supported by the state. Considering the role of the native language and mythic stories in the postcolonial nation, I argue that in this pragmatic Free State era mythic tales had lost whatever discursive power they possessed in earlier decades, while the language served some useful political ends, even if it did not fulfill the all of the claims made for it. This discussion of the Taibdhearc na Gaillimhe theatre connects, via its founders, to their second groundbreaking theatrical project, the intentionally cosmopolitan Gate Theatre in Dublin. Through thick descriptions of two landmark productions by the Gate, its first – Ibsen's

Peer Gynt – and its most heralded – the premiere of Denis Johnston's modernist satire of Irish nationalism, *The Old Lady Says "No!"* – I argue that the limited success of the Gate Theatre ultimately points to the conservative stabilization of a society which could now accommodate a certain degree of niche experimentation, rather than indicating any substantial cultural urge toward Irish modernism. My extended discussion of censorship also highlights stabilization. In debates over the 1929 Censorship of Publications Act, there was no mention of drama or theatre (as there had been none with the 1923 Censorship of Films Act), pointing once again to theatre's symbiotic relationship with the state. I will show that instead, following upon the populist Abbey censorship described earlier, informal censorship was carried out by the Irish people themselves, seen most dramatically in protests over the work of Sean O'Casey in Limerick. That city was characterized not only by a blend of nationalism, social conservatism, and poverty, but also by growing demand for a particular variety of theatrical performance (and rejection of varieties considered antithetical to the way of life of Limerick's people).

This dissertation's narrative closes in 1932. In that year, Eamon de Valera, whose name was to become synonymous with conservative Irish Catholic culture, assumed the highest post in Free State government. Emphasizing the idea of an Ireland which relied on its own resources, culturally and practically, de Valera led his economically impoverished nation into becoming a republic in all but name. With this stable, democratic transition of governance, the new Ireland moved beyond infancy as a state. In my conclusion I suggest that the seeds for these developments were clearly sown in the decolonizing processes described earlier, and that rather than dismissing the cultural life of the Irish Free State as sterile, critics should interrogate its function in helping to produce a nation-state that has now withstood the tests of several decades.

My own method of doing so is to look closely at theatre. I contend throughout this dissertation that the Irish theatre, through its circulation of discourses that were both reflective and influential, played a role not only in the imagination of the nation, but in the creation and stabilization of the first modern Irish state. My work focuses on a period of transition, as a nation with incomplete independence worked to perform itself in its own eyes and those of the world. But further work on theatre in the period after 1932 may find more powerfully stabilizing images, styles, and culture, as "Ireland" negotiated an identity that could support a truly independent political form. While I investigate theatre as one aspect of culture, similar work could be done with other cultural manifestations in relation to other arenas in Irish history (art and music being ready examples). In addition, I believe that cultural history of this nature could be successfully pursued not only in Irish studies, but also beyond the boundaries of Ireland into any field where politics, art, and national culture are intimately connected.

Chapter Two

War, Escapism, and the Nostalgic Nation, 1919-1922

I

Stages of history: the revolutionary culture

Irish life was dominated by armed conflict in the years immediately preceding and following 1920: World War One and the Anglo-Irish War (or Irish War for Independence), shortly followed by the latter's aftermath, the Irish Civil War. During this time of turmoil, while the course of national history was in doubt, the circulation of ideas about Irishness through cultural discourses played a powerful role in determining what tale the narrative of history would eventually tell. Eventual effects of the wars included both an increase in patriotism and a widespread aversion to violence, two themes that found common ground in a middle-of-the-road cultural formation of moderate nationalism. This postcolonial cultural formation would itself help to create the Irish Free State.

In the theatre, the development of violent Irish nationalism corresponded with a rise in realistic comedy, domesticity, fantasy, and light entertainment. The cultural needs that influenced these trends meant that Ireland saw little of the modernist experimentation that dominated European stages at this time, and some of those modernist productions that did find audiences did so precisely because they spoke to the same needs as more retrograde entertainments. Thus, the mainstream of escapism and this side current of modernism both found accommodation in the realism-dominated imaginary of the developing Irish Free State. In this chapter, I will discuss the germination of the powerful realist tropes of Free State theatrical

culture in the volatile, shifting war years. First is an examination of popular mainstream entertainments, with an in-depth look at the Queen's Theatre's *Kathleen Mavourneen*, a musical melodrama that displays a vision of the nation grounded in domesticity, nostalgia, and a safe variety of independence. The changing nature of the culture is seen in the struggles of fringe groups like the British Empire Shakespeare Society and the Ulster Theatre, while the most successful of Dublin's serious theatres, the Abbey, struggled to find a viable practical and artistic path during these difficult times. Even a production that seemed to present a more modern alternative to the growing dominance of realism at the Abbey, William Butler Yeats's *The Player Queen*, reveals on inspection that it owed its limited success to satisfying audiences' needs in ways that were not so far removed from the comparatively lowbrow *Kathleen Mavourneen*. The escapist discourse that underlay these theatrical events was in direct contrast to the dramatic events of public life (and would help to influence the less-dramatic politics of years to come).

Indeed, the events of history during this period were often themselves highly performative, with powerful effects upon members of the public who occupied the position of "audience." Nicholas Grene offers this assessment of the 1916 Easter Rising: "It was an event planned with conscious theatricality, and if the initial Dublin audience reaction was derisive within years it grew to be regarded by Irish nationalists as the great drama which Pearse and the other leaders had planned it to be" (*Politics* 136). Although the Easter Rising is the great event of the 1910s in Irish historiography, it would be a mistake to underestimate the effects of World War One on Irish culture. In the theatre, for example, the practical impact of World War One meant considerable changes in the nature of performances presented. In a more theoretical

sense, the tangled events of Irish history during this period meant that the effects of the war on the arts were very specific to Ireland, and profoundly different than those commonly associated with European modernism.

In the broader context, the majority of the Irish public sympathized with the Allies in the war's early days, due to the traditionally greater bonds between Ireland, Britain and her allies than between Ireland and the Axis powers. Admittedly, some, such as Roger Casement, took the patriotic view that England's difficulty was Ireland's opportunity, and attempted to weaken links to Britain by creating connections with Germany (Casement was executed in 1916 for obtaining arms from Germany on behalf of Clan na Gael nationalists). Many young Irishmen viewed the war in a practical light, however, choosing soldiering as an occupation when other options were few and thus increasing popular support for the efforts of Britain's armies. Public perceptions of the war would change when the question of enforced military enlistment arose.

In 1918, Prime Minister David Lloyd George authorized the conscription of Irishmen into the British army, following the failure of a convention to provide any solution to the politically vexing "Irish question" as well as the death of Irish parliamentary party leader John Redmond. In response to the conscription bill (and efforts to tie conscription to the enactment of the Home Rule Bill that had been passed, then suspended, in 1914) new leader John Dillon led the Irish party out of the House of Commons. This walkout, one of two greatly symbolic parliamentary walkouts that would have a marked effect on Irish society in a four-year period, created a momentary alliance between Home Rulers (the more moderate Irish leaders who had participated in the British parliament) and Irish republicans – and new distance from British politicians. Thus, even though Irish conscription was never actually enforced, World War One had a direct

effect upon the future success of Irish republicanism by enlarging the sense of difference and distance between the British and Irish populations. This political alienation, when added to the anti-British feeling created by the execution of fifteen of the Irish rebels who had taken over Dublin in Easter Week, 1916, brought the idea of an independent Ireland closer to reality.

When World War One came to its official end late in 1918, Irish nationalists of all stripes saw the end of the war, and the ensuing Peace Conference, as a promising opportunity for national self-determination. The Irish public endorsed seizing the moment for independence, shifting their electoral support from the moderate nationalism of the previously dominant Home Rulers, to the more determined republicanism of the Sinn Fein party. In December's general election, Sinn Fein recorded a resounding victory over the National (Home Rule) party, with 485,105 votes to 237,393. Historians attribute this victory to a variety of factors, including growing approval of the Easter Rising (events for which Sinn Fein was given credit), public anger over the conscription crisis, the fact that many soldiers were unable to vote, possible Home Rule abstention, and an enlarged electorate that contained more young and poor people than before, as well as, for the first time, women (over the age of 30). Regardless of the reasons, the results of this democratic action changed the course of Irish history: the elected representatives of Sinn Fein refused to take their seats in the British parliament, establishing instead an independent Irish parliament, Dáil Éireann, and prepared for violent change. The years from 1919 to 1922 would prove to be critical in the history of Ireland.

These years of revolution had been preceded by decades of cultural nationalism, to which Irish theatre groups had made a significant contribution (most notably the Abbey, but also several others, as Mary Trotter points out in *Ireland's National Theaters*). Frantz Fanon

considers cultural nationalism to be the second stage of postcolonial cultural evolution, in which intellectuals romanticize the native past. Cultural nationalism precedes the final stage, revolution. While the Anglo-Irish cultural nationalists of the late nineteenth century frequently enacted the romanticization Fanon decries, they did help pave the way for an armed struggle, even if such revolutionary philosophies were not necessarily in accord with earlier cultural leaders' intents. (Witness, for example, the different uses made of Celtic myth in Douglas Hyde's cultural separatism and Padraig Pearse's martyrology.) Serious armed rebellion became a reality when, as Lawrence J. McCaffrey puts it, "Sinn Fein's passive resistance to British authority evolved into a guerrilla war of liberation" early in 1919 (Hachey, Hernon and McCaffrey 161). Enacting their patriotic beliefs, Sinn Feiners around the country commenced attacks on police officers and other buildings and individuals that represented British authority.

Although the deaths and heartaches to come were very real, the events known alternately as the "War for Independence" and "Anglo-Irish War" also often constituted a war of symbolic action. (Decades later, even applying a name to the conflict constitutes a statement; in generally using the term "Anglo-Irish War," I have followed much of the historiographic mainstream, but acknowledge John M. Regan's objection that the conflict revolution was "primarily fought by Irishmen between Irishmen," and "was in large measure a civil war" (xv). Regan prefers the term "revolution," which he sees as followed by a political "counter-revolution" that provided political stability.) Symbolism was also important in the reaction to the executions of the Easter 1916 rebels, which eventually horrified an initially ambivalent Irish public and brought republicans unprecedented levels of sympathy. The rising tide of Irish patriotism, and its twinning with religious spirit, was seen not only in violent acts but also in performative public

demonstrations like nationalist parades held in Cork on St. Patrick's Day and May Day 1919. Performance theorist and theatre historian Joseph Roach quotes K. Kia Bunseki Fu-Kiau, scholar of African cosmology: "Festivals are a way of bringing about change. . . . Parades alter truth" (285; from Nunley and Bettelheim 23). In events like the Cork parades and their influence upon public opinion we can see the intersection of performance and history.

Other events with performative aspects took place when, in the lack of a traditional occupying army in the early days of the Anglo-Irish War, Irish rebels killed policemen – the only accessible representatives of imperialist might. The rising death toll demonstrated the rebels' severity of purpose. Some of those who were killed were neighbors of Sinn Feiners, rather than outsiders, but their employment was read as demarcation of political belief, surpassing other social categories. The uniforms worn by the men who became the rebels' victims were more important signifiers than the accents or religions of the men who wore those uniforms. Thus, the violent acts were performances in the sense that rather than being truly concerned with the beliefs of the victims in such cases, the killers were most concerned with the effects of the killing spectacle. There was a broadly construed audience for each of these actions: Britain, British politicians, and, to a large extent, the ordinary Irish people who might have sat on the fence in less pressing circumstances. To these republicans, the uniform or social role became more important than the body or selfhood of the victim – but human bodies and lives were indeed destroyed. Although casualty estimates vary widely, Robert Kee's mention of the "loss of some 1500 lives" (139) is reasonable; R.F. Foster suggests that on the British side, this figure would include "160 soldiers [and] 400 policemen" (*Modern Ireland* 497). All parties agree that a substantial number of those killed were civilians.

Thus, while the assassinations proved the rebels' serious intentions, they also turned many Irish people against Sinn Fein, including most of the clerical hierarchy as well as numerous others for whom fear of violence was the most significant factor in determining present loyalties. Counteracting this sentiment, however, was the British government's reaction, which labeled the republicans criminals rather than soldiers and thus hardened British resolution, leading to repressive policies. The British policy led the Irish public to blame the British government for the conflict, for Britain was viewed as the entity possessing the power to ameliorate rather than escalate what was rapidly becoming a war.

The Anglo-Irish War, generally considered to have begun in January 1919, was at first primarily a guerrilla conflict. As the alternative Irish government began to gain control over local law and order and courts in 1920, the British government increased its forces in the country in the form of newly recruited reinforcements known as Auxiliaries and Black and Tans. In 1921, the fighting became far more deadly. Introduction of ever-greater numbers of British soldiers and irregulars provided more targets for the growing republican army, and the violence continued to escalate. As death came close to home more and more often, the republican sentiments that had swept Sinn Fein into office were, on the one hand, bolstered by disgust for the actions by British forces, but were also, on the other hand, tempered by popular longings for peace, safety, and familiarity. These desires would be manifested in theatrical entertainments that presented images of an orderly, rather than radical, independent nation. The few groups that spoke from points outside the mainstream discourse proved to be marginal at best; both European modernism and elite Anglo-Irish performance types struggled to find substantial audiences when the nation's fate was the primary cultural concern.

II

The theatrical mainstream

A: Escaping drama

In the midst of this violence and political uncertainty, theatrical performance thrived. The populace had flocked to Dublin's theatres throughout World War One, supporting a wide variety of productions both low- and highbrow. As Robert Hogan and Richard Burnham write in *The Art of the Amateur, 1916-1920,* the fifth volume of *The Modern Irish Drama,* "as horror waxed, so also did fun." They go on to note, "most of what was done was trivial, ephemeral and vulgar – and yet there was such an incredible amount of it" (7). The question for the theatre historian thus becomes *why* theatre in Ireland was so vibrant during this period, especially considering that it was faced with substantial practical difficulties. What were audiences drawn to? What did they gain from theatrical performance, and what did theatrical performance thus contribute to Irish life? One obvious answer is the use of entertainment as a way to escape from grim realities, but if obvious, escapism is not necessarily simple. As Bruce McConachie writes in his study of nineteenth-century American melodrama, "we need to understand . . . what [audiences] escaped to, and what impact this . . . may have had on their lives" (x). Escapism was not the only need influencing Irish theatre audiences during the Anglo-Irish War, but it was an enormously powerful one. Mainstream performance practice participated in escapism and fantasy throughout these turbulent years, presenting visions of an imagined Ireland that was familiar, familial, domestic, orderly, land-based, and unitary in class, religion, and nationality.

Dublin's major professional theatres at this time were the Gaiety, Royal, Empire, Tivoli, Queen's, and Abbey. The story of the Abbey Theatre, especially its early development from the

Irish National Theatre Society/Irish Literary Theatre, has been thoroughly documented (see, among others, books by Adrian Frazier, Ann Saddlemyer, and Peter Kavanagh, and the writings of Abbey directors such as Augusta Gregory and Lennox Robinson). By the teens, the Abbey's international reputation as the home of original Irish drama was secure. Nonetheless, although the Abbey was Dublin's only serious professional "art" theatre, its financial situation was continually precarious. In contrast, Dublin was able to support several theatrical venues that functioned primarily as homes for "trivial, ephemeral and vulgar" variety acts and pantomime. Among these, the Queen's Theatre stands out for having more frequently presented Irish-themed and Irish-produced shows. The Royal was known as slightly more expensive than its competitors, and thus drew a slightly higher-class clientele.

Even before the inception of full hostilities in the Anglo-Irish War, Dublin theatres had proven their drawing power. The influenza epidemic of 1918 could not keep audiences away (theatres frequently advertised the means by which they were disinfected in order to draw patrons frightened of contagion). Indeed, a proposal was floated in October 1918 to build Dublin's most elaborate theatre yet: La Scala. At the 10 October hearing to obtain patent permission for the theatre, a lawyer for the applicants argued:

> All competition was destroyed by the amalgamation of the Gaiety and the Royal. The Gaiety Theatre turned away money constantly, and queues had to be established outside the booking offices at Cramer's when anything attractive was announced. It was absurd that Dublin should have only one theatre, and that the proprietors of that theatre could throttle opposition and say – "No more shall you have." ("The Drama in Dublin," *Irish Times* 10 Oct. 1918, 4)

La Scala, which eventually opened in August 1920 (replacing the Coliseum Theatre, which had been destroyed in the 1916 Rising), was ultimately used primarily for cinema, as some detractors had feared. The fact that a theatre seating more than 3000 persons was seen as an economically viable proposition during these unsettled years, however, testifies to the essential role of theatrical entertainment in providing imaginative outlets for Dubliners. The *Irish Times*, paraphrasing further comments from the patent hearing, had gone on: "One of the strange results of the war had been to develop local talent in Dublin to an extent not known since the Act of Union [1800]. Under the existing system these people could find no outlet for their talent" (4). This comment highlights an important factor in the future development of Irish theatre: the significant growth in Irish-made theatre during World War One.

Until 1914, the large majority of professional theatre in Ireland had been presented by touring English companies. World War One, however, brought a significant change in this custom, as the practical and psychological difficulties of war meant that fewer touring companies were willing or able to cross the Irish Sea. As a result, Irish companies like those of Ira Allen and P. J. Bourke claimed more performance time, and a more professional status, than they ever had before. To say that Dublin commercial theatre suddenly became distinctively "Irish" rather than "English" would be an exaggeration, however, since most of what was presented continued more or less along the same lines of commercially palatable entertainment. In style, certainly, Irish theatremakers had adopted the traditions of British theatre as their own, retaining realistic styles into the twentieth century while ignoring more experimental continental types. Culturally, Ireland seemed to identify modernism as more dangerously "Other" than even those familiar types that smacked of the colonial metropole. Thus, traditional lighthearted English shows that

did make it to Ireland during the war and post-war period, such as the Gaiety Theatre's 1920 Christmas pantomime, still did very well; the "Irishman's Diary" column in *The Irish Statesman* complained that the show, *Old King Cole,* was so popular that "all the parts of the house which can be booked in advance are labeled FULL, and the cheaper parts are guarded by long *queues*" ("Tau," 17 Jan. 1920, 55). Irish theatregoers in search of amusement were not put off by the fact that this show, as Eimar O'Duffy later protested in the *Statesman*, displayed a distinctively English style (14 Feb. 1920). The ambiguous politics of the period were also exemplified by entertainments like the "Our Day" benefit matinee at the Gaiety on 17 October 1919, featuring the local Curragh Players in *Cook* "under patronage of the Lord Lieutenant" as part of a large Red Cross fundraiser, and by December's "Victory Pantomime" *Boy Blue*. Political issues of native-made and foreign performance were not clear-cut, but the exigencies of the war years meant that there were changes in Irish theatre, not only in the accents of the performers, but also in some of the fare that was presented. Irish theatrical culture would see lasting effects from this stimulus to the native industry.

B: The mainstream in-depth: *Kathleen Mavourneen*

By 1920, many of the touring companies that had stayed away from Ireland in the teens returned to Dublin stages, finding solid profits in a city where residents longed for entertainment, even when finding entertainment meant traversing increasingly risky streets. Despite the return of British groups, however, Irish companies continued to predominate at the Queen's Royal Theatre Dublin. Although many performance historians in recent times have delved into the significance of mass entertainments, in the case of Irish popular theatre such scholars are few,

and they (for example, Cheryl Herr and Stephen Watt) have often found it necessary to justify their work by demonstrating its relevance to the canonical work of the Abbey Theatre. But the Queen's is worthy of attention in and of itself (as are the Gaiety, the music and variety halls, and the many touring fit-up companies for which records are unfortunately scarce). The theatre had catered to mostly working-class lovers of melodrama at its Brunswick (now Pearse) Street home since the nineteenth century. It had prominently featured (and continued to feature) the work of Dion Boucicault and J.W. Whitbread, of which Andrew E. Malone wrote, in an early nationalist defense, that they "almost for the first time gave to Ireland a drama which had some connection with the life and thought of the people. They were poor plays, mainly melodrama of the most vivid kind, but they made history real for many thousands of people" (17).

In its twentieth-century form, the Queen's seated nearly 2,000 spectators, and tickets for the galleries were available for as little as fourpence for the production on which I focus in this section, February 1920's *Kathleen Mavourneen*. Despite the theatre's name, Irish-themed stories had already found audiences at the Queen's in years past (including many Irish patriotic plays produced by Englishman J. W. Whitbread, the theatre's manager from 1883 to 1907), and the repertoire became more and more nationally oriented through the years. As a result, various theatre historians with a love for the Queen's have made claims for its national status. Philip B. Ryan calls it "the cradle of native Irish drama" (*The Lost Theatres of Dublin* 143), and Séamus de Búrca, son of P. J. Bourke, refers to the Queen's as "the real national theatre" (Jacobsen 78). With the absence of British productions in the latter years of the First World War, this national quality reached its zenith. The Queen's was national, but it also served the same need for escapism as Dublin's other professional theatres, and escapism is a phenomenon worthy of

investigation in itself. As Bruce McConachie argues, it is not "particularly helpful to rail against melodrama for encouraging its spectators to escape from reality. . . . Rather, the question is what types of melodramatic experiences did . . . theatregoers participate in and what meanings did they construct from them" (x). As Irish republican violence began to hit closer to home, theatregoers at the Queen's, like those at the Abbey, experienced domestic fantasies of a peaceful, rural Irish existence. An in-depth examination of one popular theatrical entertainment that was produced during a typically tense week in the middle of the 1919-22 period provides specific instances of widespread sentiments favoring independence combined with moderation and restraint.

Kathleen Mavourneen, a "domestic Irish drama set to music" (playbill pictured in de Burca, *Queen's* 60) by P. J. Bourke, the impresario and actor who adapted the script from a nineteenth-century melodrama, serves as a representative example of the sort of entertainments that found large mainstream audiences during this period. Bourke was an experienced manager and playwright, specializing in melodramas with a nationalist bent; while his plays were straightforward crowd-pleasers, the advertising for one of them, 1914's *In Dark and Evil Days,* was banned by Dublin Castle as potentially inflammatory. While *Kathleen Mavourneen* is far from a great work of literature, and far from innovative in production, it is an intriguing work of culture, especially as enacted during tense times in Irish history. As mass entertainment, it appealed to a wider audience than did more sophisticated theatre, and thus reflects the tastes of a broader swathe of Irish society. It stood the test of time throughout the period of most radical change in modern Ireland's history, with presentations at the Queen's Theatre almost annually between 1910 and 1928. In addition, because it takes a hybrid form, between "straight" theatre

and musical performance, *Kathleen Mavourneen* exemplifies the unsettled definitions of performance at a time when variety entertainments mixing music, drama, vaudeville, dance, and even film, were more dominant in Ireland than was any strictly defined theatrical art. It provides an intriguing example of what McConachie calls a "theatrical formation," defined as "the mutual elaboration over time of historically specific audience groups and theatre practitioners participating in certain shared patterns of dramatic and theatrical action" (*Melodramatic Formations* x). *Kathleen Mavourneen* is one entertainment, in one particular production context, that exemplifies a larger theatrical formation by which popular entertainments contributed to the development of a stable postcolonial nation-state.

P. J. Bourke's version of *Kathleen Mavourneen* is in many respects paradigmatic of Hogan and Burnham's "vulgar" entertainments inasmuch as it appealed to a popular audience. It was not ephemeral, however, and neither were the entertainments it drew upon. Bourke took his story from a popular American play of the nineteenth century, adding songs and changing the script in key ways (to be discussed later). The American play was preceded, and possibly inspired by, a popular song by the same name, and had been adapted into films twice before 1920, increasing the story's cultural currency and the sense of familiarity that was key to the success of the stage show in wartime Ireland. Bourke's musical premiered in 1910 at Dublin's Father Mathew Hall, which frequently hosted a range of amateur and semi-professional performances. From these beginnings, *Kathleen* quickly became, as Séamus de Búrca states, "a perennial favourite" ("P.J. Bourke" 5), with one notable production at the Queen's proving a solid draw even in the uneasy autumn of 1916. (The move from the Father Mathew Hall to the

Queen's Theatre is an example of the positive effects of the war on homegrown theatre companies.)

The script of Bourke's play is not overtly political, but it is patriotic. It hints at enough nationalistic elements to validate Cheryl Herr's claim in *For the Land They Loved* that P. J. Bourke's work is "politically passionate [and] . . . socially aware" (10) even when, in the case of *Kathleen Mavourneen*, it is not explicitly concerned with the traditional events of nationalist historical narrative (as were some of Bourke's other plays). The plot of the play is not complicated. "Jacques" (real name J. J. Ryce), the critic for the *Evening Herald*, summarized it thus after a slumming visit to the Queen's in 1916: "Kathleen, the honest farmer's daughter, is wooed by the haughty young squire, Bernard, and the honest young peasant, Terence. She has a dream which lasts through four scenes of exciting episodes and in the last act wakes up" (1 Dec. 1916, 4). The "exciting episodes" of the dream proceed as follows: Kathleen chooses to marry the haughty young squire, who is moved to this unconventional choice of bride by passion. But he soon tires of his low-born wife and tries first to cast her off, then to murder her so he can find a rich wife, in a plot reminiscent of those of the Irish-American melodramatist Dion Boucicault. Terence, the honest young peasant, then kills the wicked Bernard, and unrepentant, is on the verge of execution when Kathleen suddenly awakens to find herself in actuality still unwed. Shaken by her dream, she vows to marry in her proper sphere rather than attempt to defy social convention. Terence tricks squire Bernard into setting the happy couple up with land, a farm and a home, and jokes with Kathleen about children to come. Then (conveniently for the patrons of the Queen's) it is time for the villagers to rehearse for the next day's St. Patrick's Day concert, so that the performance closes with a number of sentimentally patriotic songs and dances.

Definitions of patriotism were in question and tensions were running high in the capital when *Kathleen* opened at the Queen's for its 1920 run on Monday, 23 February. Killings of policemen and raids on homes were both becoming more frequent at the time. After three shootings in Grafton Street and Westmoreland Street the previous Friday, Dublin Castle imposed the first city-wide curfew, despite the objections of the Sinn Fein-dominated Dublin Corporation. *Kathleen*'s opening night, 23 February, was the first night of the curfew, under which no citizens were permitted on city streets after midnight. The curfew's effect on the theatres was a matter of concern for all the newspapers, but, if anything, it seemed, the tension of the curfew inspired citizens to seek crowds and entertainment to an even greater extent. The *Irish Independent* of 24 February reported that "Dublin went to its amusements last night same as ever. Full houses at all theatres. The thought of midnight worried nobody" (4). The *Irish Times* stated that audiences were actually larger than might have been expected on such a night without the curfew: "The Order seemingly had no injurious effect upon the attendance at the various Dublin theatres, for, although the early portion of the night was both foggy and cold, the audiences at the places of amusement were fully up to the average" ("Queen's Theatre" 5).

Another source of tension during this week was speculation about, and subsequent disappointment over, the introduction of the next Home Rule Bill. On 23 February, many print outlets still expressed some hopes that the bill would provide reasonable grounds from which to work for a peaceful solution to the problem of Irish sovereignty, especially as the hope for help from America and the League of Nations had not entirely died away. But when the Bill was formally presented on 25 February, it offered little in the way of Irish autonomy, leading to

widespread disgust and further anxiety over what would become of the Irish nation (see, for representative examples, the *Irish Independent* and *Evening Herald* of 26-27 February).

In this week of public unease, the programmes of the theatres and music halls (planned during the previous uncertain weeks) emphasized variety and familiarity, and these were the qualities that reviewers praised in *Kathleen Mavourneen*. The *Irish Times* reported: "Although 'Kathleen Mavourneen' is familiar to patrons of the Queen's Theatre, it did not show the slightest evidence of waning in popular favour" ("Public Amusements" 6) while the *Irish Independent*, looking for variety in its entertainments, approved of the way in which "humour and pathos" were mixed with "stirring incidents," singing, and the "dancing of the Emerald Isle Troupe" ("Before the Footlights" 6). The *Evening Telegraph*, concentrating on acting in its review, judged the performances in comparison to an ideal, or previously established, standard, deciding that "the various parts were all done justice to by the members of the company" ("This Week's Amusements" 2). Adding to the sense of stability attached to this production was the fact that several members of the cast were well known to Dublin audiences as members of J. B. Carrickford's touring company. The author-producer himself, who also starred as the Everyman hero Terence, was a familiar public presence. The costuming certainly traded upon familiar tropes; all are listed in the script as stock costumes based upon designs for characters in Dion Boucicault's melodramas.

One of the major needs of Irish audiences during the war period was predictability. The people who repeatedly crowded the Queen's for *Kathleen Mavourneen* and productions like it always already anticipated a happy ending. P.J. Bourke made the coming happy ending of his play especially clear when he added the character of a gypsy who winked at the audience as the

dream began, indicating to the audience that Kathleen's tragic dream was only a nightmare from the start. This gypsy heightens the sense of prior knowledge granted to the audience, most of whom would already have been familiar with the popular tale's outcome anyway. The genre of melodrama is itself heavily reliant upon familiar tropes, of course; indeed, the *Irish Independent* published an article in the week of the 1920 *Kathleen* production listing common recurring "bits" of popular theatre, from the actor who indicates drunkenness by smashing his face against the side of the stage as he exits to the actor who indicates advanced age by whistling through the gaps in his teeth (J.H.C., "Wheezes," 26 Feb. 1920, 4). Such moments function as a sort of code for the audience, who understand how they are supposed to react (and did so appropriately in 1916, according to Jacques, giving "cheers and hisses as the mood dictates" [4]). Bourke employed similar familiar slapstick moments, as well as dialogue in a more vernacular style than that of the American melodrama's stagy speech, testifying to the twentieth-century Irish audience's desire to slide even further into a position of comfortable spectatorship. The popular songs that Bourke inserted into the play (in the awkward fashion typical of early musicals) likewise traded first and foremost upon familiarity.

A powerful sense of nostalgia was created, not only by the secure domesticity displayed on stage but also by recognizable characters and a dramatic form that led to anticipation of a happy ending. Much of *Kathleen Mavourneen*'s comedy relies upon a standard typology of Irishness. The heroes of this story are, as its auditors generally were, Catholic and lower-to-middle-class. The male hero is a stage Irishman in his resourcefulness, but of a palatable type with which Irish audiences could identify rather than find insulting. Although the characters lack nuance, and no attempt is made at the psychological realism seen in more literary types of drama,

flirtation with stereotype has some positive effects in this instance; the recognition of the familiar "Irish" type means that the audience is able to find some emotional identification with the Everyman hero whose familiar dreams come true, even while their superior knowledge prevents playgoers from taking the characters' plight too seriously. In form, the play partakes of various familiar conventions, offering a pleasant taste of each; it is not straight melodrama like the American version, nor simply a musical variety act, nor probing psychological "realism," although it follows some of the conventions of nineteenth-century realism. Certainly there is nothing radical or revolutionary about the style of the play.

One of the most commonplace aspects of *Kathleen Mavourneen* is its setting: the rural village seen in so many plays, in which inhabitants are closely tied to the land. The significance of the land – preferably unspoilt – is a common theme in postcolonial literature and drama, engaging issues of material possession, displacement, and nostalgia. Seamus Deane, in "National Character and the Character of Nations," addresses the political and literary power of the rural ideal:

> The land, the territory, the soil of Ireland . . . are central elements in a discourse that seeks to overcome the experience of a disastrous transition by asserting that there is a national spirit, of which both writing and landownership systems are embodiments, that will or should survive or prevail. . . . The west became the place of Irish authenticity, the place that was not yet subject to the effects of administrative, governmental rules and laws, and which therefore preserved among its population the national character in its pristine form or, at least, in such a state of preservation that the pristine form could be inferred from it. . . . This

> emphasis on the west as a national place, as the site of a deep authenticity, was intensified by the political question of the land. . . . (*Strange Country: Modernity and Nationhood in Irish Writing Since 1790* 52-3)

Since the first productions of the Irish Literary Theatre, 1899's *The Heather Field* and *The Countess Cathleen*, political questions of the land had been a major concern of the "national" stage and its nationalist supporters and detractors alike, but similar questions were debated, in less obvious ways, on popular stages as well.

While some more literary playwrights might question the romanticized role of "the Land" in the Irish imaginary, Bourke reproduces stereotype without irony, depicting an idealized, ahistorical countryside populated by virtuous peasants living in honest (never crippling) poverty. Such images of the "folk" are common in decolonizing cultures, although the extent of their genuineness often becomes a source of debate. Amilcar Cabral's theory of national liberation emphasizes the importance of authentic rural peasant culture in the struggle for freedom. Identifying an authentic native culture is not a simple proposition, however; as Chidi Amuta writes, "Even at that, [Cabral] was alive to the divergences and differences within authentic indigenous cultures arising from the intrinsic organic structures of those societies themselves" (161). While the statements about Irishness enunciated by *Kathleen Mavourneen* may not have been a lifelike representation of any actually existing Irish society, they did prove useful to an Irish culture that needed representations of the native that were entertaining as well as uplifting in this time of national self-definition. Although *Kathleen Mavourneen's* endorsement of a limiting class system is a far cry from the wild freedom enacted in many of the pre-colonial Gaelic myths resurrected by cultural nationalists in earlier decades, its version of the land is

equally powerful. Here is a nation in which peasants are not subjects but successful small farmers, and in which potential enemies are rendered harmless without any troubling violence or violations of strict moral and social codes. This concept of the "national character" was highly palatable to a modern city audience, carrying with it a taste of the supposed pristine past without the complexities of the present. This vision of Ireland anticipates the ideal projected in the 1930s by the government of Eamon de Valera, an era that would see the Irish Free State confirmed as a stable, conservative society.

Like other popular entertainments of the period, *Kathleen Mavourneen* demonstrates the use of domestic fantasy as a method of assuaging common anxieties. The production illustrates the manner in which familiar nationalist tropes and icons could circulate as reassuring, domestic fantasies of the nation-state to come, in which class discord, violence and other real-life concerns would be wiped away in the fulfillment of a family-centred imagined Ireland. It simultaneously evinces heightened patriotism and fear of full-blown revolution, espousing as a moderate alternative the family-centred domesticity that became characteristic of the Free State. *Kathleen Mavourneen,* resolving its dramatic tensions through otherworldly fantasy, offered simple solutions to large problems by returning to the familiar territory of the traditional nuclear family as located within larger containment structures. Promulgation of the family as the stable centre of society became an ever more common trope in Ireland, eventually becoming a stated policy of Irish Free State governments. It is clear that this domestic ideal – which equates rural domesticity rather than violent revolution with the sign "Ireland" – was immensely powerful in the early- and mid-twentieth century.

The social concerns of twentieth-century Ireland are highlighted by the changes Bourke made from the original American version of the play, first published in the 1860s. Chief among these changes is the increased role of fantasy in the plot. In the Irish piece, the cost of violently disrupting the established social order is heightened, and the grounds for doing so are questionable. In the original melodrama's dream world, Terence's killing of the aristocratic villain is clearly justified as an act of self-defense, whereas in the twentieth-century Irish version, the killer bears considerable guilt. For a mainstream audience in this time and place, willful killing was simply going too far; to use Foucault's terms, murder was a statement that was beyond the limits of expressibility endorsed by the audiences who frequented the Queen's Theatre. The non-dream world, by contrast, is more cheerful; after Kathleen awakens in Bourke's plot, Terence is able to outsmart Bernard Kavanagh into generous gifts, rendering Kavanagh more an object of comedy than an object of fear. It seems that in Bourke's imagined Ireland, the domestic fantasy is better than the original script's and the tragic fantasy is worse, so that the stakes of class transgression are even higher, although mild tactics like Terence's verbal machinations can be useful in bettering one's lot.

The moral of *Kathleen Mavourneen* is explicit. Bourke writes that Kathleen's father David says, "a girl ought to be contented in the sphere of life providence placed her in" (9), and so also, it seems, ought a man to be contented with using his abilities in a circumscribed realm. (A similar line appears in the American original, with a slightly different emphasis: "it's my belief a young woman is never so safe as when she is contented wid de spere in which Providence has placed her" [7]). There is a strong suggestion that there is a natural order to the world, endorsed by heaven, and that attempts to disrupt this order can lead to disaster. Two

major disruptions of the correct world order occur in the dream section of the play, only to be nullified by the return to a happier reality. The first disruption comes from the heroine's attempt to demand material gain and unusual romantic fantasy from her marriage, rather than the prosaically happy hearth and children ultimately in store for her at the play's end. The second disruption is due to the hero's use of severe violence. Although violence is not in and of itself forbidden in melodrama, in this case it places the hero's moral character in serious question, considering that it is already too late to restore the domestic ideal, and when he could perhaps employ other means that would not result in mutual destruction and spiritual judgment – the sort of behavior he displays in the real-world end of the play. In presenting and then rejecting an alternate world, this theatrical event displays a nationalist imagination that flirts with revolutionary martyrology, but ultimately substitutes a peaceful fantasy instead.

Kathleen Mavourneen's vision of an idealized Ireland offered a comfortable spectatorial position, a position of watching a predictable fable in which everything ultimately turns out well as long as no violently drastic changes are made. It was an understandably popular choice for mainstream theatregoers in a period in which violent societal change seemed to lurk just around the corner. Similar attitudes can be seen in other entertainments (witness in the same 1920 week, for example, the crowded houses for return visits of predictable comic operas), but it is particularly significant here on the most "Irish" of the popular Dublin stages. This spectator position stands in stark contrast to that of the hypothetical average citizen watching the unpredictable pageant of political change in Dublin. The Irish populace, embroiled in a dramatic war that was not restricted by neat divisions of acts and scenes, could not anticipate that supernatural fantasy would restore public order; but they could eventually support politicians

who promised similar effects. Ultimately, a large portion of the Irish public, while embracing the goal of independence, hoped to do so in a manner which would cause the least trouble possible to an already troubled nation. *Kathleen Mavourneen*'s ethos—preserving the correct Irish way of life from destructive outside influences, without radical change—is symptomatic of a larger cultural sentiment that grew ever more pervasive during the Anglo-Irish and Civil Wars. This discourse would be enunciated even more frequently as theatre participated in the stabilization processes that aided the formation of the Free State.

III

The fading fringe

If uncertainty meant an increase in the circulation of tales like *Kathleen*, it meant a decrease in the power of certain other elements of the national discourse. In *Writing Ireland: Colonialism, Nationalism, and Culture,* David Cairns and Shaun Richards argue that the narrowing of postcolonial culture is inevitable to its survival:

> Culture, then, requires the drive toward – if not the achievement of – unity. But the contradictions that are necessarily excluded as a means of its achievement are quite literally those elements which contra-dict, speak against and speak otherwise than the dominant group. (180)

In the years following the Easter Rising, the drive toward unity meant, in large part, a drive toward common acceptance of the Sinn Fein rebels as the representatives of Irish nationalism. As the Anglo-Irish War worsened, Britain and its forces came increasingly to embody the "Other" to the Irish "self," as public opinion turned against the Black-and-Tans and Auxiliaries. More than ever, to be Irish meant to be *not-English* – "English" being the usual Irish identifier for the British, with a wealth of history contained in the term.

This broad cultural change was manifested in a small way in the demise of one of the Irish capital's amateur theatre groups: the Dublin Branch of the British Empire Shakespeare Society, familiarly known as B.E.S.S. The "contra-dictions" of this group can be inferred from its name, as can the change in its status that came with impending societal change. The B.E.S.S., Dublin Branch, was founded in 1907 as an intellectual society, mounting its first productions in 1910. Its productions, some full-fledged Shakespearean plays, some lighter entertainments, were

generally played by and for a limited social group, and were not necessarily successful in theatrical terms, but did succeed in raising some funds for charitable projects. B.E.S.S. was in its heyday at the start of 1916. To a certain extent, this was part of a larger reaction to the Great War in Irish society, as British patriotism swelled among the Anglo-Irish. Post-1916, however, the Society ran into difficulties. As Myles Dungan writes in his pamphlet *No Great Shakes? 1907-1982: 75 Years of the Dublin Shakespeare Society*, "by the 1920's the Society's name had become a considerable embarrassment" (16). Although it still attempted occasional productions in the 1920s, the B.E.S.S. dwindled away completely by the end of the decade. As Irish culture became more determinedly Catholic and isolationist, a group such as B.E.S.S. had no place. The class distinction implicit in the group's name, membership, and mission was incongruous in a culture relying on a postcolonial sense of unity, even if that unity was illusory. Not until Irish society had fully stabilized was the Society reborn, as the Dublin Shakespeare Society, in the late 1930s.

There would be room for some elite artistic elements in the new Ireland, however, although their reach remained limited. For theatre historians, 1919 is significant as the year that saw the first productions of the Dublin Drama League, considered the first modernist theatre group to have a lasting impact in Ireland. Although partisans of the League might argue with the mention of the League and B.E.S.S. in the same breath, considering divergences in the two groups' artistic goals and achievements, such comparison is appropriate since the two societies drew participation and support from similar Dublin social groups. Myles Dungan reports that Gabriel Fallon, who developed a successful acting career at the Abbey and elsewhere, "recalls that some of the members of the Society were also involved in the Dublin Drama League" in the

early 1920s (16). This cross-membership suggests a similar social stature for the membership of each organization – and the membership's distance from the overwhelmingly poor and Catholic body of the Irish population.

The League's leadership was markedly different than that of B.E.S.S., however, lending it a certain professionalism right from the start. Lennox Robinson (playwright and, from 1910 to 1914, producer/manager of the Abbey Theatre), circulated a letter seeking subscribers to his new venture in the autumn of 1918, with the backing of W. B. Yeats, James Stephens, and Ernest Boyd. Brenna Katz Clarke and Harold Ferrar, who have provided the most thorough history of the League in *The Dublin Drama League 1919-1941*, write that "Robinson's concept was unique in that the League was managed by its audience-subscriber members who determined policy, elected officers, chose a play selection committee, and formed a committee to negotiate for presentations by visiting companies" (13). One-year memberships cost eighteen shillings and sixpence. This was a highly practical arrangement for a time period in which even popular mainstream work had trouble drawing paying audiences. Considering that a subscription cost nearly 3% of the 1914 average annual income of £34 (calculated as percentage of GNP by L. M. Cullen, cited in Cormac Ó Gráda's *Ireland: A New Economic History 1780-1939* 380), however, it is clear that a certain elitism was built into the group's organization. (By contrast, gallery admission to *Kathleen Mavourneen* in 1920 could be had for fourpence.) In contrast to a large commercial house like the Gaiety or the Queen's, the League drew most of its organizers, members, and audiences from the upper classes, seen most acutely in its private "at-home" play-reading programs (originally planned as semiannual events). Organizing on a subscription basis meant a built-in artistic problem as well: while the cooperative nature of the semi-democratic

set-up ensured active participation, it would also sometimes mean that the League lacked a clear and consistent direction or voice.

The League did have one precursor with goals that overlapped its own: Edward Martyn's Irish Theatre Company, which sputtered out in 1920 after failing to draw sustaining audiences during its six-year existence. As described in William J. Feeney's *Drama in Hardwicke Street,* this demise represented "the dead end of the road on which [Martyn] set out" (11) when he had joined Yeats, Gregory, and his cousin George Moore in founding the Irish Literary Theatre in 1899. Not finding the eventual direction of the later Irish National Theatre Society to his liking, the Catholic, Ibsen-influenced Martyn ended his association with the Abbey and pursued his own theatrical ventures. The Irish Theatre Company's focus was a "drama of ideas," incorporating Continental works, new plays by Irish writers in both English and Irish languages, and more plays by Martyn himself, who provided major funding for the primarily amateur company. Productions that reached the stage included Ibsen, Chekhov, Strindberg, and various forgettable one-acts by unknown Irish writers. In 1917, producer-writer-actor John MacDonagh described the Irish Theatre's goal as contributing to the security of Ireland's "intellectual position among the nations," which meant "psychological" rather than peasant plays (*New Ireland* 10 Mar. 1917, 295).

Interestingly, it was this company which saw the greatest involvement of impassioned revolutionaries of the Easter 1916 Rising: leaders Joseph Mary Plunkett, Thomas MacDonagh and William Pearse (brother of Patrick), while supporters of the Abbey, were more active with the Irish Theatre (Plunkett and MacDonagh as directors), and all died in the cause of Republican blood sacrifice. These convergences suggest that the minds of some nationalists at that time

were moved by international currents as well as the stuff of Celtic myth. The Irish Theatre Company's struggles meant that its productions rarely approached a high professional standard, however, and ticket sales for its small, technically limited auditorium were erratic at best. When frequent contributor John MacDonagh left the group early in 1920, the writing was on the wall. Martyn cancelled the lease on his Dublin theatre without having inspired the new dramatic school he had dreamed of; MacDonagh went on to more lowbrow work as a director of comic films (three of the first produced in Ireland), and as a producer of theatrical revues.

While there was some similarity between the two groups' goals, the Dublin Drama League took a more singular mission than did Martyn's company, leaving Celtic concerns to the Abbey, and concentrating on bringing international influences to Ireland. Its goal was described as "the production of plays, which, in the ordinary course of events would not be likely to be seen in Dublin" (Clarke and Ferrar 13). Although initial plans proposed sponsoring touring productions and productions by different theatrical organizations within Dublin, the League's self-produced work soon became its primary activity. The company attracted enough subscribers by early 1919 to begin presenting regular programs on the Abbey's off nights (Sunday and Monday), featuring both enthusiastic amateurs and professional actors, some of whom were regularly employed by the Abbey, and some of whom had been involved with Martyn's Irish Theatre. This participation raised the League above the level of the amateur, and indeed, the group did pay its actors small sums. The affiliation with the Abbey additionally provided the stability that groups like the Irish Theatre Company had lacked. The Drama League would remain a producing organization for ten years (a few additional productions were staged under the League name in 1936 and 1941), and was thereafter credited with breaking the ground that

the city's first truly professional modernist theatre, the Dublin Gate, would later mine so successfully (see Chapter 4 for further discussion of the Gate).

Although the Dublin Drama League met with mixed critical and popular reception, especially at first, it does stand as one of the few major Irish cultural projects to exhibit a typical brand of European modernism – the search for the expression of new ideas through new forms. Current events meant that this artistic position had a political dimension. Individuals were attempting to strengthen cultural bonds with Europe while the political realities of the Irish independence movement meant ties to London were becoming weaker. While many similar groups were founded in Europe during the years of and after World War One, espousing cosmopolitan goals at this time in Dublin was problematic, as nationalism was a more pressing concern. Clarke and Ferrar write of Lennox Robinson's quest to found the League: "In the autumn of 1918, when Robinson was fervently enlisting financial and ideological support for the experimental venture, the Irish political situation was explosive," and "Irish pride was rampant" (12). Thus, they state, "Robinson found it necessary to assure the public in advance that the League would not subvert the new rise in the nationalist tide," by writing in the initial subscription circular that "'Seeing foreign plays will not divorce ourselves from Ireland'" (12-13).

Cairns and Richards' notion of "contra-diction" is obviously relevant. In part, however, the League did represent an attempt to influence the "nationalist tide" by lending it more of an international, cosmopolitan flavour. The League's first production, *The Liberators* by Croatian playwright Srgjan Tucic, may have been a case in point; it seems to have been chosen with the intent of drawing parallels between the case of Ireland and that of other oppressed societies.

Such parallels, however, did not play well in a nationalist culture that relied upon (as nationalisms generally do) a myth of singularity. Indeed, so self-absorbed was Irish nationalism that even theatregoers accustomed to finding nationalist meaning in productions at the Abbey apparently failed to recognize any local import behind *The Liberators*. This tunnel vision is characteristic of the Irish theatregoing public's relationship to non-realistic drama at this time. The significant experiments with modernist style in Irish theatres during these years featured non-Irish content. Thus, they did not have much to say to the pressing concerns of national identity. Even some of those that, like *The Liberators*, did attempt to offer a different voice on local events were received as too essentially foreign and strange to be either relevant or threatening. Experiments that were entertaining, such as W.B. Yeats's *The Player Queen* (to be discussed further), served as sources of distraction and/or fantasy-fulfillment rather than offering provocative alternatives, circulating diverting discourse much as did lighthearted shows of the *Kathleen Mavourneen* variety. Not until later in the decade would Irish drama see works that were experimental in both theme and style, and their reception would be more problematic than that of the League's work.

The other two productions of the League's first season, each seen in only a single performance on 27 April, were Leonid Andreyev's *Pretty Sabine Women* and Lord Dunsany's "thriller" *A Night at an Inn.* This evening clearly did not have a major impact, and the League gave no more performances for nearly a year, till March of 1920. Eventually, March-April and November-December would become the regular performance periods for the League. The League presented a wide range of performances, but seemed to abandon potentially political work like *Liberators* and *Sabine Women* when the Anglo-Irish conflict became more serious.

Clarke and Ferrar contend that "the League's deliberate eclecticism prevented a lopsided investment in any single style or point of view" (16). Viewed in a positive light, this could mean that theatre's national vision, then, was *de facto* one of multiplicity and inclusiveness, in deliberate contrast to the consistency of the Abbey and the "Irish Ireland" cultural philosophy that would be espoused by the Free State under Eamon de Valera.

In practical terms, however, eclecticism meant that the League's failure to address Irish topics, which, together with its organizational framework, marked it as an elite organization that was irrelevant, if not antithetical, to the nation-building project. Clarke and Ferrar, champions of the League, acknowledge that its greatest contribution was in exposing a generation of theatremakers to a range of modernist work, rather than providing such exposure for a greater swathe of Dubliners or Irish people. The League is credited with making a "prodigious contribution to the growth of the people who made [theatre] history" (16), including frequent attendee Sean O'Casey. Even at its peak, however, the group had only around 300 members, and there were limits to its artistic accomplishments, as well. The disappointment of the *Irish Times*' reviewer of *The Liberators* is understandable; having hoped for a greater splash, he criticized the group for going down "a rather well-beaten track, and a very local one" by retaining the familiar trappings of the Abbey, leading to exclusivity and to what the reviewer considers a murky, gloomy atmosphere, unconducive to the fomenting of a dramatic revolution (10 Feb. 1919, 2). The Dublin Drama League began and would remain on the fringe, neither radical enough nor broad enough in its reach to play a role in mainstream discourse.

IV

Anti-modernism, the Abbey, and the postcolonial moment

The founding of the Dublin Drama League, which provided something of an outlet for the Abbey Theatre's Robinson and Yeats, meant that the Abbey itself was even less likely to produce unusual work than it might otherwise have been during the difficult war years. The 1910s had been an unsettled time for the theatre. Without the intimate involvement of the initial triumvirate of directors, and with continually precarious finances, the Abbey saw a series of managers, contributing to the theatre's overall lack of artistic direction during this era. The problem was both practical and ideological. Peter Kavanagh, in his 1950 *The Story of the Abbey Theatre,* bolsters his claims for the Abbey's relevance during the war years by relating them to the previous years of cultural nationalism:

> The period from 1919 to 1925 was one of the most crucial for the Abbey Theatre and for the Irish nation. . . .
>
> The Abbey was a national theatre and it could not, even if it so wished, dissociate itself from the political struggle for a free Ireland. It had contributed much to the change in national sentiment, but in so subtle and fundamental a way that its influence was not clearly apparent. For twenty years it had been molding the intellect of Ireland to accept an attitude of independence. (117-118)

With this argument, Kavanagh attempts a defense of the Abbey against those who contend that its work became less and less significant for Irish nationalism as the years went on. To state simply that the theatre was still nationalist, however, is not enough, since it does not engage the question of what forms nationalism would now take. While the theatre had played a vital role

during the cultural renaissance of the previous decades, the nature of its cultural contribution was in question now that revolutionary nationalism and conservative domesticity were the dominant (sometimes conflicting) themes.

For the most part, the Abbey's various managers aligned themselves with the latter cultural discourse – conservatism – while they pursued financial solvency. Although St. John Ervine, writing to *New Ireland* while Abbey manager in March 1916, praised the Abbey for not falling into the light-entertainment mode of other theatres, claiming that "there is not another theatre in these islands that has played a serious play or tragedy – apart from plays with a war appeal – since the war began" (4 Mar. 1916, 278), standards were not what they had once been. Ervine's managership was turbulent; that of J. Augustus Keogh was financially successful but artistically unremarkable; that of Fred O'Donovan was notable for his disagreements with W.B. Yeats over attempts to produce foreign plays, and ultimately led to the departure of many of the major Abbey actors in March 1919. Signs of change finally came when Yeats was able to convince Lady Gregory to (re)-appoint Lennox Robinson as manager following O'Donovan's exit. Yeats had objected to O'Donovan's interest in producing "foreign plays" at the Abbey, considering the formation of the Drama League a more acceptable alternative. Lennox Robinson, the prime mover behind the League, was himself greatly interested in innovative modern drama. But as the writer of successful Abbey comedies like *The Whiteheaded Boy* (1916), and as a practical man, he understood what the Irish people wanted from their national theatre. Under Robinson, realism would come to dominate the Abbey more than ever, and entertainment value was always a concern.

Peter Kavanagh, who assesses Robinson's record more favorably than some other theatre historians do, writes that the manager "attempted to bring the Abbey back to the high position it had held" (115). Robinson also had the mission, however, of bringing the theatre to a stable financial position, a difficult task in times of war and influenza. The theatre's bank balance was only £100 on Robinson's return, and there was little money for actors' salaries (a major factor in the defection of O'Donovan's group in March). Thus, producing plays with commercial appeal was imperative. Kavanagh considers Robinson's actual achievement at the Abbey during these years to be "consolidat[ing] its position as a folk theatre" (115). The "folk theatre" path was one means of maintaining artistic integrity with a practical approach. Robinson's first production made a statement; by staging *Cathleen ni Houlihan* (in which Lady Gregory memorably assumed the title role to fill a casting gap), he reaffirmed bonds with the Abbey of old, and once again asserted the theatre's claim to national status. It also served as a familiar production that would draw bodies into the seats. The production served as a redefinition of what "national" would mean to the Abbey. Where, in the past, the Abbey's artistic goals might have resulted in productions that displayed groundbreaking but potentially unpopular types of nationalist ideas, in this age when a calmer variety of national self-determination was the accepted norm being a national theatre meant playing to mainstream beliefs.

In doing so, the theatre may be said to have become more truly national. Productions that were more patriotic than innovative – such as *Cathleen ni Houlihan* and *The Revolutionist* (premiered 24 February 1921) by the late Lord Mayor of Cork Terence MacSwiney, who had died on a hunger strike in 1920, helped the Abbey connect to an audience that was becoming more Irish than Anglo-Irish. The theatre continued to bolster its finances and its reputation as a

"national" theatre by touring some of its classic productions throughout the United States and England. W. B. Yeats also did his part by raising money on lecture tours (utilizing speech-making skills that would in the future be put to use in his Establishment figure role of Free State Senator). The lecture tours proved especially beneficial as Dublin violence grew worse, leading to increasingly early curfews. The Abbey's stage, like that of all Dublin theatres, was more and more frequently dark in response to the early curfews and tiny crowds. Without benefit performances in London in the spring of 1921, the Abbey might not have survived.

Fighting for survival also meant fighting for audiences, with the result that many observers commented that the Abbey experienced a democratization during these war years. The theatre drew larger audiences than it had in recent, more financially desperate times, but critics and longtime patrons complained that the new, less sophisticated, theatregoers did not always enact the same behavioral codes as did more conventionally correct upper-class attendees. To these critics, there seemed to be class infiltration of the theatre; audiences were described as not knowing how to conduct themselves properly, responding to the performance more in the manner of a working-class Queen's or pantomime audience than the more decorous patrons of the Abbey. Admittedly, Abbey patrons are famous precisely for their lack of restraint on several occasions – but the 1907 *Playboy* riots, and later, those at the 1926 *Plough and the Stars* premiere, were far removed from the standard behaviors of these 1920s audiences. Lennox Robinson, when finally appointed as Abbey manager by Yeats after a great deal of wrangling with Lady Gregory, went so far as to put notices in the programme asking the audience to applaud only at the appointed intervals. But it seemed that the damage – if damage it was – was done. The Abbey now played to a wider sector of the Dublin community. The *Evening*

Telegraph, reporting on the failure of Robinson's notices, wrote "the Abbey audience, I think, has been undergoing a change within recent years – and not a change for the better, and is becoming more addicted to the vaudeville type of commendation" (8 Oct. 1919, 3). Periodicals of all sorts agreed. *The Leader* wrote that "The Abbey Theatre is now only degrees removed from the Empire Music Hall. It is quite a popular place for those w ho want a laugh, and a place to sit out a few hours of an evening" (18 Jan. 1919, 583), while J. A. Power in the *Evening Telegraph* commented on "what a curiously mixed crowd the average Abbey audience is at the present day" (8 Sept. 1929, 2), and Jacques (J. J. Ryce) of the *Evening Herald* offered a detailed description of silly exclamations from audiences reacting to an off-putting attempt at beginning Abbey plays in dramatically silent darkness (9 Oct. 1920, 5). In an *Irish Statesman* article titled "The Abbey Theatre Audiences" the commentator "Prior" wrote:

> Judging by the size of the audience at the last three or four performances at the Abbey Theatre which I have attended, I gather that the Theatre is, financially speaking, in a much improved position. It is, however, surprising, and not a little painful, to find the "hiss-the-villain-and-applaud-the-hero-for-all-you're-worth" type of playgoer at that theatre. The average Dublin theatregoer of these times will, of course, make what political capital he can out of every play he sees; but it is not to this that I refer. (28 Feb. 1920, 213)

Prior's astute analysis of the relationship between cash flow, theatrical styles, and politics reveals a concern that the current disturbances were not of the politically charged variety that had brought the Abbey both notoriety and distinction in the past, but were instead something more mundane and potentially degrading.

The changing behavior was not all on the part of the audience, but rather, a give-and-take relationship between actors and the crowd. Robert Welch, in *The Abbey Theatre: Form and Pressure*, blames manager Lennox Robinson for failing to enforce high artistic standards in acting:

> As Yeats and Lady Gregory surrendered most day-to-day responsibility to Robinson, on whom drink was beginning to take hold at this stage, the Abbey players started to grow more and more wilful and less disciplined. Around this time the practice of "gagging" began, in which the actors work the audience for laughter and applause, however inappropriate these might be to the play. This behaviour coarsened the actors' craft and the receptivity of the audiences, although the Dublin theatregoers loved the hamming. (81)

Although Robinson was more of a populist than Yeats (the various effects of which trait will be discussed in the next chapter), it is shortsighted to assign all of the responsibility for the audience changes at the Abbey the manager.

In fact, these audiences' behaviors were examples of broader cultural trends manifesting themselves in mundane ways. Trends beyond Lennox Robinson's control contributed to the changes in the Abbey Theatre. For one, exposing audiences to new Irish works of great literary merit was a daunting task when the times simply did not seem to foster such writing. Robinson was not alone in facing this problem; both Keogh and Ervine had complained of the inability to find high-quality Irish plays among those that were submitted to the theatre. And it is clear that Robinson did search for new material within the familiar mode. In 1920, for example, the Abbey produced six new plays, while managing not to slide too deeply into debt. Realist productions

showing more artistic ambition during the year included Shaw's *John Bull's Other Island* and Brinsley MacNamara's *The Land for the People*. Three new non-realistic plays produced between 1919 and 1921 are of particular interest; *The Dragon, The Golden Apple,* and *Aristotle's Bellows,* called "wonder plays" by their author Lady Gregory, drew large audiences. The appeal of these three works can be traced, once again, to a desire for escapism. As Maud Gonne MacBride wrote after seeing *Aristotle's Bellows* on St. Patrick's Day, 1921: "It is a most charming fantastic little play. . . . After the terrible week we had lived through I didn't think I could have endured an ordinary comedy. . . . the raids and arrests of every day particularly of students is going on worse than ever" (letter to Yeats, qtd. in Hogan and Burnham *O'Casey* 37). These three plays, while different in style and subject to Gregory's usual peasant comedy mode, bear resemblance to them in their generally positivist view of the world. Of the Abbey's directors, only W. B. Yeats attempted something thoroughly different in his playwriting in this period, meeting with mixed results. As I will show in the following section, the fate of *The Player Queen* demonstrates that the Abbey, its audiences, and even its playwrights, were largely functioning within the same discursive networks as the Queen's Theatre during the Anglo-Irish War, responding to and feeding similar ideas.

VII

The modern masks the mainstream: *The Player Queen*

In his journal, Joseph Holloway, the architect of the Abbey Theatre, constant theatergoer, and inveterate diarist, grouped disparate non-peasant plays together, praising the Abbey's ability to "play out-of-the-way plays like *The Dragon* [by Lady Gregory, produced 21 April 1919], *Androcles* [G.B. Shaw, produced 4 November 1919], and then here and now *The Player Queen*" (National Library of Ireland MS 1850, folios 1261-62; qtd. in Bradford 417). *The Player Queen,* a play W. B. Yeats worked on over many years of his career, was first staged at the Abbey in December 1919 (following a London Stage Society premiere in May of that year). *The Player Queen* seems an apparent anomaly in that it was reasonably successful in drawing Irish audiences despite displaying distinctly modernist characteristics.

An examination of the play in production reveals, however, that this play was successful neither because Irish wartime audiences responded to modernism, nor because they perceived a commentary upon their local society, but because they could read plays as apparently disparate as *The Player Queen* and *Kathleen Mavourneen* in similar fashion when it suited the cultural need. Although *The Player Queen*'s deviations from mainstream subjects ensured that it would never be a smash hit, it can certainly be considered one of the few modernist Irish plays to earn a measure of both critical and popular success. The evidence suggests, however, that the play's public acceptance was due to reasons very similar to those responsible for the success of the distinctly non-modernist *Kathleen Mavourneen*. This is despite the fact that standard histories would suggest that the Abbey Theatre sat at the opposite end of the theatrical spectrum to the Queen's Theatre. As Hogan and Burnham write, there was an "artistic gulf" between the two

theatres; the "plays and the playwrights, as well as the actors and the audiences, were culturally worlds apart" (106-7). Certainly the aesthetic standards governing the Abbey and the Queen's were vastly different – although the behavioral standards of their audiences were no longer so different. Upon inspection, it is evident that similar cultural forces were at work in both theatre environments during the Anglo-Irish War.

Audiences were able to find some entertainment value in *The Player Queen* when it premiered in Dublin in December 1919. The December timing played a role; Dublin audiences looked for diversion around Christmastime. It is no great leap to say that there were similarities between audience responses to Yeats's modernist experimentation and to Christmas pantomimes, since each type of performance could provide escapism. In brief, *The Player Queen* tells the story of a group of performers preparing to enact the biblical story of Noah at the command of the Queen and Prime Minister of a country facing the potential for popular rebellion. The play is never performed, partly due to the rivalry between two actresses, one the wife and the other the mistress of the chief actor and poet, Septimus. The wife, Decima, refuses the roles offered her by Septimus, and instead plans to marry the Prime Minister, eventually supplanting the insecure Queen and becoming Queen herself to popular acclaim. Yeats's comments on his lengthy writing process suggest that he himself saw this plot as a vigorous, crowd-pleasing farce, despite initially conceiving it as an intellectual investigation of the nature of selfhood:

> I wasted the best working months of several years in an attempt to write a poetic play where every character became an example of the finding or not finding of what I have called the Antithetical Self; and because passion and not thought makes tragedy, what I made had neither simplicity nor life. . . . At last it came

> into my head all of a sudden that I could get rid of the play if I turned it into a farce; and never did I do anything so easily, for I think that I wrote the present play in about a month. (*Plays in Prose and Verse* 429)

Yeats reportedly made the change from tragedy to farce after a suggestion from Ezra Pound. Although the play features some songs and poems, it is primarily prose, and prose of a fairly entertaining variety; comedy and theatrical spectacle are featured throughout. During the play's composition Yeats seems to have been preoccupied with impressing future viewers both aurally and visually, writing in the *Plays* preface, "if it is gayer than my wont it is that I tried to find words and events that would seem well placed under a beam of light reflected from the ivory-coloured surface of the [Gordon Craig] screens" (vi-vii). Certainly, the play in production did offer a visual display that was a clear departure from the realist peasant mode otherwise dominating the Abbey stage, with colorful sets and costumes inspired by the exotic style of Leon Bakst. In addition, the metatheatrical element offered a perfect opportunity for Yeats to continue to explore his preoccupation with masks.

The spectacle of mask, costume and poetry, with a strong farcical element, proved attractive to audiences. While attracted, however, spectators generally left perplexed. The review in the *Freeman's Journal* of 10 December summarized the crowd's reaction: "The puzzled audience admired the poetry, applauded the occasional flashes of humor, and whole-heartedly demonstrated its admiration of the players" (2). The *Evening Telegraph*'s Joseph A. Power criticized the "freak" script, but complimented the lead actors and the "picturesque" scenery of the first act (10 Dec. 1919, 2). Joseph Holloway wrote in his journal that "Its strange story baffles me, while its unfolding is set in so picturesque an environment that it charmed the

eye if it didn't wholly satisfy the mind" (*Abbey Theatre* 206). Holloway wrote that the audience as a whole had a reaction similar to his own, and that "The play was followed with intense interest, and loud applause followed its conclusion" (Folio 1263; qtd. in Bradford 417, mistakenly credited to W.A. Henderson). Peter Kavanagh writes, without citing a source, that "after the performance everyone was asking one another in the foyer what it was all about" (120), and Yeats complained that the press responses to the play were "as unappreciative as if the play had been in verse & may indeed have thought it was" (qtd. in Foster *Yeats* 155).

Although audience reactions were not rapturous, Yeats could not complain that they were violent. The more intellectual elements of the script were confusing, and some phrases were distasteful to some viewers, but the production as a whole was not terribly shocking. The note quoted above goes on to imply that Yeats made further changes to the play after 1919 in order to please audiences, stating that the second act that initially left audiences cold in London had since been "much reformed." Manuscript research leads Curtis Bradford, the author (with Yeats) of the extraordinary book *The Writing of the Player Queen*, to believe that while the 1922 published version of the play was based upon the Abbey performance text, Yeats probably made emendations between the London and Dublin productions of the play, and that the Abbey production probably did not contain the potentially shocking published line that "the end of the Christian Era" was coming. Pre-Dublin changes also apparently included a toning down of the more shocking elements of the play, which had included grotesque suggestions of bestiality that Yeats had anticipated would provoke violent reaction in the audience. Thus, although Joseph A. Power, in the *Evening Telegraph* review Bradford calls "the least friendly of all" (418), suggested that many audience members were left with "an unpleasant taste in the mouth" at the

end of the evening, these individuals were not moved to any marked demonstration of displeasure. While Holloway had some issues with the morality of the play, he was by no measure horrified by it, recording simply that "There is a lot of talk in Act I about the chastity of a unicorn, and in Act II marriage is made very light of, indeed" (206). If Holloway, a conservative moralist, found nothing to condemn or repulse him in the script, it is unlikely that most other Abbey audience members would either. It is likely that *The Player Queen's* unconventional style muffled its potentially offensive elements, for it offered less obvious provocation than had challenging realist works like *The Playboy of the Western World*.

Likewise, the political commentary contained within this play is less than provocative, muted within a commentary about the power of performance that is expressed metatheatrically through the play-within-a-play. Acting and theatrical images, according to this play, are powerful forces, a message that is of interest to theatre historians but was less than incendiary for contemporary audiences, few of whom, apparently, bothered to delve for this message. Curtis Bradford writes that "it is difficult to imagine incomprehension carried further than it is carried" in the reviews of the initial production of the play (416). To Bradford, and presumably to many modern readers, the main point is simple: "that an actress born in a ditch between two towns can, if she is a good actress, make a better queen than one born to the purple." Bradford's attitude stands in contrast to that of Robert Welch, who calls the play's meaning "obscure and baffling," while noting its "attempt to convey the psychological and emotional disruptions caused by the violent conflict of the Anglo-Irish War in the aftermath of the horrors of the 1914-18 conflict" (*Form and Pressure* 77). This latter comment, however, can be contrasted both with Yeats's claim of non-Irish subject and the failure of Irish audiences to identify with the play.

Decima, the player who becomes queen, gains control over the "mob" through her art. Considering Yeats's views on the aristocracy, it is interesting that the usurper seems manifestly better suited to rule than does the original Queen, who inherited her position. The original Queen, however, exhibits a rather pallid religiosity, which may well reflect Yeats's concerns over how the potential Irish state might develop. Yeats offers instead a vision of government that is not democratic, but controlled by individuals skilled at persuasion and controlling appearances. *The Player Queen* is thus a statement about the power of theatrical discourse, although not entirely a favorable one.

The metatheatrical commentary extends to the audience, as well, in ways that offer further indication of the Irish audience's inability to embrace modernist experiment in drama. Curtis Bradford notes that "in some versions the players comment on the attitudes of the theatrical audience. There is a discussion of the audience liking realism; people like the play because they like to see themselves on the stage" (14). In this, perhaps, we readers can see Yeats attempting a dig at the Irish audience, which had shown a strong tendency toward theatrical self-identification as a national body. Identification was the key issue, for example, in the rioting at the premiere of *The Playboy of the Western World*, which was deemed to slander all of Ireland by portraying a group of Irish peasants of questionable morality. In contrast, certainly much of the appeal of plays like the popular Abbey comedies of George Shiels, Edward McNulty, and William Boyle lay in the very ordinariness of their characters – an idealized ordinariness, in which the common Irishman always comes out on top. Like *Kathleen Mavourneen's* Terence, such characters appealed to audiences as fantasy-selves.

Few fantasy selves were on offer in *The Player Queen*. In contrast to the mixed identification and distancing created by the familiar domestic fantasy of *Kathleen,* audiences for *The Player Queen* seemed to experience complete aesthetic distancing from the performance, judging by reviews that described audiences enjoying the performance while largely ignoring potentially provocative aspects. Although Yeats himself had suggested that Dublin audiences would find this play even more offensive than *The Playboy* (in discussing an admittedly slightly more explicit 1915 version of the play in a letter to Lady Gregory, qtd. in Foster *Yeats* 24), distancing meant that even the sexual references in the play did not bring it into disfavor. The fact that this is the only one of all Yeats's plays not to be set in Ireland meant that even the war plot did not hit home for audiences; as Yeats wrote in the preface to his 1922 *Plays in Prose and Verse,* "The Player Queen' is the only work of mine, not mere personal expression, written during these last twenty years, which is not avowedly Irish in its subject matter being all transacted in some No-Man's-Land" (vi).

Standing in contrast to the perspective of the first Irish audiences is that of some literary critics who focus upon the modernist achievements of the script. Christopher Murray calls *The Player Queen* a "neglected but fascinating anticipation of theatre of the absurd" (*Twentieth-Century* 30). R. F. Foster concurs with Richard Ellmann in summarizing the play's subject: "on an abstract level, it worked out the themes of self and anti-self, mask and reality, which preoccupied [Yeats] at this time," going on to suggest, with a historian's slant, that the play "also suggested the annunciation of a new age and the mutability of apocalyptic times" (*Yeats* 25). Considering the play *in production* as a locus of cultural discourses requires attention to the way it was received by audiences as entertainment, however, and the "annunciation of the new age"

was a topic of little interest to the audience focused upon its domestic war. Thus, authorship by one of the great writers in the pantheon of modernism did not make this play function in a modernist fashion when it was presented in a country whose cultural discourses were dominated by themes of war and rebellion, nationalism and postcolonialism, exhaustion and fear. This play illustrates the fact that despite Yeats's canonical stature, there are inherent difficulties in classifying certain Yeats works as modernist. As Debra Journet argues, Yeats himself attempted to disassociate from the label at times. Journet writes "that the Modernist writer has shifted attention from the world of social experience to the world of human consciousness is a generalization often made about Modernist literature," which, for her, is a primary difficulty in classifying Yeats as a modernist (44). When compared to interpretations of *The Player Queen* that emphasize its entertaining elements, as mine has, or, like Robert Welch's interpretation, emphasize the play's connections with the community and the events of history, viewpoints that argue for this play's modernist significance are complicated.

Whatever this play was, it was anomalous. Yeats did not return to the farcical or proto-Absurdist mode in his drama, concentrating instead on more intimate, restrained works like his "plays for dancers," into which he did not put forth the same effort to connect with audiences. Even as *The Player Queen* was prepared for production, Yeats had written in an open "Letter to Lady Gregory" published in the *Irish Statesman* that his true desire was for "an unpopular theatre and an audience like a secret society." A "great diningroom or sittingroom" would prove more fitting for the reception of his drama than the Abbey, of which he wrote:

> Oh yes, I am listened to – am I not a founder and is not our audience polite? – and here and there scattered solitaries delight in what I have made and return to hear it

> again; but some young Corkman, all eyes and ears, whose first rambling play we have just pulled together or half together, can do more than that. He will be played by players, who have spoken dialogue like his every night for years, and sentences that it had been a bore to read will . . . delight the whole house. (6 Dec. 1919, 572)

While the Abbey became more and more connected with the ordinary culture (exemplified in the so-called "Cork realist school" of playwriting of which Lennox Robinson himself was often considered a member) Yeats's dramatic work withdrew from the mainstream. More of the energies he did expend in the cause of Ireland were focused upon non-theatrical ventures after the Free State was established, when he was appointed to the Senate and became involved with tasks like the design of new Irish coinage. Thus, after *The Player Queen*, the Abbey did not premiere another Yeats work for seven years, when the theatre staged his 1912 version of *Oedipus the King* (discussed in a later chapter).

An unattributed essay that appeared in the *Irish Statesman* during the same week as Yeats's letter suggests that the more artistically experimental and politically thoughtful elements of *The Player Queen* were simply out of step with both a war-weary, entertainment-seeking people, and a dramatic tradition that remained concerned with the politics of postcolonial representation:

> Never was a people worn and wearied with year after year of crisis, alarum, and finally world-wide catastrophe, more passionately anxious for peace – mental, moral, even sheer physical peace – than the people of Ireland to-day. We have too long consented to be one of the stage peoples of the world, and our good

> nature in this as in many another matter has been our undoing. The stage Irishman is so firmly established that, while the real Ireland is as yet one of the world's undiscovered countries, the typical Irishman is a topic upon which every man from the Falklands to the Faroes is free to dogmatize. So it is that we, who are in sober truth the most peaceful of peoples, the most willing to obey just laws, the most anxious (anxious even to a grave fault) to let well alone and keep our hands from our neighbours' affairs, have suffered ourselves to be pictured as lawless, irrepressible, and bloodthirsty. (6 Dec. 1919, 570)

The concerns of the *Statesman* are more indicative than the text of *The Player Queen* of the cultural issues with which Irish theatre was truly engaged during this period. Cultural demands included the need for theatre to provide positive images of Irish people as part of the anti-colonial thought process both at home and abroad as well as the need to provide imaginative responses to the widespread longing for peace, safety, and even isolation. The distancing created by this stylized dialogue and mythical, non-Irish setting allowed audiences to remain comfortable and secure enough to respond in a general way to the play and production's emphasis on entertainment and performance.

Thus, the moderate popular success and simultaneous artistic failure of *The Player Queen* show an audience responding more to its own nation's domestic war and struggles with postcoloniality than to the international war and the artistic discourses it influenced. These audiences sought diversion from a performance that was attractive and amusing, but so foreign that it was odd rather than threatening and confusing rather than thought-provoking. Performance types ranging from the nostalgic musical melodrama of *Kathleen Mavourneen* to

the more unusual high-status *Player Queen* made varying contributions to the circulation of these themes.

These are the concerns that would be manifested clearly in the mainstream of Irish theatre in the early 1920s, as discussed in the next chapter. Examples of theatre productions that tested the limits of expressibility of style and subject in Ireland would become even more rare in the mid-1920s as Ireland entered its temporally post-colonial period, a period that saw greater consolidation of conservative discourses of realism, stability, and the land, even beyond the escapism that dominated the war years.

VI

The rising tide: theatre in Belfast and Cork

The trends dominating Dublin stages – realism, domestic fantasy, and parochialism – found varying theatrical manifestations throughout Ireland. The difficult times leading up to and following the birth of the Irish Free State were, if anything, heightened in the counties that became "Northern Ireland," where incidents of violence were complicated by deeply rooted sectarianism. Thus, in Belfast, rising societal tensions led to the demise of the previously successful Ulster Theatre, an organization that had been founded in 1902 as the self-proclaimed "Ulster Branch" of the Irish Literary Theatre, but had never achieved a level of professionalism equivalent to the Abbey's. In its early years, the Ulster Theatre had offered a forum for communication between the frequently opposed bodies of public opinion in Ulster, taking on the culture clash between Catholic and Protestant with sensitivity and good humor in often satirical plays. While the theatre company generally expressed a rational nationalist voice, it acknowledged the disparities in the North and problems with a unitary vision of Ireland in ways the Abbey clearly did not. It found laughter in these disparities, and was able ultimately to provide a sense of hope that the people of the region could live together under the sign of "Ireland," or at least, under the sign of "Ulster." The group was always too small, however, to have a significant influence on cultural discourses that were dominated by division, especially when the strains of war increased perceptions of binary opposition.

Sam Hanna Bell, author of *The Theatre in Ulster,* calls the period "from 1920 to 1934, the years of slow but perceptible decay" for the Ulster Theatre (49). 1919 was a decent year for the Ulster Theatre – in particular its revival of Gerald MacNamara's satire *Thompson in Tir-na-*

nOg – but by 1920 the company produced only one week of performances, and that in Dublin. The group managed to premiere one new play, Charles Ayre's comedy *Loaves and Fishes*, in 1921; the *Northern Whig* described it as "broad and vulgar," echoing similar criticisms of many Dublin productions in the war years (3 Nov. 1921, 8, in Hogan and Burnham, *O'Casey* 51). Bell writes of the company's struggles:

> Again in 1925 and 1926 there were no productions in Belfast, and in 1927 no Ulster Theatre season anywhere. 1934 was the Ulster Theatre's last year at the Opera House. In that season the theatre and the Opera House lost money. . . Thereafter the company was refused the stage they had filled with such distinction for twenty-six years. (49)

The theatre group that in earlier years had been viewed as a cultural beacon by various individuals in Belfast was no longer a viable proposition.

The theatre's decline can be tied to the rising tide of bloodshed throughout Ireland as a whole, but more specifically to the increasing problems of a divided Ulster community which the theatre had tried to embrace as one. The fading of the Ulster Theatre was in part due to practical factors (including a lack of playwrights and lack of a permanent home), but it had always been vexed by these problems; the fact that the theatre's great decline took place in the 1920s points to the changing political climate as an even more significant factor. As the perceived need of Protestant and Catholic communities to defend themselves with violence grew, satire on their political convictions no longer found an audience, and the creative impulses of playwrights and producers faltered. It may be that the theatre's perceived sympathies with southern institutions like the Abbey also brought it trouble during this time. As the specter of Irish independence

and/or partition grew near between 1919 and 1921, Northern Protestants had become more committed to retaining an identity distinct from that of the Irish nationalist majority. This was partly in reaction to the new face of that nationalism, which was more clearly Catholic, revolutionary, and Celtic than before. From 1920 to 1922, Belfast would be wracked by major sectarian violence as long-standing historical tensions came once again to the fore. The pragmatic situation for serious theatre in Belfast was even more grim than that in Dublin during the same period, without the same levels of reputation and fundraising ability to see theatre through. Audiences could no longer laugh at gripping political and social problems; while policemen were being killed in the street and workers fired en masse in the name of religion, escapist rather than engaged entertainment was the order of the day, and this was not the specialty of the Ulster Theatre. Even after the wars, the interstitial space, the room for common ground, had shrunk, while the two major cultures of the North became entrenched as opposite poles in reaction to real and imagined decolonizing processes.

The nonpartisan nationalism that the old Ulster Literary Theatre had espoused became an unreal prospect as the Irish Free State settled into domestic rather than revolutionary ideals, with a determinedly Catholic nature and Gaelic trappings. The question of what *did* work in Belfast will be taken up in Chapter Three. Like theatre in Dublin, Limerick, Galway and Cork, theatre in Belfast was involved with a necessary process of nation-building for a decolonizing state (or states, to follow upon Conor Cruise O'Brien's *States of Ireland*). Later in the 1920s, amateur drama became a useful form of expression in Northern Ireland, but not until the 1930s and 40s (the era in which Dublin saw the rebirth of the Shakespeare Society) would Northern culture be stable enough to make room for more ambitious serious drama.

While wars at home and abroad meant the end of "literary" theatre in Belfast, popular entertainments thrived there as they did throughout the Irish island (particularly at the Grand Opera House and Royal Hippodrome, though both were sometimes closed due to violence). Such was also the case in Cork, bastion of Irish nationalism and the capital of the southern region that saw many of the worst troubles of the period. If anything, the popularity of "vulgar" touring entertainments was greater in Cork than in Dublin, corresponding to the greater level of violence in Cork as the Anglo-Irish War began. The strength of the popular desire for fantasy and escape can be seen in the fact that Cork's cinemas even stayed open while the city centre burned in fires set by the Black and Tans in December 1920. Although there was little original theatrical work in Cork, perhaps partly due to the difficulty of organizing in a city plagued by unrest, the city did see many successful touring productions, including those staged by companies like P. J. Bourke's, J. Augustus Keogh's, and Joseph O'Mara's. Cork also had two established amateur theatre groups in the Munster Players and the somewhat lighter, and hence more popular, Leeside Players. Despite the need for escapism, however, the dangers and difficulties associated with large public gatherings in the evening became too great in 1921, and Cork's theatres were closed for much of the year.

The strength of escapist discourse in theatre throughout the island points to an unusually strong cultural cohesion between the metropole and the rural areas commonly enacted on urban stages during this period. The correspondence was partly due to practical considerations; Cheryl Herr makes the point that the lack of British touring productions during the Great War meant Irish companies that had in the past primarily toured small towns now offered their wares to city audiences, so that "what played well across the country now had to make it in Dublin; a closer

dialogue about national self-representation was established between city and country" (12). Thus, although the tendency among theatre historians to equate *Dublin* theatre with "national" theatre can be troubling, there may be more grounds than usual for doing so during the First World War and the several years following. When English touring companies did resume large-scale tours of the Irish island, many of the same companies that visited Dublin, such as the Carl Rosa Opera Company, performed in regional centres as well.

VII

The rising tide: public drama

Mention of Cork brings up once again the fact that symbolic actions, like the death of Cork Lord Mayor Terence MacSwiney in a jail hunger strike in October 1920 and the subsequent huge public funeral, played a critical role in the two-year Anglo-Irish War. Symbolic enactment became a monumental issue in the ending of the war as well. Reaction to the war and its associated tragedies by international observers played a significant role in bringing the British government to the table to negotiate a withdrawal with the colonial revolutionaries. Robert Kee assigns much of the responsibility for the end of the war to public reaction to the violent behavior of Black and Tans and Royal Irish Constabulary Auxiliaries, whose activities became increasingly more widespread in 1920: "increasingly it was horror at the reprisals and special indignation aroused by acts of lawlessness committed by the forces of law themselves which dominated public opinion not only in Ireland but in liberal England too" (111-12). 1920 had seen more violence than had 1919; then, in the early months of 1921, the conflict rose to a new ferocity, with horrors committed on both sides. In spring and in summer, curfews became stricter as civilian deaths rose, and theatres were closed more often than not. Finally, the British government had had enough of the frustration and bad publicity that was the Irish situation, and was willing to negotiate. A truce was declared in July 1921, with plans for a treaty settlement to follow. In October, Irish envoys led by Michael Collins negotiated a treaty with the British government that provided for the recognition of the majority of the Irish island as the Irish Free State – a solution that, although not entirely permanent (the disposition of the Northern counties, still part of Britain, was left open to renegotiation at a future date), was considered far less than

ideal by republicans. Even more problematic than the Northern border was the continued necessity, under the Treaty, for members of the Irish parliament to take an oath of allegiance to the British crown. Although revisionist historians have faulted Irish politicians of the time for regarding the oath as the most fundamental problem with the treaty, the fact that it was the ultimate sticking point for republicans points to the extraordinary importance of this type of performative event in Ireland's postcolonial culture.

Dissatisfaction with the Treaty led to another parliamentary walkout, in a strange echo of the Irish party's abandonment of the British House of Commons in 1918. This time, in one of the seminal events of Irish history, Eamon de Valera led his Sinn Fein loyalists out of the governmental chamber (and system) after Dáil Éireann narrowly voted to ratify the Treaty. The walkout, enacted upon the 10th of January 1922, was one of the great dramatic moments of modern Irish history. Now the tensions of Irish society were domestic in nature, and a weary nation held its breath, preparing for war once again. In Belfast, still festering with deep-rooted sectarian problems, rail strikes and killings erupted in February, and similar events began to occur all over country in the late spring and summer. Although the threat of violence was depressingly similar, the circumstances for Ireland had drastically changed. The ratification of the Treaty, and its subsequent endorsement by widespread public support for the new Free State government, marked the beginning of the end of an extraordinary period in Irish history. Most of Ireland had, at last, earned some measure of independence from England; the primary concern of Irish culture for the next few years would be determining whether that independence could last.

Chapter Three

The Decolonizing Process: Cultural Stabilization and the Triumph of Realism

1922-1928

I

Civil War

A: The struggling state

The walkout by the anti-Treaty delegates marked the beginning of a grim period for Ireland. The ensuing Civil War, which saw former allies turning against each other, and civilians in the firing lines, offered no promise of simple resolution to the divisions that tore a people apart. Day after day, Dublin, Cork, and Belfast newspapers reported murders and ambushes around the country, as the new domestic government of the twenty-six southern counties strove desperately to control the activities of insurgents with whom they had fought against the British so short a time before.

And yet, despite violence and uncertainty, an independent Irish state did now exist. In this chapter I will examine the theatrical culture of the first tenuous years of Saorstát Éireann, the Irish Free State, during a crucial five-year period that saw the country move from internecine bloodshed to stable change in government. I primarily focus upon the Abbey Theatre in order to zero in on what would come to be the culture of a new governing class, as the theatre became more and more tied to the state and its pragmatic brand of national discourse. One key development at the Abbey in this period was the establishment of an official subsidy, a financial lifesaver that made the theatre the first in the English-speaking world to be funded by a state.

Another crucial factor in the Abbey's tenuous survival was the theatre's links with the world outside of the Irish island. These links were paralleled by the relationships of the insecure postcolonial state to the wider world, relationships which demonstrate the constructive power of conservative Irish nationalism in the postcolonial moment.

Perhaps the most significant theatrical development of this period was the rise of the "Abbey comedy" play type that would come to dominate the Irish artistic theatre for decades. Together with the popular stages' continued reliance on straightforward entertainment (seen also in the rise of cinema), the Abbey comedy cemented the anti-modernist mode of the Irish stage. Further demonstrations of the mainstream's wholesale rejection of modernist discourse were found in the extraordinary, and brief, Irish career of the playwright Sean O'Casey. The contrasting successes and failures of O'Casey's 1920s plays in Ireland illustrate the conflicting roles played by realist and modernist discourses in the early Free State as well as the function of popular reception and modes of censorship in silencing postcolonial contra-dictions during these years. Overall, the five-year period discussed in this chapter was one of solidification and stabilization, rather than innovation, on both the theatrical and political fronts. As the 1920s came to an end, the state, its theatres, and its cultural discourses found the stability that at the beginning of the decade had seemed mere fantasy.

The Irish Civil War lasted from June of 1922 to April of 1923. From the standpoint of the anti-Treaty forces, or Irregulars, the term "Civil War" would have been a misnomer – rather, they saw the ongoing conflict as the continuation of an anti-colonial action. The Treaty agreement with Britain that left the Irish island politically partitioned (even if only temporarily, as it seemed to many in 1921), as well as the charged oath of allegiance, were powerful

arguments in favor of their view. But the fact that the state against which the Irregulars fought did not bear the name "Ireland" arbitrarily, but was endorsed as such by the people of the nation, meant that the war was a domestic affair. Internal conflict would continue to dominate the culture for the next few years, as the Irish Free State came into shaky existence.

B: The struggling theatre

During this conflict, theatre struggled to provide the vibrant imaginative outlets that had served the public during World War One and the War of Independence. Although World War One and the Anglo-Irish War had positive effects on the domestic theatre industry inasmuch as they created a demand for escapist entertainment and native talent, the continued violence of the Civil War and ongoing problems with city-wide curfews were ultimately disastrous for theatres, particularly the Abbey. The Abbey, like most art theatres, had never shown much of a profit, but during and after the Civil War it skated perilously close to bankruptcy. Increasingly unpredictable violence meant curfews more severe than those seen in earlier years. When the Irregulars took Dublin's Four Courts building, to which the Free State Army in turn laid siege in late June 1922, the capital's theatres closed entirely. Even when theatres were open, they struggled to find audiences, because performance times were irregular and Dubliners were nervous about public gatherings. Although it usually managed more performances than did other theatres, monetary takings at the Abbey were so low that its directors despaired of keeping it afloat, and a proposal for the new government to take over the theatre was prepared. Lennox Robinson seems to have worked on this proposal throughout 1922, and a letter was officially submitted to the Free State government in June of 1923 or 1924 (Robert Hogan and Richard

Burnham detail some confusion in the dates of relevant documents [156-60]; regardless of the date, it is clear that efforts to establish some form of official relationship between the Abbey and the government were lengthy). The extent to which the Abbey directorate really wished to relinquish control of their theatre is debatable; R.F. Foster, for example, writes of Yeats's ongoing "possessiveness" after a government subsidy for the theatre was eventually granted. Yet Lennox Robinson, in *Ireland's Abbey Theatre*, insists that the offer to gift the Abbey into the hands of the Free State was sincere (125). In any event, the proposal for the Abbey to become the official state theatre (which was ultimately rejected by Eoin MacNeill, minister for education) reflects a sense that the goals of the Irish National Theatre Society had been at least partially achieved in the Irish Free State. Like most of the Irish public, Yeats and his colleagues felt that the Irish Free State represented an adequate realization of republican goals (or, like Lady Gregory, a good site from which to negotiate further independence), and yearned for an end to violence.

At this point in his life's work, Yeats was so eager to leave the Abbey behind that after MacNeill refused to take on the theatre, the writer argued in favor of closing the Abbey for good. Gregory disagreed, however, and sought ways to keep the theatre alive. When she finally agreed to the appointment of Lennox Robinson as a theatre director at the end of 1923, the Abbey Theatre officially gained what would be its most influential guiding hand for years to come (in artistic terms, this was a promotion from the managerial position Robinson had held since 1918, even if it meant less day-to-day hands-on work). Despite the esoteric interests he pursued at the Dublin Drama League, when it came to the Abbey Robinson was a populist who "made every effort to attract the public" (Kavanagh 123). His work at the Abbey over the next several years

can be fairly credited with saving the theatre in the practical sense, even if his artistic legacy was mixed. Although it is not entirely correct to call Robinson's appointment a turning point, since in many ways it merely cemented the path the theatre was already on, it did constitute a defining moment in the life of one of Ireland's most important cultural entities.

Attracting the public was a distinct challenge in dangerous times, meaning that productions had to have a broad appeal. In this time of struggle, which many hoped would settle the "Irish question" for Ireland's people once and for all, Irish theatre turned even more resolutely toward fantasies of a peaceful nation than it had in the previous few years. The Irish cultural imagination, confronted with a chaotic present and an uncertain future, embraced nostalgia for an idyllic Irish rural past that (of course) had never truly existed. The realistic "folk" mode pioneered by Lady Gregory continued to find favor at the Abbey and (in less sophisticated forms) on amateur and music-hall stages. Even while the ongoing violence and intermittently imposed curfews brought financial hardship to theatres, audiences were still eager to attend when productions spoke to needs of their imaginations.

At the Abbey, audiences responded favorably to comedies that depicted untroubled Irish societies in which lower- to middle-class people could exercise some control over their environments, ensuring stability. While the theatre had great trouble drawing audiences throughout the spring of 1922, its luck was somewhat better in the fall. Achieving a reasonable level of success was *Grasshopper*, Padriac Colum's conversion of a German play into a nineteenth century Irish rural setting, which, though essentially dramatic, drew laughter at inappropriate moments. Even more productive of laughter were Lennox Robinson's own *Crabb'd Youth and Age,* a one-act comedy that premiered in November, and George Shiels'

farcical comedy *Paul Twyning*. Productions that did poorly included the August premiere of *The Moral Law*, a serious drama about the Black-and-Tan War by R. J. Ray, during which (according to the diary of attendee Joseph Holloway) the audience "laughed at the sight of both soldiers and police, as if their mere coming on stage were funny" (qtd. in Hogan and Burnham, *O'Casey* 78).

This apparently extraordinary reaction is partially explained by reviews of the production, which all complained that the play was unrealistic, filled with pointless dialogue and soliloquies, and especially unconvincing in its depiction of a house raid and other wartime situations. The critic for the *Evening Telegraph* suggested that "Perhaps the time is not yet ripe for the writing of plays . . . portraying Irish life during the 'terror' in Ireland. . . . Events recalled after too short an interval may loom too large and grotesque in the mind" (30 Aug. 1922, 2). While this reviewer referred to the "mind" of the writer, it could also be said that for the audience, the events of recent history were still too affecting to be accepted when portrayed in an ineffectual manner on stage (such a performance constituting a grotesquerie in itself). In addition, similarities in the behavior of the *Grasshopper* and *Moral Law* audiences are telling; the audiences' repeated laughter at seemingly inappropriate moments suggest once again that the public sought entertainment above all in the theatre (the *Irish Times* blamed the *Grasshopper* laughter on the eagerness of the attendees "to get the sort of fare which they were expecting" [25 Oct. 1922, 6]). The difference in the two plays' respective takings, however, suggest that, beyond practical concerns, historical topics were more palatable than more recent events, and that high-quality writing like Colum's was still desired by Abbey spectators.

Perhaps the most unusual Abbey production of the year was Robinson's *The Round Table*, which drew mixed reviews and mixed audience responses on its January premiere. In this

play, called "unconventional" by Frank J. Hugh O'Donnell in *The Gael* (13 Feb. 1922, 11), the author experimented with combining audience-pleasing domestic comedy and a more perplexing "Strange Lady" character who might have been either a supernatural being or some form of psychological or philosophical manifestation.

Despite his personal artistic preferences, by 1922 Lennox Robinson must have been forced to acknowledge that the ethnocentric nationalism dominating Irish public discourse left little room for continental influences at a time when the crucial question in Irish politics was whether one opposing faction was more authentically "Irish" than the other. As the self-proclaimed and increasingly de facto Irish national theatre, the Abbey was not a suitable venue for formalist experiment. Even the Dublin Drama League played it relatively safe during the Civil War and avoided stylistically provocative work, leaving for the moment early favorites like Leonid Andreyev in favor of less groundbreaking plays by the likes of Robert Browning, Anton Chekov, Harold Chapin, and Eugène Brieux. (The League would return to fresher material after the wars, offering Henri Lenormand's Freudian *Time Is a Dream* in December 1923, before it was professionally produced in New York or London.) And although Robinson as playwright would continue to attempt some boundary-stretching works, they were rarely successful in popular terms; for example, after the Abbey produced Robinson's 1925 play *Portrait,* the *Manchester Guardian Weekly* wrote, "Perhaps it is old-fashioned, but Dublin still prefers *The Whiteheaded Boy* of Lennox Robinson to his essay in psychoanalysis" (10 Apr. 1925, qtd. In Hogan and Burnham, *O'Casey* 272). The latter straightforward 1916 comedy, mentioned in the previous chapter, had marked Robinson as a member of the "Cork realist" playwriting group.

At the Abbey itself, Robinson's desire to fill the theatre's seats and coffers led him inevitably to the comedies that drew large audiences at this time; the serious dramas he mounted were generally failures. Thus, the 1920's saw the emergence of what would come to be known as the "Abbey comedy" – in brief, a formulaic type widely considered to have dominated the Abbey stage for decades, and which many critics over the years have considered sadly antithetical to the much-valorized Irish dramatic genius of earlier decades. The type has several defining characteristics: first, it follows the conventions of the realistic well-made play (although without the probing insights of psychological realism); second, it features a harmonious, domestic, rural or small-town setting; and third, it shows a world in which clever working-class heroes can arrange lives and events as they ought to be, according to the convictions of the community. It bears obvious similarities to plebian works such as Bourke's *Kathleen Mavourneen*, although it lacks the elements of fantasy and music that stamp *Kathleen* as a music-hall piece. While Abbey comedies generally display more psychological realism and greater cohesion of form than the melodramatic variety entertainment of *Kathleen*, they nonetheless show strong ties to the nineteenth-century dramatic tradition, adhering to the unities of time and space by which playwrights conventionally created an illusion of reality and avoiding experimentation. Thus, in the Abbey comedy, scholarly detractors see the regrettable triumphs of realism over modernism, of stasis over innovation, and of pandering to audiences over cultural provocation. While all of these criticisms bear some degree of truth, they do not render the form meaningless or worthless. The Abbey comedy's cultural significance and power can be assessed through a thick description of one representative production.

II

Selling populism: *Paul Twyning*

Much of the blame for creating and cementing the Abbey comedy has often been accorded to George Shiels, a reclusive Antrim-born playwright who had donated money to the Abbey even before he first had a play accepted for production there. To Peter Kavanagh, Shiels's work was "the great vulgarizing influence on the Abbey Theatre . . . unfortunately . . . the directors relaxed their vigilance, and the public demand for Shiels's plays was satisfied" (147). Sanford Sternlicht's *Guide to Modern Irish Drama* notes that "after O'Casey, Shiels was the mainstay of the Abbey Theatre" (85-6), and Robert Hogan and Richard Burnham note Shiels's "reputation as a mere purveyor of popular entertainments" (*O'Casey* 274). D. E. S. Maxwell emphasizes the plays' "music-hall laughs" that "satisfy the taste for the broadly comic" of the masses (*Critical History* 84; Maxwell does, however, credit Shiels's later work with an ironic quality he calls modern in spite of the adherence to realism). In *After the Irish Renaissance*, Robert Hogan states that "George Shiels, more than any other playwright . . . wrote the typical Abbey play of the 1930's and 1940's," (33), and that "his influence on the Abbey repertoire was immense" (34). Hogan's descriptions of Shiels's early work include the terms "asinine farce" (33), "inanity," (34), "broad writing," "buffooneries," and a characterization of the author at this point in his career as a "clown" (39). (Hogan, like Maxwell, praises some later Shiels works, such as the 1940 drama *The Rugged Path*, which is indeed different in tone to the early comedies.) Rather than further castigating Shiels's work or that of his imitators, however, it is pertinent to ask *why* this particular form of drama arose at this particular cultural moment, and why it gained such power. An analysis of *Paul Twyning* and reactions to its initial

production provides some insight into the relationship between the "Abbey comedy" and the Irish Free State, a relationship grounded in the usefulness of pleasurable entertainment presenting visions of a unitary Irish society.

First and foremost, stories like *Paul Twyning* served very practical ends for Irish theatre in the 1920s. While the Abbey was threatened with insolvency, the discovery of a playwright who could help satisfy the theatre's mission of staging new Irish drama with numerous plays that actually drew paying customers into the theatre was welcome. George Shiels proved to be that playwright. He developed his comic writing through a few one-act plays produced at the Ulster Literary Theatre and (in 1921) at the Abbey, before the premiere production of *Paul Twyning* in October 1922. This was his first effort at a full-length play, and it met with considerable success not only in its initial production, but also in many Irish venues over succeeding decades. It is no wonder that the Abbey premiered new plays by George Shiels in eight of the ten years between 1921 and 1930. These Shiels comedies provide a clear example of audiences, playwright, and producing organization creating a supply-and-demand loop that offered benefits to all involved. In this loop one can see the co-dependent relationship implied in Bruce McConachie's definition of the theatrical formation, which requires "mutual elaboration over time" (*Melodramatic Formations* xii).

The roots of this ongoing success can be seen in the ideology underlying reactions to the initial production of *Paul Twyning*. The play tells the story of a traveling plasterer who takes on a temporary job for James Deegan, a retired magistrate who exercises a domineering will over his adult children, particularly his weak-willed son Dan. Dan is threatened with deportation to America for loving a girl his father considers unsuitable. But Paul, who is described as unable to

"keep his nose out of other people's business" (Shiels 150), plays one side against the other, eventually outsmarting Deegan, helping his sons to achieve financial independence, and forcing a measure of reconciliation with the lower-class father of Dan's love. All of this leads to Deegan's observation "There's a Labour leader lost in that frothy scoundrel" (186). Paul also finds some money and an attractive female companion for himself in the process, in the form of an American adventuress who attempts to run her own scam upon the Deegans.

The premiere of *Paul Twyning*, staged at a time when Dubliners were happy to find entertaining diversions from the stress of real life, was well-received. In October 1922 Dublin had just come through a summer that had seen the worst fighting of the Civil War, and the autumn brought increasingly harsh government measures aimed at quelling the anti-Treaty forces. In this atmosphere, a play that brought hearty laughs was welcome. Hogan and Burnham note that "even if the new play were merely undistinguished fun, it was greeted on its first performance by a distinguished audience" (*O'Casey* 83). Frank J. Hugh O'Donnell, reviewing the premiere production for the *Evening Herald,* was not alone in considering the play farce in genre rather than comedy (it seems that even the political references mentioned above were taken as objects of humor in a "fantastic and bizarre" world far from reality). O'Donnell judged, however, that despite some flaws, the play was "the most gloriously farcical phantasy that has come our way for some time" ("Comedy or Farce?" *Evening Herald* 4 Oct. 1922, 4, qtd. In *O'Casey* 82). He correctly anticipated that it would "prove itself to be a good commercial proposition for the Abbey Theatre," foreshadowed by the manner in which the first "audience showed their appreciation in no half-hearted manner." Shiels' play was apparently well-served on its initial production, with costumes, acting and particularly makeup receiving good reviews

throughout the press – not always the case with Abbey shows in this period, which often saw low technical standards. The overall charm was heightened by the performances of future film star Barry Fitzgerald, a popular comic everyman, in the title role, and of Michael Dolan, whom Jacques (writing for the *Independent*) credited with lending the play the potential for a "popular place in the repertoire of the Abbey," as Dan Deegan ("Beware of Lozenges," 4 Oct. 1922, 4, qtd. in *O'Casey* 83).

Like *Kathleen Mavourneen's* Terence, Paul Twyning himself is a rascally hero who subverts the dictates of an upper-class villain. In celebrating such a character, this story might seem on the surface to partake of revolutionary notions. Overall, however, rather than endorsing any ideology of committed Republicanism, the play enters whole-heartedly into sentiments that hindsight permits us to see as broadly characteristic of the Irish Free State. While offering subtle criticism of a rural Irish social code that often saw adult sons subordinate to their fathers well into middle age, *Paul Twyning* ultimately honors a mix of individual independence and obedience to the social order, delivering comeuppance for would-be autocrats and resolving various difficulties with conventional marriage-plots. Although it does criticize extreme patriarchal dominance, the play endorses traditional domestic relationships, and ranges itself solidly on the side of the middle and working classes, without ever engaging too seriously with difficult issues. Excess of all types is excluded; happy endings are sure.

This optimism is another cause for critical complaint about the "Abbey comedy" type, largely because it links the style to even less estimable popular types like *Kathleen Mavourneen*. The two plots (*Kathleen*'s and *Paul*'s) adhere to the domestic comedy genre's conventional resolution of marriage. There are certainly important differences between the two plays, many of

which, related to *Paul Twyning*'s adherence to dramatic conventions and realist style, gain the Shiels play a higher literary status than the earlier work. These include the way in which *Kathleen*'s plot resorts to fantastic elements in contrast to *Paul*'s observance of the unities of time, place, and action; Bourke's use of music and dance; and Shiels's more realistic dialogue. Despite these differences in construction, however, the two plays converge in thematic content, conveying similar messages. Peace, stability, simplicity, and fun are the crucial discursive tropes. Admittedly, *Paul Twyning* is neither so escapist nor so nostalgic as *Kathleen Mavourneen;* within its own fictional world it does not need to be, since the obstacles to a happy ending in the farce as opposed to melodrama (disinheritance vs. murder) are considerably lesser. In the Dublin social world (the "real" world, or what Clifford Geertz refers to as "the political, economic, stratificatory realities within which men are everywhere contained") the need to escape may also have been less pressing at this point in the war, for even as the state stepped up its military efforts, this meant that an end to the violence was nearing. (Although the Free State military, using emergency powers granted in autumn of 1922 in hopes of finally quelling the Irregulars, employed increasingly harsh measures such as summary executions, R. F. Foster suggests there was little controversy, since most of Ireland longed for an end to dissent: "it is important to note that public opinion did not repudiate such policies; the Free State government was strongly supported, even at its most coercive, because it was 'Irish'" [*Modern Ireland* 513].)

There are other differences attributable to the greater realism of *Paul Twyning*, including theatre audiences experiencing less distancing and closer identification with the characters of the play. Nonetheless, a crucial observation results from the comparison: manifestations of the same cultural discourses were found in disparate genres, in disparate venues, playing to disparate

classes, proving their relevance to and increasing their circulation throughout all strata of society. Bolstering this observation is the apparent increasingly déclassé behavior of Abbey audiences discussed in the previous chapter. The same trend toward egalitarianism can also be discerned in the descriptions of the Abbey's domination by ordinary mainstream discourse discussed in the introduction, even if this is usually seen as a cause for criticism. Could not these developments, though generally frowned upon by later scholars, instead be seen as evidence of the theatre's becoming even more vitally involved in the life of the nation, even if this is a profoundly different method of engagement than the previous (and critical) ideal of interventionist cultural provocateur?

Paul Twyning quickly became popular across Ireland, demonstrating that the script itself resonated with a broad spectrum of the Irish population. Like *Kathleen Mavourneen,* it would be revived throughout the years. A critic for the *Limerick Leader* found kinship with the protagonist of *Paul Twyning* in a local amateur production in 1929: "His match-making for others and for himself, and his smoothing over of the dilemmas which he created were of our life, and we laughed with, not at, his jokes" (9 Dec., 3). That same year, however, literary critic Andrew E. Malone offered a more sobering opinion in his influential book *The Irish Drama*, arguing that, despite some value in the character type of Paul Twyning himself, Shiels's comedic work otherwise made "no attempt to effect a contact with the life of the Ireland in which the scene is supposed to be laid" (239). (Malone blames this characteristic of Shiels's work not on social trends or audiences but on the physical disability that prevented the playwright's "immersion in contemporary life," yet goes on to call the whole of Irish comic drama "a poor and a paltry thing" (240).) Bearing out Malone's point, the play, although it is set in

contemporary Ulster, makes no reference to the politics that vexed Ireland at the time (this very significant "smoothing over" seems to have gone unnoticed by the Limerick writer quoted above). Perhaps *Paul Twyning* connected with the life that Ireland wanted to live, rather than that which it was living. Lennox Robinson wrote in 1951 that "George Shiels is the Thomas Moore of the Irish Theatre. Moore is often despised by the intellectuals, but yet [sic] in the hearts of Irish men and women he is their national poet" (122). If the long-time director of the Abbey Theatre considered Shiels to be the national playwright of the Irish public, it seems safe to say that Shiels's work should occupy a prominent place in discussions of national culture.

Why, then, would a "national" writer ignore issues of such pressing importance to the nation? Historian Thomas E. Hachey, in *The Irish Experience*, calls "the Northern Ireland question" the "most compelling problem to confront the new state" (172). One might expect that a play written and premiered during the Civil War, featuring characters who move back and forth between northern and southern counties, would naturally touch upon this question, even if only briefly. Instead, the events unfold in an Ireland where mobility and harmony between north and south (Paul is a Dubliner) are taken for granted, and violence is not even a specter. The play projects a unitary Ireland: not one which has triumphed over the divisions enacted during revolution, civil war, and political debate, but one in which such questions simply do not exist. North, South, and the Irish diaspora (in the person of a fast-talking Irish-American character with whom Paul falls in love) function merrily together in a fantasy world where the only dividing lines are mild cultural stereotypes such as that of the thrifty Ulsterman. Here is a vision of Ireland that embodies scholar Benedict Anderson's notion of the imagined community: "regardless of the actual inequality and exploitation that may prevail in each, the nation is always

conceived as a deep, horizontal comradeship" (7). Again, a similar ideology prevailed in *Kathleen Mavourneen*, although the contemporary *Paul Twyning* is less troubled by class differentials than the historical piece. Each play in performance enacts and transmits a particular vision of Irish identity that proved useful in creating the history and self-definition that a troubled society needed as it stabilized. In eliding certain social difficulties, these popular performances helped the postcolonial culture to "reinvent," in the words of Joseph Roach, troublesome portions of the communal history (or present history-being-written) that is encoded through "the social processes of memory and forgetting, familiarly known as culture" (*Cities of the Dead* xi).

Christopher Murray, while acknowledging the popular appeal of Shiels' work, argues that plays like Shiels's 1920s comedies "sanctioned evasion of serious issues" (*Twentieth-Century* 114). While ignoring obvious conflicts like the Northern question certainly constitutes evasion, it is crucial to recognize that evasion, like its close cousin escapism, constitutes a serious cultural issue in and of itself. Tellingly, when George Shiels did attempt to take on some of the grimmer facts of Irish life in *The Retrievers* (premiered May 1924), a farce with a Civil War setting, reactions were not particularly favorable either from critics or from audiences. Evasion is typical of a sort of willful collective amnesia that characterized the early Free State, and can also be seen in other nations emerging from periods of unrest into more stable years. Indeed, such attitudes often seem to help to promote peace and stability. Somnolence, rather than the continual probing of still-open wounds, may have been the best thing for the survival of the Irish Free State. And that survival, ultimately, was what the people of the nation wanted, if survival meant peace.

III

The stabilizing culture

The years from 1922 to 1924 brought the new state more trials, but it endured. Saorstát Éireann officially came into being on 6 December 1922, on the first anniversary of the signing of the Treaty that had established the state's parameters. Although the government had lost two of its most significant leaders the previous summer with the deaths of President Arthur Griffith and military commander Michael Collins (Griffith's Dublin funeral procession on 16 August had registered as a powerful show of support for the new state, exemplifying the performative power of parades noted by Roach and Bunseki Fu-Kiau), its determined campaigns against the anti-Treaty forces actually gained momentum in succeeding months. Republicans, functioning essentially as guerrillas, lacked the strength and organization of the Free State troops. In April 1923, the Irregulars lost their military leader with the death of Liam Lynch, and on 24 May, Eamon de Valera, considered the president of the Irish Republic, ordered his followers to lay down their arms. After the deaths of an estimated 4,000 to 5,000 people (Regan 374), the new Irish state had passed its first, and most crucial, test.

National stability would increase as the new state progressed beyond infancy, with the government showing its strength by successfully putting down a potential military rebellion in March 1924. On that occasion, the Free State announced plans to shrink the army by dismissing more than half of its 60,000 troops, certain veteran soldiers and officers mutinied. The Saorstát government, now headed by William Cosgrave as President of the Executive Council, made some concessions (such as instituting a military pension plan), but immediately dismissed such figures as the secretary of defence, and, subsequently, the thousands of soldiers as initially

planned. The success of this maneuver was highly significant for Irish culture, establishing a nation-state dominated by civil rather than military authorities.

The citizens of the new Free State embraced this peace, even in 1925, when nationalists once again had real cause for complaint. In this year, a long series of Boundary Commission meetings with the British government came to a close. Intended to resolve the provisional settlements of the Treaty that had ended the Anglo-Irish War, the Boundary Commission simply left in place the temporary borders established by the 1921 Treaty. The six Ulster counties partitioned off by the Treaty were designated to remain permanently under British governance, a highly unsatisfactory end for nationalists who believed that significant parts, if not all, of the six counties belonged within the Irish state. And yet, although the same set of issues had provoked bloodshed among the Irish subjects of the British monarch only a few years before, among the citizens of the Irish Free State the 1925 agreement eventually found acceptance, if not pleasure.

Despite the objections of Republicans (and the unfortunate implications for future violence in the Irish island), the partition settlement may have made the process of postcolonial state-building much easier for the South, since it meant the solidification of a 26-county body dominated by one religion and by two political parties that shared goals varying primarily in degree rather than widely in aim. It also meant that the people of the new Irish state could more easily be (and were) defined in historical, ethnic, and religious terms, as the descendants of continuously occupying Gaelic peoples – without the troubling presence of a large, vocal Ulster Presbyterian minority. R.F. Foster argues that "the removal of that intractable element [Northern loyalists] helped ensure social and cultural coherence to a degree otherwise impossible, an

important influence behind the Free State's much-vaunted political stability" (*Modern Ireland* 531).

Social cohesion meant that Gaelic-ness and Catholicism were crucial elements of the developing civil discourse of the new nation. Official government campaigns fostering Gaelic culture and language began to proliferate. The rhetoric they employed was not entirely based on notions of ethnic purity; to take such a strict line would have been to ignore the contributions of Anglo-Irish Protestants in revivifying ancient myths in the Celtic Revival. Nonetheless, it does suggest a reliance on bloodlines in establishing community. Foster quotes records of the National Programme Conference on Primary Instruction which state the importance of showing "that the Irish race has fulfilled a great mission in the advancement of civilization," as part of a program intended "to revive the ancient life of Ireland as a Gaelic state, Gaelic in language, and Gaelic and Christian in its ideals" (*Modern Ireland* 518). The last phrase in that comment demonstrates the extent to which religious faith and Gaelic civilization were conflated, in an attempt to bring the two most distinctive aspects of twentieth-century Ireland into one. They did find common ground in some respects, which would have particular effects on cultural phenomena like the theatre: "The bishops were indeed conservative, even reactionary in some instances, but there was also a xenophobic hostility toward the outside influences of modernism within Irish society that derived equally from the Gaelic and Irish-Ireland movements" (Hachey, Hernon and McCaffrey 182). The primary means for transmitting both of these cultural themes was to be a national system of education in which "Catholic teachers under Catholic control" (Association of Catholic Clerical School Managers, quoted in Foster, *Modern Ireland* 534) would transmit Irish language and mythic history to the distinctly non-British "Irish Irelanders"

of the future. The arts played a role as well, as I will address in a more detailed discussion of Irish-language theatre in the next chapter.

Yet despite all the official and non-official attempts at Gaelicization, Catholicism was the prevailing order of the day, and would continue to be the most defining characteristic of Free State culture for decades. As Conor Cruise O'Brien writes in *States of Ireland*:

> It was never officially called a Catholic State, of course. Its territory (twenty-six counties) was what Lloyd George had defined as 'Southern Ireland'. Its first official title was the Irish Free State. . . . Then the name of the State became, in the Irish language, Eire and in the English language Ireland . . . (103)
>
> However defined, named or described, the State remained within the boundaries of Lloyd George's 'Southern Ireland' and retained the essential characteristic of that entity: that of being that part of the island which was inhabited, in overwhelming majority, by Roman Catholics. (104)

Catholicism was a major part of everyday life for most Irish people, especially since Ireland's nineteenth-century "devotional revolution" (in the term of Emmet Larkin) had influenced the wide-scale adoption of small rituals such as rosaries and novenas and widespread use of religious symbols such as holy pictures (see "The Devotional Revolution in Ireland, 1850-1875"). Church influence in public life could not be unexpected when most of the individuals involved in government adhered to this type of religion.

Catholicism began to play more of an obvious role in Free State theatrical discourses than it had under the British colonial government. A paper delivered by playwright T. C. Murray to the Catholic Truth Conference on 12 October 1922 (and subsequently summarized in the

Evening Herald) foreshadowed the relationship between theatre and the new state when Murray argued that each had an essentially Catholic nature. Murray, who like Lennox Robinson was termed a "Cork realist," was already an important Abbey playwright (his *Birthright* of 1910, *Maurice Harte* of 1912, and *Autumn Fire* of 1924 are well regarded to this day). In his speech, Murray made it clear his beliefs did not necessarily mean that he was afraid of taking on controversial issues, stating that drama must depict both "the nobler and baser elements in man's nature" ("Catholics and the Theatre," 12 Oct. 1922, 1, qtd. in Hogan and Burnham, *O'Casey* 126). Murray had in fact written a play for the Abbey (*The Serf,* 1920) that contained criticisms of a parish priest's management of a country school, and his *Aftermath* of 1922 dramatized the effects of unfortunate marriages. He believed, however, that in the truly Irish theatre, it was essential, indeed inevitable, for drama to embody a Catholic sensibility (*O'Casey* 127).

Suggesting a split between modern Irish and modern Continental modes of thought, Murray went on to praise the Abbey Theatre for its support of the former:

> the trend of the stage all over Europe is toward decadence. On the other hand, the Irish National Theatre [has] preserved on the whole a singularly healthy tone, far above any standard which obtains elsewhere. This is directly due to the fact that it derives its inspiration from the life and thought of the most Catholic nation in the world to-day. Its future should therefore be a matter of concern to all of us from a Catholic as well as a National point of view. (126)

He predicted a new blend of nationalism and morality that would lead to good things for the Abbey in the Free State era, saying, "A deeper sense of nationhood than they had felt for a century is ours to-day. That it has led to such woeful happenings only shows its intensity. The

new drama will reflect this heightened spiritual consciousness" (127). The theatre would be improved, in his view, if the Catholic Church would take a more active interest: "Was it not for the Church, while sternly condemning what is bad or irreligious in the art of the theatre, to foster what is good?" (126).

Although Church hierarchy would devote little energy to fostering good drama over the coming years, and much of its critical energies were centered upon the burgeoning art of the cinema, it is plain that the particular brand of Irish Catholicism that came to dominate Free State culture had a significant effect upon its theatre, and that the duly influenced theatre, in turn, contributed to the ideology of the society. While the most obvious impact of Catholicism upon the Abbey Theatre would come with the introduction of a government representative to the theatre's board, the influence of a mono-religious society could be seen, for example, in the theatre's 1924 season, which, while most noted for the premiere of *Juno and the Paycock*, also saw successful productions of Gregorio Martinez Sierra's *The Two Shepherds* and *The Kingdom of God*; Murray's own "morality play" *Autumn Fire*; and Lady Gregory's version of Christ's Passion, *The Story Brought by Brigit*, in her own "Kiltartan" Irish country dialect. Critiqued as morally gruesome for its depiction of the dark side of tenement life was the prizewinning short tragedy *The Passing* by "Kenneth Sarr" (Kenneth Reddin), produced in December 1924 (*Irish Times*, 10 Dec., 5; *Irish Independent*, 10 Dec., 4). Catholic-inflected works by Martinez Sierra, Paul Claudel, and Jacinto Benevente found approving audiences at the Dublin Drama League.

The Catholic nature of the new state soon became clear in social policies that, though not initiated by the Church per se, correlated with its policies. The first of two major censorship acts, the Censorship of Films, was passed in 1923; Censorship of Publications followed in 1929,

and Catholic priests were appointed to a national board of censors. A law prohibiting divorce in 1925 created a real social distinction between Ireland and the United Kingdom that made some members of the Protestant minority uneasy, as did officially outlawing birth control (1929 and 1935). Criticism of such measures, however, sometimes only increased the sense of distance between Protestant and Catholic Free Staters. Conor Cruise O'Brien describes William Butler Yeats's reaction to the divorce bill:

> W.B. Yeats denounced the Bill in the Senate with majestic vehemence as inflicting a wrong on the Protestants of Ireland. The language he used implied that Protestants were an elite group, or caste, who should not have laws made for them by their inferiors. Naturally the speech annoyed Catholics, but most Protestants also thought it unwise. (115)

Yeats spoke out of a disillusioned realization that the descendants of the Protestant Ascendancy, despite the accommodations made for them in the Senate, would not occupy a place of privilege in determining the course of the new state.

His disappointment may have been compounded by the fact that, despite the seminal role of Celticism in modern independence movements, the new state was becoming more determinedly Catholic than it was Gaelic, and the first was decidedly less palatable to Protestants than the second. Despite the official emphasis on Irish language and culture in education, the percentage of Irish-speakers in the country did not rise substantially during the Free State years (nor thereafter), primarily for the reason that it was simply impractical. Qualified language teachers and adequate educational materials were scarce, and parents were reluctant to raise their children in a language that had questionable potential for individual advancement in a modern

society. But with 93% of the country churchgoing adherents to Catholicism, the actualization of Catholic morality in the new representative democracy was all but inevitable. While the Free State government maintained full and equal rights for Protestants (manifested in a constitution that included a bill of rights), Protestant mentality was bound to change under the new system and with loss of connections to Ulster and England. Between 1911 and 1926, emigration meant that the Protestant population of the 26 counties diminished by one-third. It was a vicious circle; the more univocal Irish society became, the more differentiated voices it lost.

IV

The postcolonial and the international: creating an official theatre

On the small scale, emigration also played at least something of a role in the changing character of the Abbey audience, as there were slightly fewer members of the Anglo-Irish elite, and a growing number of Free State power figures to make up audiences. The same practical difficulties (curfews and lack of audience members) that drove many Abbey actors overseas in the early 1920s nearly meant the closure of the theatre itself. English sympathies for Irish culture had proved essential to the survival of the Abbey in these years, problematizing its borderline status within Ireland. When the theatre's productions and audiences were severely limited by the violence and curfews of the Anglo-Irish War, the Abbey directors relied on fundraising efforts in London. In the spring of 1921, W. B. Yeats, then living in England, had organized a lecture series that (together with a benefit performance and a large donation from Lady Ardilaun) saved the theatre from insolvency.

In hindsight, these donations draw attention to the Abbey's English ties, which dated back to the financial support of Annie E. Horniman, which had allowed the INTS to incorporate and survive early in the 1900s. Financial support from the British upper-classes and intellectual elite strengthened public perception of the theatre as Anglo-Irish rather than Irish-Irish, a problem that would continue to dog the theatre during tense times for Irish politics, especially when it presented material that smacked of any sort of controversy. Lecturing to a London audience, Yeats offered some justification for this type of criticism when he seemed to place himself above the Irish audience as a sort of native intellectual explaining the dull preferences of the colony to the metropole whose innovative tastes Yeats actually shared. As Robert Welch

writes in *The Abbey Theatre: Form and Pressure,* Yeats admitted "that, for the foreseeable future, the theatre would continue in the social realist style." Yeats justified this mundane style by appealing to his audience's charitable intentions toward the unruly Irish, arguing that the increasingly predictable Abbey style "would serve a pragmatic function in a newly settled Ireland, that of explaining one faction to another, and party to party" (79).

Brian Friel complained in the program notes for *Translations* in 1980 that "apart from Synge, all our dramatists have pitched their voices for English acceptance and recognition" (Grene 5). While Friel's blanket statement hardly seems defensible, it does highlight one of the central dilemmas not just of the modern Irish theatre but also of postcolonial cultures in general: the role of external acknowledgment. Because a fledgling national culture must constantly struggle to establish itself as a legitimate, lasting entity in the larger world, its cultural discourses always have an extra-national element. From its inception, the Abbey Theatre staged its productions not simply for bodies in a Dublin theatre, but also for an international audience, in both a literal sense through tours, and also in a more theoretical sense, using its reputation to export its images of Irishness throughout the world. The Abbey, as Irish people of the 1920s were aware, could provide effective propaganda overseas as well as within Ireland. Lennox Robinson, for one, in the letter offering the Abbey Theatre to the government of Saorstát Éireann as a gift (and signed by Yeats and Gregory), contended that the theatre had "brought honour to our country," and that it would be "one of the nation's glories" if operated as an official state theatre (qtd. in Robinson 125).

While many Irish nationalists worried that Sean O'Casey's *The Plough and the Stars* (1926, to be discussed further) would tarnish the Irish image overseas, the work of George Shiels

could export a more desirable Irishness (despite the fact that literary history has enshrined the former playwright rather than the latter as a distinctive Irish genius). An item in the *Saturday Evening Herald* during the original production of *Paul Twyning* expresses confidence that Shiels and other playwrights of his era and ilk would do the theatre credit on the international stage: "Abbey patrons appreciate the continuance of the pioneer spirit which has done so much to make the little theatre famous throughout the world" (5). The tours that the theatre had undertaken in the United States and England (and the publications of its leading authors) had seen it feted as a unique institution worthy of world recognition. While this international exposure initially saw the Abbey both hailed and reviled overseas, it ultimately helped to solidify the theatre's stature.

The financial and artistic difficulties brought on by the wars also meant that many of the Abbey's most prominent actors departed Dublin for paying jobs elsewhere, seeking to capitalize upon the reputation the theatre had gained through its publishing, publicity, and earlier tours. Although these departures meant even more difficulties for the Abbey, the departed actors helped to spread the Irish theatre's fame. Lennox Robinson described the disastrous effects of the wars on the Dublin acting company: "the players' salaries had to be reduced and further reduced; the starriest of the players sought their living elsewhere" (*Curtain Up*, qtd. in Kavanagh 119). Robert Hogan and Richard Burnham write in *The Years of O'Casey, 1921-26,* "by 1922 there seemed to be almost as many Irish actors working outside of Ireland as there were at home" (128).

The group called the Irish Players, featuring such Abbey actors as Arthur Sinclair and Maire O'Neill, is the most significant case in point. The Players drew good houses in New York and Australia with Lennox Robinson's respectable *Whiteheaded Boy*, which was also

successfully produced with Abbey actors in London. Sara Allgood, for years the Abbey's foremost actress, likewise traded upon the Abbey brand when she organized performances of Irish-authored works in England. By avoiding controversy, these actors did not vex the "Irish" status of the Abbey for foreign observers; rather, by their critically successful performances, they helped to deepen it. Although the large-scale departure of Irish actors from Ireland was the result of struggles at home, this trend would ultimately help the Abbey to survive.

Another key element of international publicity was the ever-increasing standing of W. B. Yeats as an individual. During these years, as his reputation progressed from that of a slightly odd artist to that of a truly eminent writer and even statesman, it came to shed considerable luster on his favorite institution. As Yeats's theatre came to be more widely accepted as "Irish," so too did Yeats himself, largely due to rising external perceptions of the man. An earlier series of Yeats lectures, while not explicitly in support of the Abbey, did contribute some increased respectability to the theatre's reputation in the United States when he embarked upon his first lecture tour there, from October of 1919 to May of 1920. The ongoing publication of Yeats's plays and poems (together with those of other Abbey writers such as Synge and Gregory) augmented the literary reputation of the theatre. Yeats lived mostly out of Ireland for the eight years prior to 1922, but with the birth of the new state, he established a new family residence in Dublin and his finally habitable County Galway tower, Thoor Ballylee. 1922 and 1923 were key to confirming Yeats's international stature, as he became first a Free State Senator (December 1922) and then a Nobel laureate (November 1923). The two titles helped to confirm Yeats's claim to Irishness, as well, at least to the non-Irish: Senator for obvious reasons and Nobel laureate because it identified him as a peculiarly Irish genius. The fact that Yeats chose "The

Irish Dramatic Movement" as the subject for his Nobel Prize lecture speaks volumes about his commitment to theatrical endeavors, and his role in publicizing them. In the words of Christopher Fitz-Simon, the Nobel "bathed the tyro nation in an effulgence of artistic glory" (*Abbey Theatre* 58). It served the ends of both the Free State and Yeats himself for the government to confirm the hybrid Yeats as Senator in the role of "true Irishman" that he had presented in his tours abroad.

The Abbey directors mortgaged their theatre building to pay off the company's debts in 1924. This stopgap measure would not solve the theatre's fiscal problems in the long term, however. Thus, in 1925, the Free State government (in the person of Minister for Finance Ernest Blythe) was finally induced to grant the Abbey an annual subsidy. Blythe suggested in a letter to Robinson (apparently some years later) that the subsidy had been approved shortly after the government rejected the directors' offer to give the theatre to the Free State.

> President Cosgrave took no interest in the Abbey. . . . personally, I thought the offer to give the Theatre to the Government was more tactical than serious . . . but in any case I should not for a moment have thought that the Government should accept an offer of the Theatre. I had visions of questions being asked in the Dail as to why particular lines were allowed to remain in a certain play. . . .
>
> I thought, however, that there should be no difficulty in giving a small annual grant to the Theatre to make it possible to carry on in changed circumstances. . . . I mentioned the matter at the next meeting of the Government and no objection was raised. (Qtd. in Robinson 126)

The funds (initially £850), while not a major portion of the annual operating budget Robinson had estimated at £8000 in 1922, would meet the theatre's most pressing needs and relieve Lady Gregory of the duty of continual fundraising among her well-off friends (annual budget prepared for subsidy request and attached to a 24 April 1922 letter to Yeats, qtd. in Hogan and Burnham *O'Casey* 95). This subsidy was a milestone in the history of Irish culture. With it, the Abbey became the first state-subsidized theatre in the modern western world, testifying to the institution's international cultural significance. At the same time, the institution of the subsidy is seen as a sad event by many theatre historians, the equivalent of the theatre selling its soul; Peter Kavanagh, for example, writes that "The acceptance of the subsidy was the beginning of the end for the Abbey as a theatre of the imagination" (127).

Rather than critiquing the effects of the subsidy, it may be more productive to ask why it came about. Although £850 was not an enormous sum of money even in 1925, it came from an extremely cash-strapped government. The Free State had expended tens of millions of pounds on its war against republicans and was now repaying millions more to the British government. It had a shrinking tax base and an overwhelmingly poor population in sore need of basic services and infrastructure. That such a country would devote any money at all to the arts, when many of history's most prosperous nations have been reluctant to do so, is surely remarkable.

The subsidy testifies not simply to the esteem in which the Abbey Theatre was held in 1920s Ireland, but also to the stature it had attained as a cultural icon. The Abbey was already widely credited with a positive influence on the Irish movement for independence. Historians have generally considered the Abbey a significant part of an Irish cultural movement, beginning in the late nineteenth century, which contributed to the conditions in which the Easter Rising

became an ideological success. Contemporary evidence such as Hanna Sheehy-Skeffington's letter to the *Irish Independent* on the occasion of the *Plough and Stars* disruptions of 1926, of which she was a leader, attests to the widespread nature of this belief. Sheehy-Skeffington would not have been moved to protest O'Casey's play had her estimate of the Abbey's prior significance not been so great: ". . . I admire the earlier ideals of the place that produced 'Kathleen ni Houlihan;' that sent Sean Connolly out in Easter Week; that was later the subject of a British 'Royal' Commission; the Abbey, in short, that helped to make Easter Week" (15 Feb. 1926, 8).

To some, it may seem curious that an institution that was considered part of a *revolutionary* movement should readily be incorporated into the financial affairs of a government that was already proving to be socially and culturally conservative. Indeed, it is this perspective that has led so many theatre historians and literary critics to view the subsidy with sadness, as marking the official death of a vital and/or iconoclastic entity. To others, it may be more perplexing for a nearly opposite reason – that the new government was led largely by former Sinn Fein members whose politics had been considerably more radical than those of the Abbey directors throughout the preceding years. The fact that both theatre directors and government officials were willing to enter the relationship, however, suggests that each party saw the other as working "on the same side," rather than adhering to any classic opposition between authority and the arts.

My analysis of popular Abbey productions during these years has already suggested a thematic congruence between the Abbey and the growing conservatism of 1920s Irish culture, but there were more concrete reasons for the two entities to connect as well. Perhaps it is

disheartening for romantically inclined lovers of the drama to admit that the Irish Free State, mundane and prosaic as it was, still represented at least in part the fulfillment of certain goals of the Irish National Theatre Society, and therefore that it was not entirely unnatural that the state should be allowed some voice in the Theatre's undertakings. And like the Free State's leaders, the Abbey's leaders could mitigate orthodoxy with pragmatic needs. This is not to suggest, of course, that the Abbey directors were eager to take artistic direction from bureaucrats; after the rejection of the earlier offer to give the theatre to the state, the directors revised their expectations of their futures with the Abbey. Yeats, in particular, was concerned with maintaining artistic independence. And yet, even as the directors hoped for minimal government interference, they were glad to receive the "national" imprimatur from this state along with the money (although the Abbey was not officially made a state theatre with the subsidy, Yeats praised the government for its "intelligence" in creating the first "State-endowed" theatre in the English-speaking world in a speech given to mark the event [*Daily Mail* 10 Aug. 1925; Holloway *Abbey Theatre* 244]). Even if eagerness for the subsidy was motivated primarily by mundane concerns on the Abbey's side, it would be naïve to argue that the ideological associations thus brought about were antithetical to the theatre's ideals. The Abbey Theatre stood to gain from a state subsidy in multiple ways.

What, in turn, did the government gain from establishing the subsidy? Even among those politicians who might be supposed to be violently opposed to many Abbey productions, a state subsidy had been seriously discussed for some time. Republicans who in earlier years emphasized, and thus dismissed, the Anglo-Irish rather than Irish-Irish nature of the Abbey directorate eventually came to see the usefulness of the theatre. Lionel Pilkington, author of

Theatre and the State in Twentieth-Century Ireland: Cultivating the People, argues that this change began to develop in the teens:

> The contrast between the attitude of Sinn Fein to the Abbey in the period 1910-14 with the attitude of *New Ireland* [a Sinn Fein periodical] in the period 1916-18 [after the Easter Rising] is remarkable. Whereas in the case of the former, the Abbey Theatre was simply to be condemned, for the latter it was recognized as having an important ideological role in preparing Ireland for statehood. (81)

If Sinn Feiners, so committed to their vision of the Irish Republic that they continued to refuse to take the oath of allegiance and enter the Dáil (this despite winning a substantial minority of 44 parliamentary seats versus Cumann na nGaedheal's majority 67 in the first Free State general election in August 1923), could embrace the Abbey as a national power, it is no wonder that the more moderate politicians at the helm of the government could do so as well. This was, after all, a government conscious of establishing a place for Ireland in the international arena, whether that meant joining the League of Nations (1923) or exceeding the provisions of the Treaty by appointing Free State ambassadors to potential key allies like the United States, France, and the Vatican.

The original subsidy agreement contained no suggestion that government officials would control the minutiae of theatrical productions, although a government representative was added to the small board of directors. This representative would eventually, as it developed, function primarily as a censor of small rather than great matters. Joseph Holloway actually recorded on 12 October 1925 that George O'Brien, the first government appointee to the Abbey board, was more concerned about the public thinking that he "was interfering with the liberty of the theatre"

than with trying to quell a play that contained offensive language and implied incest, since his goal was to see the grant and the theatre succeed (246). Holloway went on to soothe O'Brien's concerns about potential disturbances or demonstrations within or without the theatre, assuring him that "the audience knew better." Holloway would be proved wrong only a few months later, when the *Plough and the Stars* riots showed that offending the decorum of the nation could be a more serious matter than offending the decorum of the theatre.

Thus the subsidy was not intended to remake the Abbey into a vehicle for official propaganda. Ernest Blythe, the Free State Minister for Finance and theatre aficionado who arranged the subsidy, did consider whether the government's money might be better spent on more clearly propagandistic enterprises, most specifically organizations like the Gaelic League that might aid Saorstát Éireann in its stated goal of revitalizing the native (and official) Irish language. Eventually, he decided upon funding an Irish-speaking drama group in Dublin (An Comhar Dramíochta, also known as na hAisteoiri Ath Cliath [The Actors of Dublin], the Gaelic Players, and the Gaelic Drama League) as well as the Abbey.

An Comhar, which gave its first performance on 12th November 1923, presented a range of plays translated into Irish as well as original Irish works about once a month, usually on the Abbey stage on Monday nights when the theatre would otherwise have been dark. Despite the £600 subsidy, the Gaelic Players were essentially amateurs, and their early years were marked by amateurishness; Robert Hogan and Richard Burnham write of the group's 1925 season, "As usual, the voice of the prompter was much in evidence" (251). Even when the *Irish Times* deemed that the group had achieved a more polished performance standard, their material was less than groundbreaking: "The actors now have reached a pitch of skill fitting them for

something more subtle than old-fashioned amateur theatricals" (19 May 1925, 9). Although An Comhar offered a performative outlet for winners of Irish playwriting contests, it hardly fostered a great school of Gaelic language drama. And the style of its plays was very familiar: the *Irish Times* said "the racy country comedy with a dash of poetry" is what "the Players do particularly well" (17 Feb. 1925, 4) – words that could, obviously, have been easily applied to the Abbey Theatre as well. While the subsidized An Comhar did achieve a certain amount of stability, its range was limited; thus Lady Gregory could term the group's sale of 115 season tickets "a great success" (*Journals Vol. I.* 489). Indeed, while An Comhar's mission was supposedly large enough to have an impact upon the entire nation-state, its operations remained confined to the capital, only symbolically connected to the countryside that the group purported to both represent and stimulate. In October 1928, a member of the Dáil from County Clare eager for language revival complained about An Comhar's limited reach in a parliamentary debate, calling the group a "Dublin institution" made even more inaccessible to those outside the city because its productions were staged during the work week (Hogan, P. par. 7).

Providing funding for An Comhar was another major discursive statement for the postcolonial government, although the propagandistic effects had a different focus (including the lesser international, more domestic political uses of An Comhar). It is a testament to the perceived power of theatre in Ireland in the 1920s that the performances of a few poorly trained amateurs could be perceived as lending strength to the hugely charged issue of language revitalization (the politics of language and performance in Ireland will be taken up in the next chapter, in a discussion of Galway's Taibhdhearc na Gaillimhe). It is a testament to the fact that the Abbey was already presumed to be working to a large extent within the cultural parameters

envisioned by Free State politicians that the theatre was funded despite its sometimes questioned associations with the Protestant Ascendancy. And it is a testament to the Free State government's cultural awareness that the new state should devote any of its scant resources to funding of the arts (in 1926, the Abbey's subsidy was increased to £1000 a year, close to meeting the gap between income [primarily ticket sales] and expenditures [primarily salaries], while the total granted to An Comhar and subsequently established Irish dramatic groups was £3,000, £1,200, and £1,000 in 1927-1930). Another manifestation of this ideology was seen in the 1924 Tailteann Games, best known as an Irish Olympic-style event (with international participation), but which also featured literary competitions and presentations. Hogan and Burnham write:

> No doubt the games were basically a public relations stunt, but, despite the heavy air of Irish self-congratulation, they were quite successful. However, they certainly also represented a desire of the new Irish Free State to indicate to the world that a condition of stability had been established, and that Ireland was now capable of taking its place among the nations of the world. And finally, although a bit portentous and pompous and chauvinistic, the games did invest the arts with a certain priority. (*O'Casey* 185)

Both sport and the arts had played significant roles in the development of popular nationalism in modern Ireland. In the Tailteann Games, art and sport were used to perform Irishness not just to the Irish but to the world.

No mere idealism but a shrewd political assessment of the power of international publicity played a large role in these budgetary decisions. For a postcolonial nation still in its infancy as an independent country, few factors are as crucial to survival as the acknowledgment

by more settled countries that the new state is, in fact, a viable entity deserving respect. Associating itself formally with a respected cultural institution granted the government a part in the powerful reputation of that institution. In addition, for a nominal price, the government was able to reinforce formally the notion that Ireland was a land of poets, artists, and scholars – a notion which had proved so fruitful during the Cultural Renaissance. The significance of international tropes in the Irish political discourse was highlighted in Yeats's speech congratulating the state on the establishment of the subsidy. Even when, according to Joseph Holloway, Yeats wished to emphasize the idea that the theatre "thought of Ireland first" rather than "outsiders," he went on to justify the theatre's importance in terms of its international reputation: "the fame of this theatre has gone everywhere: there is, I think, no European nation where its plays have not been performed, and I am constantly hearing of some new translation of some one or other of our dramatists into some Oriental language" (*Abbey Theatre* 243-4). With this the case, co-opting the Abbey, and all that its name connoted, was a logical strategy for the state. Not only might the theatre be useful in exporting appropriate images of Irishness (partly including the Irish language), but also the publicity around establishing the subsidy itself played into a desirable image of Ireland as a nation-state that loved and supported literature and the arts. Thus, the subsidy was of mutual benefit, both practically and imaginatively, to the Abbey and the Free State government.

International perspectives on the Abbey theatre and its creators played a major role in the stabilization (financially, artistically, and politically) of the temporally postcolonial Irish theatre. The theatre celebrated its new official status and its twenty-first anniversary in triumph at the end of 1925. Symbolically enacting this coming together, directors and statesmen took the same

stage, in an event that was a source of both rejoicing and worrying among Dublin's arts leaders. In response to the celebration, George Russell wrote in *The Irish Statesman*:

> Nothing can be worse for an intellectual movement than a chorus of approval. Universal approbation means that the people have come to be on its own level, and it is not ahead of them, and therefore it has ceased to belong to the aristocracy of intellect and character. If it ceases to produce plays which set the pit and galleries shouting, it will then be time for it to go into limbo. ("The Coming of Age of the Abbey," 2 Jan. 1926, 518)

Russell was not ashamed of his intellectual and social snobbery – elsewhere in the same article he calls the much-extolled Irish peasantry "one of the most incompetent in Europe" (518) – but his was a point of view that would find few sympathizers in a culture dominated by a new Catholic governing class. More and more often, the Abbey Theatre set the galleries laughing rather than shouting—save for one more curious clash between the discourses of nationalism and art.

V

Sean O'Casey and modes of censorship: *The Plough and the Stars* and *The Silver Tassie*

A: Early acceptance: the critical and public appeal of O'Casey's first two major plays

The Abbey subsidy was barely established when it was fiercely attacked during the riots that greeted *The Plough and the Stars*, a play whose February 1926 premiere had been highly anticipated. Despite the dual forces of the Abbey's continually growing reputation, and its profitable new Shiels-type comedies, the theatre had continued to struggle financially in the middle twenties. A series of new plays that straddled the line between reputable high art and populist comedy, however, made a substantial difference. These plays were the work of Sean O'Casey, who has been internationally canonized as one of the great twentieth-century playwrights, but who also demonstrated a great popular appeal in the early plays often considered his finest. To literary critics, O'Casey's are the most significant Irish plays of the 1920s. His three notable tragi-comedies of working-class Dublin life are hailed for their groundbreaking urban settings and powerful characters, many of whom are motivated as much by greed and survival instinct as by noble political conviction. Public reception, however, was a more complicated matter as the three plays premiered, illuminating fine yet definitive lines between the popular and the illicit.

The first two plays of the "Dublin trilogy," *The Shadow of a Gunman* (1922) and *Juno and the Paycock* (1924) were highly successful in practical as well as critical terms, to the extent that they are frequently credited with saving the Abbey in these fiscally troubled times. Joseph Holloway noted in his diary in 1924 that "Juno has broken all records" for attendance (231). At a later date (14 August 1924), Holloway, generally a morally conservative nationalist, wrote of

the success of the first two plays, *The Shadow of a Gunman* (1922) and *Juno and the Paycock* (1924):

> Certainly [O'Casey] has written the two most popular plays ever seen at the Abbey, and they both are backgrounded by the terrible times we have just passed through, but his characters are so true to life and humourous that all swallow the bitter pill of fact that underlies both pieces. The acting in both reaches the highest watermark of Abbey acting. It looks as if the Abbey is coming into its own at long last, and it's about time. (236)

With similar appreciation for O'Casey's "neo-Elizabethan" ability to mix the comic and tragic, W. J. Lawrence wrote in his *Irish Statesman* review of *Juno and the Paycock,* "He lures us into the theatre under the pretext of affording us hearty laughter, which, sooth to say, he most profusely provokes, and he sends us away with tears in our eyes and with the impression of direst tragedy lying heavy on our hearts" (15 Mar. 1924, 16).

Acknowledging O'Casey's ability to straddle genres, however, also forces acknowledgement that much of the appeal in O'Casey's Dublin trilogy derives from the same familiar crowd-pleasing elements that entertained audiences at on Dublin's more traditionally lowbrow stages. Even while personifying the human tragedy of the War for Independence and Civil Wars, O'Casey enlivens the stage with ne'er-do-wells, braggarts, and clowns, satirizing with a lively humor that is sometimes physical and sometimes crude. Observing a populist style throughout O'Casey's oeuvre, critic Christopher Murray (drawing on Stephen Watt's *Joyce, O'Casey, and the Irish Popular Theatre*) writes that O'Casey "is always closer to the popular tradition than consciously in line with intellectually accredited dramatic developments"

(*Twentieth-Century* 89). W.B. Yeats, rejecting O'Casey's 1921 play *The Crimson in the Tricolour* on behalf of the Abbey, had written, "It is so constructed that in every scene there is something for pit & stalls to cheer or boo. In fact it is the old Irish idea of a good play – Queens Melodrama brought up to date [and] would no doubt make a sensation" (*Letters of Sean O'Casey Vol. I* 90). (It is interesting to see Yeats, who struggled so hard to found a new style of drama, acknowledge here the right of the melodrama to the name "Irish.") Certainly the play to which Yeats objected, *The Crimson in the Tricolour,* is not one of O'Casey's best, but comments from other contemporary observers also suggest the primacy of entertainment even in O'Casey's acclaimed Dublin trilogy. There is evidence to suggest that Abbey audiences – which, as previously shown, increasingly found amusement even in unlikely plays – tended to respond to O'Casey's plays as comedy first and foremost; a commentator for the *Irish Statesman* complained of the "bovine merriment," "brainless laughter," and "idiotic titterings" that "continuously" sprang up through performances of O'Casey's *Shadow of a Gunman* and *Juno and the Paycock* (20 Sept. 1924, 46).

Hogan and Burnham suggest that this commentator may have been the writer Brinsley MacNamara; in 1926, Joseph Holloway recorded that MacNamara objected to O'Casey and his work not only on artistic but also on national terms, finding the man generally guilty of performing a "stage Irishman publicity stunt," and complaining that his "plays lower the tone of the Abbey, the players, and the audience. Now that Ireland is getting re-Anglicized, O'Casey's plays just suit the new class of audience who come to see them" (*Abbey* 270). W. J. Lawrence, despite his praise for the democratic nature of O'Casey's subject matter in the *Juno* review, also complained, "At present he [O'Casey] is apt to play a trifle too much to his audience. Wit he has

in abundance, but occasionally his snappy dialogue degenerates into a sort of sublimated music-hall crosstalk. Truth to life is sacrificed for the sake of a cheap laugh" (*Irish Statesman* 14 Mar. 1924, 16).

One should also note, after mentioning Holloway's praise for the quality of acting in the two productions, that praise for the pathetic appeal of performances like Sara Allgood's majestic Juno was only matched by approbation of the comic skill of the likes of Barry Fitzgerald, who had also played Paul Twyning and went on to deploy his skills with farce in various stage-Irish roles as a charismatic star of Hollywood films. Mugging and playing to the audience were not entirely absent from these or almost any Abbey shows. Despite obvious contrasts, the two Fitzgerald roles of Paul Twyning and Captain Boyle and the two successful plays of these crowd-drawing playwrights highlight the dominance of the realist style. Shiels and O'Casey have a great deal in common, even if Shiels's brand of happy ending drama is considered critically inferior to O'Casey's pathos. And despite the artistic and nationalist objections of those like MacNamara, O'Casey's plays, like Shiels's, sold out.

B: Limits of expressibility: censorship of content

O'Casey's first two major plays were, like *Paul Twyning*, *Kathleen Mavourneen*, and even (to an extent) *The Player Queen*, popular partly because temporally post-colonial Ireland demanded both entertainment and fantasies of a cohesive nation from its cultural influences. Even the political satire of *The Shadow of a Gunman* and *Juno and the Paycock* had proved acceptable when surrounded by comedy, since it was applied to a variety of parties and factions, satirizing all in a way that was almost therapeutic, while still holding out hope that decency

would prevail. O'Casey's third major play, however, which went beyond satirizing disputatious characters to questioning the very foundation histories of the Irish nation-state, was greeted in very different fashion. The performances of *The Plough and the Stars* onstage, in the theatre aisles, and in the press constituted statements (in Foucauldian terms) that illuminated the discursive limits of expressibility in Irish culture, through which censorship, public approval, and institutional theatrical arrangements helped to determine the forms and subjects of drama that functioned as part of the Irish imagination at this time.

In contrast to the popular approbation given to the first two plays of the Dublin trilogy, *The Plough and the Stars* quickly became an object of notoriety. Much of the negative reaction was due to the depiction of events and persons involved in Easter 1916 in a less than idealized fashion. Although the two earlier plays had evinced irreverence for republicans, this play went much further in taking on the already mythic martyrology at bedrock of the nation-state's self-conception. O'Casey uses actual words from Patrick Pearse's speeches, including the famous line "bloodshed is a sanctifying thing," in an ominous fashion, spoken by a figure seen only in silhouette through the window of the pub that serves as one of the play's settings. Using the drama of the Easter Rising and its era as the backdrop to pub and tenement settings filled with varied characters resulted in a combination of the lowbrow and the sacred, satirizing common notions of patriotism and morality. Negative reaction to this play was eventually widespread, since most Irish people could agree on the importance of the national liberation narrative, if not always on how it should be interpreted. The concern, once again, was with the authenticity of the Irish image.

The production was greeted with indignation, particularly by a group of women who had political and personal ties to the 1916 rebels. Although Hogan and Burnham write that contemporary descriptions of the opening night of *The Plough and the Stars* "make it amply clear that the reception of the initial performance was overwhelmingly enthusiastic," they also state that "even then there were quiet and ominous murmurs of dissatisfaction" (*O'Casey* 287). While reviews of the play itself tended toward the positive, by the fourth night of the production, audience members with Republican convictions mounted a protest. Hisses, boos, and objects thrown at the stage interfered with the performance; finally, it was interrupted when several women in the audience climbed onto the stage, and at least one man physically assaulted the actors, only to be handled in turn by Barry Fitzgerald. Policemen were called in and ejected several protestors, W. B. Yeats took the stage to denounce the audience's behavior, and the play resumed, playing to its close with some interruptions.

Some disturbances continued for the rest of the week *The Plough and the Stars* ran, although Robert G. Lowery, editor of the book *A Whirlwind in Dublin: The Plough and the Stars Riots*, contends that these riots were considerably less serious than the riots that greeted Synge's *Playboy of the Western World* in 1907. Lowery also notes that, in keeping with the popular success of O'Casey's earlier plays, this production was already "booked solid for the week and played to full houses for the entire run," box-office success that notoriety did nothing to diminish and perhaps enlarged (6).

The "riots" suggest that despite its tendencies toward predictability and conservatism, the Abbey still played a vital role in Irish culture. Indeed, its role in establishing the "Irish" was now perhaps greater than ever since it was officially entitled to the name, and internationally

recognized as such. Complaints over *The Plough and the Stars* emphasized these issues, focusing in particular on the perceived denigration of the republican flag. In the *Evening Herald* of 12 February, a front-page eyewitness account of the riots emphasizes the nation-state's responsibility for protecting and projecting a proper Irish image:

> such a play would not be permitted by the Government of any other country – certainly not in America, France, Germany, or under Mussolini at the present time. . . . There is an effort abroad to destroy nationalism and supplant it by internationalism, and the desecration of the National flag of a country. I should imagine the play would come under the Treason Act. It is quite possible that during the world war national flags were carried into public houses, and it is evident that Mr. O'Casey saw such an incident. But what are national censors for? There was an effort, too, last night to turn the incident into a political split, but this did not succeed. Free Staters and Republicans seemed to resent what they considered an attempt to desecrate the Easter Week rising and the memory of the dead. (1)

Hanna Sheehy-Skeffington, in her letter to *The Independent* explaining the protests, complained that "the incident [protests] will, no doubt, help to fill houses in London with audiences that come to mock at those 'foolish dead,' 'whose names will be remembered forever'" (15 Feb. 1926, 8). This comment reveals at once irritation that the Abbey's politics were, on this occasion, outside the national mainstream; anxiety that Ireland be perceived correctly internationally; and an astute assessment of the function of protests in publicizing those very productions they sought to suppress. Indeed, it seems as if Yeats was simultaneously castigating

and congratulating the riotous audience, when, in a famous speech from the Abbey stage, he stated that "The news of the happenings of the last few minutes here will flash from country to country" (qtd. in *Irish Times*, 12 Feb. 1926, 7). For Yeats, after all, who was conscious of his theatre's international artistic reputation, news traveling from country to country was quite likely to be beneficial.

O'Casey's defense of his play is hinted at in the passage above – that he himself was familiar with the 1916 rebels, and that his characters, plots and settings were true to Irish life. An argument based on such facts was unlikely to sway those whose definition of the nation relied upon an entirely different set of historical memories and political tropes. Reality was a question of perspective; and, in any case, Irish audiences' preference for the realist style did not necessarily indicate a preference for factually realistic content, as can be seen in the prevalence of domestic and nostalgic fantasy. Wryly, O'Casey demonstrated an understanding of public taste when he noted that certain of the objections to *The Plough and the Stars* seemed situational at best, writing to Lennox Robinson on 10 January 1926, "Lowsey [one of the off-color words to which various parties objected] is in 'Paul Twyning': is it to be allowed in that play and rejected in mine?" (*Letters* 165). Indeed, *Paul Twyning* and the Dublin trilogy have more than one point of similarity, as I have suggested earlier. Shiels' work, however, stayed safely within the bounds of the light comedy genre, combining realist style with unreal, imagined fantasy subjects, whereas O'Casey's threatened the popular imaginary by mixing drama and comedy and trafficking in all-too-real subjects that audiences preferred not to confront. *The Plough and the Stars* constituted a statement of knowledge that was not useful to the dominant cultural imagination in a historical moment whose primary societal concern was the production of

stability and unity. In earlier decades, the Abbey had run into trouble for misrepresenting the nation when it was seen as claiming to represent the subjugated knowledge of authentic Irish discourse; now, its fault lay in circulating through its newly official apparatus thoughts and scenes that were not acceptable within the normalizing, limited, version of history.

C: Forms of expressibility: the theatre as National

Much has been written about the *Plough and the Stars* riots. For a full understand of the ramifications of these events, however, they should be considered in relation to an event that played an equally momentous role in Sean O'Casey's career – the spring 1928 rejection of *The Silver Tassie,* the play whose rebuff by the Abbey caused the playwright to end his association with the theatre. Comparing the two controversies illuminates the importance of subject matter and style in Irish theatre, in an era when variations on both the usual depiction of nationalism and the usual realist style could prove dangerous. The first play was rejected by the public for its failure to re-enshrine popular republican myths as the bedrock of this conservative society; the second was rejected by the Abbey directors, particularly Yeats, for taking on the internationalist subject of World War One and employing an ambivalent modern (rather than confidently reactionary or realist) style. These two rejections manifest two different methods of censorship, which censored two different imaginative modes – in the later case, modernist style and subject, and in the earlier, realist style coupled with uncomfortably real, rather than escapist, content. The effectiveness of these socially influenced methods is reflected in the fact that, as I will discuss further in the next chapter, Irish theatre never faced legislative censorship. Together,

they demonstrate the limits of the postcolonial nation-*stage*, highlighting the cementing of an Abbey theatre discourse that would see few challenges in the decades to come.

The Silver Tassie depicts an initially brash young soccer player who, after going to war, is left bitter and wheelchair-bound at the end of the play. Two realistic acts bookend a fantastic second act set on the battlefields of France. By virtue of this second act, *The Silver Tassie* is regarded as an Expressionist play. Nesta Jones, author of *O'Casey and Expressionism*, summarizes common definitions of the term "Expressionist":

> The majority of expressionist dramas possess several of the following characteristic features: explicitly stated themes which convey a message or moral, or present particular states of mind which demonstrate both individual and group responses; juxtaposition of disparate styles which reflect the grotesque experience of contemporary life; the exploitation of a variety of theatre arts such as music, scenography and dance, to heighten the dramatic impact; an intense subjectivity resulting in distortion and stylization of visual effects (achieved through scene painting and lighting) and language (using verse, heightened prose and monologues) often intensified by the use of choric effects in movement and speech; abstraction and purification in the presentation of character to represent social groups rather than particular people; an episodic structure which made it possible to move more freely through time and space; and theatrical shock tactics of all kinds to intensify the dramatic experience. (12)

In its technique, the second act of *The Silver Tassie* warrants application of the term "Expressionist," widely applied to it from the time of its first circulation, despite Sean O'Casey's objection to being labeled as a member of any particular artistic movement.

W.B. Yeats was quick to defend *The Plough and the Stars* against disruptive audiences. But his rejection of *The Silver Tassie*, whose message is not a critique of nationalism but one of opposition to wars on the scale of World War I, was absolute. He deemed the play unsuitable for production at the Abbey from the start. The basic objections of Yeats and the other directors to the play were made immediately clear to an interested public when an angry O'Casey forwarded the letters the Abbey directors had sent him on the subject, together with his own letter of reply, for publication in the *Irish Statesman* and the London *Observer*. The letters revealed that while Lennox Robinson approved of O'Casey's attempt at a topic rather different than those of his "slum plays," he objected to the *Tassie*'s "mixture of the two manners – the realism of the first act and the unrealism of the second" (letter of 30 May 1928, qtd. in *Irish Statesman*, 9 June 1928, 268). Nesta Jones notes: "Raymond Massey, the first director of *The Silver Tassie* [in London, October 1929] remarked that, given the diversity of dramatic methods utilized within it, the play was not 'for tidy minds'" (14). Whether Massey's comment was an undeserved slur on Robinson and the Abbey or not, it offered a fair comment on the culture of the Irish Free State, which indisputably embraced tidiness over chaos in both art and politics; indeed, tidiness would become a stated goal of the future Irish Republic government in the 1950s with the inauguration of Tidy Towns competitions – even if their necessity pointed to an actual lack of neatness in day-to-day life.

Yeats himself, still the most powerful of the Abbey directors when it came to play selection and artistic vision, objected to the play's Expressionist style when he complained that it had no unity of action or single dominating character, and many latter literary critics have shared these concerns. Richard F. Petersen further blames Yeats's "intellectual arrogance" for the director's unwillingness to tolerate experimental theatre that embodied a conception of drama vastly different to his own (even while he called for more innovative plays). Petersen acknowledges consistency, however, in Yeats's demand to see central characters or subjects in plays submitted to the Abbey` ("Polishing Up the *Silver Tassie* Controversy," 126). In the case of the *Silver Tassie,* although style was a problem, Yeats's primary reservation seemed to be the subject to which the modernist techniques were applied. While Yeats approved of O'Casey's drawing upon his personal history of Republican and socialist involvement to write about the Easter Rising and Irish Civil War, he contended that the playwright had no business addressing the Great War. O'Casey's response that he was, in fact, interested in and knowledgeable about the European war fell on deaf ears. Rejection of the subject was a telling position for the subsidized national theatre to take, and reflective of wider ideas in Irish society. Despite the substantial losses and difficulties it had brought to the Irish people, World War One could not be accorded a place equivalent to that of the late troubles closer to home in the national imaginary or on the national stage.

The rejection of *The Silver Tassie* played a role in Sean O'Casey's break from Ireland's national theatre and the Irish state. The *Tassie* was the first of O'Casey's plays to be completed outside of Ireland, which may offer a partial explanation of Yeats's objections to the subject. O'Casey had left Dublin shortly after the controversial premiere of *The Plough and the Stars*

with a three-year lease on a flat in London. David Krause, in his comments accompanying volume I of O'Casey's letters, writes:

> Although he had been reviled and humiliated – he was "overcome by a temporary weakness" of embarrassment during the debate [a public debate over *The Plough and the Stars*] and had to sit down – he had no immediate intention of forsaking Ireland when he went to London in March 1926. . . . Gradually, however, a world of new friends, experiences and ideas was opening up to him. (164)

Supporting Krause's argument that O'Casey did not initially intend a permanent move to London is a letter in the National Library of Ireland, sent to O'Casey by George Yeats to inform him of his election to the committee of the Dublin Drama League in May 1926. He came to enjoy London life, however, and it seems that the rejection of *The Silver Tassie* helped finally convince him that it was best not to return to his native country and his first theatrical home. O'Casey would respond to Lady Gregory's attempts at peace-making after the *Silver Tassie* controversy by telling her that he found his treatment impossible to forgive. The ensuing rift was not only a turning point for O'Casey himself, but also a dramatic sign of cultural trends toward moral and national conservatism and stability. As I will show shortly, political developments both before and after the denial of *The Silver Tassie* and O'Casey's departure from Ireland correlated with these trends.

The public nature of O'Casey's long-term decision to exile himself from Ireland and its theatre points, once again, to a self-conscious performativity, through which (in this instance) he attempted to voice minority discourses that ultimately could not play a significant role in the Irish conversation. For many critics, Yeats's decision to reject *The Silver Tassie* had disastrous

consequences not just for O'Casey but also for the Irish theatre as a whole. Christopher Murray writes that Yeats "seemed to be denying a major playwright the right to be serious. He seemed to be offering aid and comfort to audiences who wanted no more from the national theatre than a good guffaw. Unfortunately, the trend once allowed was maintained over several decades" (*Twentieth-Century* 115). In this light, O'Casey's departure from Dublin and the Abbey can be and often is read as a symbolic end to the Irish Literary Renaissance. In a different, and perhaps more positive light, however, it can also be seen as the demarcation of the moment in which the Abbey Theatre became genuinely national.

Cultural interpretations of O'Casey's actions (going beyond individual subjectivity) are supported by the volume of third-person autobiography that describes this period in his life, *Inishfallen Fare Thee Well,* in which O'Casey repeatedly states "it was time" for the protagonist Sean to leave Ireland (231, 236). The reasons for this imperative went beyond the personal and professional to the national. Before the blunt repetition of the statement "It was time for Sean to go," O'Casey gives a condemnatory description of the Catholic Church's increasing hold on Irish life and imagination and the resultant cultural censorship, implying a strong link between the growth of Catholic social teaching and the playwright's feeling of alienation (235-36). He says that he will not be more in exile in Europe than he was in Ireland, stating that he feels the Ireland of the time is no home for artists (beyond a few narrow-minded drawing room habitués). O'Casey quite clearly suggests here that it was because of broad social developments in Irish history, rather than specific personal or career reasons, that he left Ireland. This social critique can be seen in the content of the play, as well; Christopher Murray argues that *The Silver Tassie* is "a condemnation of the collaboration between church and state in the sacrifice of manhood to

protect the status quo" (106), and church and state were certainly coming closer to "collaboration" in the development of the Irish Free State. (When the *Tassie* was eventually approved for production by a newly expanded Abbey directorate in the politically stable year 1935, various clerics and prominent Catholics objected to the second act's depiction of religion; the reaction of audiences and critics was lukewarm. Stage designer Joe Van□k suggests that the generally staid theatre was not capable of coping well with the script's combination of Expressionism and realism, writing in his essay for the catalogue accompanying the 2004 exhibition of Abbey stage designs at the Irish Museum of Modern Art that "the play proved a challenge to the designer, to blend two opposing worlds, and it was not to be satisfactorily achieved until the . . . revival of 1972" [4].) Although O'Casey was not consistently the committed Republican he has sometimes been painted, he was committed to Socialist (even Communist) ideals. The Free State, with its authoritarian government and endemic poverty, was hardly the dawning of the utopia that a man of O'Casey's political convictions might have hoped for. And, perhaps even more to the point, it showed no promise of becoming such a state.

VI

Consolidation and stabilization

As the Free State developed, the essential *smallness* of Ireland became more and more clear. The government had limited aims, and limited funds. These limitations echoed the narrow physical boundaries of the country, as well as the limitations of mental experience encountered in such a homogeneous population. As Terence Brown says, after the violence of the Irish wars, "a general shift to the right was widely accepted by an Irish public that sought peaceful stability after a period of intense uncertainty" (*Ireland* 37), with the result that Ireland in the 1920s was dominated by "a social order largely composed of persons disinclined to contemplate any change other than the political change which independence represented" (17). The disparate treatments of *The Plough and the Stars* and *The Silver Tassie*, together with O'Casey's self-exile from his home nation, constitute another clear example of David Cairns and Shaun Richards' contention that postcolonial culture inherently excludes "those elements which contra-dict, speak against and speak otherwise than the dominant group" (180). Neither O'Casey's unorthodox version of new Irish national myths nor his brand of European modernism could thrive in this Ireland. The de facto censorship seen in the rebuff of these two plays demonstrates the extent to which theatre participated in limiting expressibility in Irish cultural discourse; it is particularly telling in light of the fact that, as I will discuss further in the next chapter, Irish theatre never faced *legislative* censorship.

Perhaps the most dramatic demonstration of Cairns' and Richards' postcolonial unity came in 1927, when Eamon de Valera decided to lead his political party into Dáil Éireann. William Cosgrave's government faced a series of challenges in 1926 and 1927, including public

dissatisfaction with the "ultimate financial agreement" that committed the Free State to send some £5 million a year to Britain for land and pension payments, with a public safety act instituted in response to rising IRA attacks on police barracks, and with legislation that put new limits on the opening hours and numbers of public houses. During this period, de Valera broke with the ranks of the most radical Sinn Fein republicans, and formed the Fianna Fáil party. Partly as a result of Cumann na nGaedheal's difficulties, the election of June 1927 saw Fianna Fáil achieve substantial results, nearly enough to take control of the Dáil depending upon the votes of minor parties and independents. De Valera and his followers still refused to take the oath of allegiance to the British Empire, however, preferring to remain in opposition outside the parliamentary chambers. But when the Dáil passed an act requiring even candidates for both houses of the Oireachtas to declare their willingness to take the Oath if elected, Fianna Fáil was faced with the unwelcome prospect of no role in representative politics at all. After a series of negotiations and demonstrations against the oath, de Valera's political pragmatism at last won out; recognizing that the Free State was indeed surviving, he determined that his party should now work for desired changes within the system rather than working against it.

The Fianna Fáil deputies signed their oaths and took their seats in the Dáil in August. De Valera contended that his own signing of the oath was not a capitulation but a meaningless, non-binding performance, adding to the drama of the moment by preceding it with a speech in Irish in which he called the signature a mere formality, covering the words to which he appended his signature with a piece of paper, and removing a Bible placed upon the signature book to the other side of the room. Thus, while technically taking the oath, de Valera attempted to subvert the meaning of a formally determinate sign through performative means, re-inscribing the action as a

marker of anti-colonial independence rather than affiliation to the imperial center. The result was a set of spoken words whose meaning was now hybrid, subject to interpretation. In historical retrospect, the redefinition of the oath provides a striking example of Bhabha's argument in *Locations of Culture*:

> Terms of cultural engagement, whether antagonistic or affiliative, are produced performatively. . . . The social articulation of difference, from the minority perspective, is a complex, on-going negotiation that seeks to authorize cultural hybridities that emerge in moments of historical transformation. (2)

To de Valera and the Irish public at the time, however, it was important that Fianna Fáil's performance of the oath be read not as ambivalent, but as an essentially Irish action in the best interests of the nation-state. From the Irish perspective, unity was a more useful statement than hybridity.

When the Cumann na nGaedheal government, hampered by large representation from minor parties as well as Fianna Fáil, was unable to work effectively during the summer of 1927, a no-confidence vote necessitated another national election in September. The election resulted in large numbers for the two major parties. This meant the effective establishment of an enduring two-party system, which would prove to be a major factor in the stability of the new state. Thomas Hachey writes that some have seen the election result as an "expressed preference by the electorate for the stability of a two-party system over the uncertainties of proportional representation" (177). William Cosgrave retained control of the government (though he now lacked the support of the recently assassinated Kevin O'Higgins, a particularly able minister), even as Fianna Fáil began to build its democratic machine. The Irish state was not now free of

dissension, but with the transfer of dissent from battlefield to ballot box and parliamentary chamber, it was well on its way. This ongoing stabilization of Irish politics had been accompanied by a theatrical stabilization that saw increased steadiness in both the organizational/financial (with the government subsidy) and artistic sectors (with the supremacy of the realistic dramatic style). Both the riots over the premiere of *The Plough and the Stars* and the Abbey's rejection of *The Silver Tassie* functioned as modes of censorship that contra-dicted minority voices. The first case exemplified the power of the conservative Catholic-nationalist postcolonial discourse in the Free State and the limits of the historical knowledges it could accommodate. The second case, together with the departure of the one period writer universally acclaimed as a success in the play, Sean O'Casey, was evidence of the Irish theatrical world's inability to accommodate modernist form. Cultural conservatism helped to provide stability, and over the next few years growing stability would permit the entry of a few experimental voices. Because the Abbey was now officially part of the state, however, modernism would be accommodated only as a niche element that posed no serious threat to the cultural discourses that supported the mainstream imaginary.

Chapter Four

The Stable Culture and the Modernist Fringe, 1928-1932

I

Outside the Abbey: expanding stages, contracting state

In the late 1920s, the Irish theatre began to see a greater degree of variation than it had during the previous several years. As the new state settled into stability, many wondered if there would, after all, be room for more non-conservative cultural elements in the Free State. While the Abbey itself continued for the most part in the unadventurous mode exemplified in the dismissal of O'Casey and the success of Shiels, other new groups attempted to expand the boundaries of the Irish stage – with mixed results. In this chapter, I primarily focus on theatre outside the Abbey, both in Dublin and beyond, look at these variations in theatrical discourses as Ireland headed toward the 1930s, and explore what these variations suggest about the state of the culture and state. Ultimately, I find that while there was room in post-independence culture for some incursions of cosmopolitanism and modernism, their ongoing restriction to elite niches points to the culture's continuing need for consolidation. The political history of the period displays the continuing dominance of postcolonialism in the Irish state: while increased political participation added to a sense of confidence in the state's long-term security, it also showcased a continuing preoccupation with the nuances of national definition.

The entry of the Fianna Fáil party into the Dáil had lasting consequences for the Irish state. With two strong parties now participating in the political process, the process itself was legitimated. Although de Valera continued to press for the establishment of an Irish Republic,

contending that the Free State was not the proper political expression of the Irish nation, his decision to take the oath in order to play a role in parliamentary politics served, ultimately, as a support for Saorstát Éireann. Over the next few years, Fianna Fáil's role in Irish government would become more and more significant, as the Cumann na nGaedheal government increasingly ran into difficulties. I have already mentioned the political problems that helped de Valera's party to make gains in the June 1927 elections. Thomas E. Hachey writes that at this time, "a combination of unpopular policies and organizational deficiencies began to jeopardize the party's control over a restive electorate" (186). Cumann na nGaedheal also lost its most dynamic leader with the assassination of Kevin O'Higgins, and caused more dissatisfaction by passing another harsh public safety act in response to the death.

The governing party did continue to provide stability for the Irish people with a conservative financial program (a greater challenge during growing economic depression at the turn of the decade), and to shore up the nation-state's international status, notably through participation in the Commonwealth conferences that helped shape the 1931 Treaty of Westminster. This Treaty redefined Dominion status, adding to the Irish state's measures of independence; thus, these political negotiations ironically ultimately benefited de Valera (even though he disavowed them at the time), for they helped to make something quite similar to his concept of external association into a reality. These developments, like the increased minority participation in government, contributed to a sense of stability strong enough to allow Irish individuals a safe base from which to explore divergences from the status quo both politically and culturally. At the same time, however, the ongoing negotiations over national identity within the political process point to the continuing primacy of postcolonialism in the state.

As the 1930s neared, the mutually beneficial relationship between the theatre and the Irish nation-state that was best exemplified in the establishment of the Abbey subsidy grew even stronger. While the conservative character of the state meant that realism continued to dominate Irish drama, there was room for a few more slightly different plays and productions (although not always at the Abbey). None was so markedly different as *The Silver Tassie*, which had exhibited "foreignness" in both its content and form. Rather, the non-typical works which found success, including Micheál Mac Liammóir's *Diarmuid agus Gráinne* (premiered in Galway in October 1928) and Denis Johnston's *The Old Lady Says "No!"* (Dublin, July 1929) tended to trouble only one of those categories. Despite finding some success at the box office, however, plays like these tended to be one-hit wonders; their failure to inspire imitators reveals them to be novelties rather than organic expressions of important cultural discourses.

In this chapter I will look in greater detail at the relationship between language issues and the theatre in the postcolonial state, with a close reading of the first production of Galway's state-funded Irish-speaking theatre. Returning to Dublin, I explore some of the minor attempts at introducing more modernist theatre into the Irish scene at the Abbey and the Dublin Drama League before discussing the founding of the Dublin Gate Theatre, widely considered to be Dublin's true second professional theatre and the home of modern plays and superior theatrical design. Focusing upon the Gate's first two seasons, I look at three key productions – *Peer Gynt, Diarmuid and Gráinne,* and *The Old Lady Says "No!"* – using them to illustrate a theoretically-influenced explanation of the artistic and cultural path the Gate would ultimately take. The last of those productions, which caused a degree of controversy, raises once again the question of theatrical censorship. I consider the lack of official theatrical censorship in light of the rising

popularity of cinema, which was subject to government censors. Films also played a role in the changing societal status of theatre. At the end of the chapter, I broaden the scope to include the midwestern city of Limerick, where issues related to film and theatre censorship were highlighted, once again, through the work of Sean O'Casey. Debates both in the streets and in the media about professional and amateur theatre in Limerick and Belfast testify to the continuing importance of performance in post-independence Irish cultural discourse, even as the conservative 1930s saw the theatre's role change somewhat.

II

Modernity, myth, the language, and the West: *Diarmuid agus Gráinne*

A: The play in production

The Abbey was not the only subsidized theatre company in Saorstát Éireann. In further testimony to the high status of theatre in Ireland, the Irish government in 1927 authorized a subsidy for an Irish-language theatre in Galway, the largest city in the western province of Connacht. As the urban area closest to much of the officially declared "Gaeltacht," or areas in which Irish was declared to be the first language, Galway was considered a crucial locus of native culture. The theatre, to be called Taibhdhearc na Gaillimhe (the name can be roughly translated as "Galway's place of illusion"), or An Taibhdhearc, joined Dublin's An Comhar Dramíochta in the state budget. While specific budgetary figures are not available for Irish theatre groups – the public budgetary estimates list only one number for "grants in aid of plays in Irish" – the £600 figure listed (and allotted to An Comhar) in 1925-26 leaps to £3000 in 1927-28, the year the government provided funds for An Taibhdhearc to purchase a hall in the heart of historic Galway City and renovate the premises into a 300-seat theatre. In 1928-29, the figure goes down to £1200, suggesting a sum of £600 for each theatre. In the late 1930s and 40s, when more specific figures were published, Taibhdhearc na Gaillimhe received £1,000 a year – equivalent to the Abbey subsidy – and An Comhar £600. In addition, smaller grants were paid to several other amateur/educational groups. The large initial expenditure ensured that the new institution would have a dedicated permanent home (unlike the Irish-speaking players of Dublin). Taibhdhearc na Gaillimhe was from the first about permanence, with its central mission being the maintenance and promotion of the dying Irish language – and by extension, about the

preservation of what was seen as a unique native culture. Thus, even a cash-strapped government that placed the arts very low in its list of priorities saw an artistic endeavor which involved the politically potent issue of the Irish language was worth supporting – despite the fact that the original fundraisers knew little about what their theatrical work would encompass.

The active organizer, Liam O'Briain, professor of romance languages at Galway's university, was eager for his city to have a first-class Gaelic theatre, but he recognized the shortcomings and inexperience of the organizational committee. (O'Briain had previously shown his commitment to Ireland in arms, fighting with the Irish Republican Brotherhood in the 1916 Easter Rising.) Although O'Briain and others, including committee chairman Dr. Seamus O'Beirn, were prepared to translate European plays into Irish, they wanted Irish-written plays as well, and a theatre professional who could help bring the amateurs to form the Taibhdhearc company up to something of a polished standard. Onto the Galway scene came a company of touring players under the direction of Anew McMaster. The Intimate Theatre company included McMaster's brother-in-law, Alfred Willmore, a handsome young man who, after a successful run as a child actor in London, had attended the Slade School of Art, as well as pursuing studies of Irish language and culture via London's Gaelic League. Willmore had also resided in Dublin for a period, where he was known as a painter, and had experimented with translating his name into Irish, ultimately settling upon "Micheál Mac Liammóir." Mac Liammóir was not only acting during his time with the McMaster company, but also writing, revising the play he had written in Irish based on a Gaelic myth: *Diarmuid agus Gráinne*, which McMaster was considering for production.

When McMaster decided against staging the Irish play, his loss was O'Briain's gain. Fortuitously, O'Briain found in Mac Liammóir not only an Irish-speaking playwright with a completed play in hand, but also an accomplished professional actor capable of taking on a leading role. In addition, Mac Liammóir was an experienced set and costume designer who could not only design for his own play but also supervise the final fittings-out of the new theatre. And possibly most fortuitously, Mac Liammóir did not come alone. In this year, he had joined forces with Hilton Edwards, a fellow actor on the McMaster tour, who shared many of MacLiammóir's ideas about innovation in the theatre. A director and lighting designer as well as actor and singer, the English-born Edwards was eager to establish his own theatre. When Edwards fell ill during the McMaster tour, Mac Liammóir stayed in Cork to help look after him and to make plans for future theatrical endeavors. The partnership thus forged would prove to be one of the most influential in the history of the Irish theatre.

Because those first organizers were so much less experienced than Mac Liammóir and Edwards, the pair was granted enormous latitude in determining the artistic direction that would set the standard for the new theatre. As it happened, Mac Liammóir's penchant for romantic Celticism infused with a vigorous physicality was ideally suited to a city and cultural movement looking for signs of life from its old traditions. For Micheál Mac Liammóir, the story of Diarmuid and Gráinne embodied the sort of romantic Celtic mythology he longed for, a longing actualized in the mythology he made of his own life.

Liam O'Briain believed Micheál Mac Liammóir to be an Irishman who had learned the native language as a child. O'Briain was deceived, like most who met Mac Liammóir. Several academics, including biographer Christopher Fitz-Simon, Éibhear Walshe, and Michael Ó

hAodha have detailed the way in which the man actually born in London to an ordinary English family turned much of his own life into a performance, presenting himself in Ireland as a Cork-born Catholic. Although Mac Liammóir had actually learned Irish in London as a young man, the story that he learned the language at the knee of his grandfather prior to a move to London circulated through the press, and was widely believed. By maintaining this fiction, Mac Liammóir added the aura of genuine Irishness to his persona and, by extension, added a certain cultural currency to his theatrical undertakings. As a returned native, he could present his work as exuding cosmopolitan glamour, but with a safe base of the authentically national. His identities, both private and public, were thus intriguingly hybrid.

The sense of performance extended to other facts of Mac Liammóir's life, as well. Although his part-fiction autobiography *All for Hecuba* (1946) uses a tragic boy-girl romance as a central motif (based on his great friendship with his distant cousin Mary/Máire O'Keeffe, whose death from tuberculosis in Switzerland was a major impetus for his joining the McMaster tour), it does not mention the fact that Mac Liammóir and Edwards lived together in a personal partnership in the capital of a Catholic country for decades. By 1977, with the publication of another fictionalized autobiography, *Enter a Goldfish,* Mac Liammóir was more forthcoming about his sexuality, although not about his national origins. Even an essay Hilton Edwards wrote about Mac Liammóir shortly after his death in 1978 maintained the fiction of Irishness. Christopher Fitz-Simon believes that had O'Briain known that Mac Liammóir was not "a native Irish speaker . . . it would hardly have mattered, for enthusiasm was the order of the day" (*The Boys* 50). While this is probably true in regard to O'Briain – the actor/artist's fluency in the language was never disputed – the manner in which Mac Liammóir's endeavors were received

throughout his life might have been quite different if the truth were widely known, especially when, as will be discussed later in this chapter, his work was undertaken on behalf of a less definitively Irish enterprise. Perhaps it was partly his very foreignness that led him to embrace Celticism as a vital part of his own identity, for like Yeats and other members of the Irish Literary Revival he "discovered" Irish myths along with his own longing for artistic inspiration. Claiming the inheritance of Irishness helped to validate his decision to settle in Ireland and follow Irish interests, and lent his pursuits not only a certain drama but also added significance in the postcolonial society.

The story of Diarmuid and Gráinne was an unusual choice for a developing Irish playwright in 1928. Though Yeats, Lady Gregory, and others had taken on this and other stories from Celtic mythology in the early days of the Irish national theatre movement, they had failed to foster a school of mythic drama, as realism came to dominate the Irish stage, first in peasant drama and to a lesser extent in the urban realism of O'Casey. In contrast to these types, Mac Liammóir's *Diarmuid and Gráinne*, while still taking on a definitively Irish subject matter, does so in a wildly romantic manner that the author himself described as more characteristic of the Celtic Twilight period of the 1890s than of the 1920s (*All for Hecuba* 70). (An interesting item held in Northwestern's Dublin Gate Theatre Collection titled "First Draft of Heroic Ballet: Diarmuid and Gráinne," a four-page prospectus of a performance that I cannot determine to have taken place – it may in fact predate the play – offers the suggestion of more unusual style than that eventually seen in *Diarmuid agus/and Gráinne,* calling for "episodic dances in abstract sets" [Script Box 26, P.59]. Possibly Mac Liammóir hoped to create something more formally experimental than an episodic play. Thematically, however, the "ballet" is perhaps even more

romantic than the play, trading in mythological archetypes.) The composition of the original Irish play, *Diarmuid agus Gráinne,* constitutes a significant episode in the first of Mac Liammóir's part-fiction autobiographies, *All for Hecuba*, an episode that seems reflected in the style of the play; Mac Liammóir tells of writing as he strolled through and lolled about the ancient hills of Howth, near Dublin, where, he claims, he could feel the spirits of the characters of the story moving about the landscape. The subject matter itself is the stuff of romance – except for the fact that it lacks a clear hero or sense of right and wrong.

The plot of the play is complex. Mac Liammóir, incorporating a multitude of details from the doomed lovers' legend, seems to be aiming for an epic effect (in contrast to the spare, Nōh-influenced uses to which Yeats put Irish mythology in his Cuchulain plays). To summarize, the story tells of a beautiful young princess, Gráinne, who is uncertain about her approaching betrothal to the aging war hero Fionn Mac Cumhaill. When she sees Fionn's young friend Diarmuid O'Duibhne, she is initially taken by Diarmuid's appearance, and then falls hopelessly in love with him after he accidentally reveals an enchanted star on his forehead, which has power over any woman. The love-struck Gráinne drugs the rest of the men at her betrothal feast and convinces the reluctant (because honorable) Diarmuid to flee with her. Not until after a fight with Fionn, an attempt by a supernatural being to seduce Gráinne, and Gráinne herself stabbing Diarmuid, do the two lovers consummate their relationship. Here, Mac Liammóir condenses the story somewhat, continuing several years later when Diarmuid and Gráinne, living happily together in a castle, hold a hunt to which they have invited the now-friendly Fionn. Diarmuid is mortally wounded in a fight with a great wild boar (a fight which may or may not have been instigated by Fionn). Fionn, who has healing powers, is about to save Diarmuid when he sees

Gráinne exchange a tender look with the wounded man. Diarmuid dies, denied aid by the suddenly spiteful Fionn. Gráinne, crushed, agrees to go with Fionn after all, since she now feels as if her spirit is dead. (Supporting characters in the play include Aenghus, the God of Love, other spirits who fill in narration, a druid, and a wise old serving woman.)

The Galway production of this elaborate mythic tale was seen as an event of national significance. Media reactions to *Diarmuid agus Gráinne* were less theatrical reviews in the traditional sense than they were news items which announced the success of the production as fact rather than opinion. Indeed, it was a success in terms of audience drawing power; the theatre was filled for each of four performances, at ticket prices ranging from one to three shillings (comparable to the ninepence to three shillings charged for the other major entertainment offering in Galway that week, the touring Bowyer-Westwood Grand Opera's performances at the Town Hall). As for artistic criteria, Micheál Mac Liammóir's sets and costumes were accepted as the latest standard in professional theatre. The acting of the amateur company, on the other hand, was hailed for its appropriateness and dignity rather than its genius; the *Connacht Sentinel* praised Maire Scully, who played Gráinne, for possessing "the true artistic insight" as well as "dignity and stateliness," and termed Liam O'Briain a most "suitable selection" for the role of Fionn (28 Aug. 1928, 3). Overall, however, press items about the premiere of *Diarmuid and Gráinne* were most concerned with the future for Gaelic theatre and drama that the show portended. This future was quickly extrapolated from the immediate circumstances of Taibhdhearc na Gaillimhe to Irish culture as a whole. The *Standard*, a new Catholic newspaper, reported:

> A great event has happened in the Gaeltacht - an event for which the best thinkers in the language movement have long been waiting. . . . The importance of having a Gaelic theatre cannot easily be exaggerated. An Irish-speaking stage is at this period a vital necessity to the Irish language. The power of the theatre as a distributing agent of phrase and idea, as a leveller of idols, and as a peaceful penetrator of principles, is not always remembered. (29 Sept. 1928, article located in Dublin Gate Theatre Collection Press Cuttings Book 1, 25)

The author of this article, "Anghus," credits the theatre with a social power that is tremendous, yet comprehensible within a society that had already seen the potency of theatre demonstrated in political life. The *Connacht Tribune* saw a similar progression, in which a successful theatrical production could help bring about the success of the Irish language, which would in turn mean a new vitality for the national culture as a whole, calling it an "extraordinarily successful production, which has been the biggest event in the history of the language movement in the West and which, it is to be hoped, will inaugurate a new era in the cultural history of Ireland" (1 Sept. 1928, Gate Press Book 1, 28).

The nationalist approbation, even as it celebrated "a purely Gaelic tale" in which "every word-picture, every figure of speech, every stage scene was of Ireland" (*Connacht Tribune*) was not diminished by the foreign elements of the production. The contribution of the manifestly English Hilton Edwards, late of the Old Vic, was admired as the work of an expert that only added to the distinction of the purely Irish story. While Christopher Fitz-Simon suggests that the modern aspects of the designs (Mac Liammóir's set and costume plans show the influence of Leon Bakst's 1908-1918 designs for the Ballets Russes) may have been missed by audience

members who preferred the purely Irish, comments of observers suggest that they actually appreciated the employment of the cosmopolitan techniques in a nationalist effort. Minister for Finance Ernest Blythe, writing under the Gaelicized name "Earnan de Blaghd" in the *Connacht Tribune*, stated:

> The scenes and dresses were extremely beautiful, and the lighting effects which were obtained were such as I have not seen excelled. The stage of Taibhdhearc na Gaillimhe is small, but the spectacles which were presented were as artistic and attractive as any I have seen in big theatres where no expense is spared. ("Galway the 'Key' City," Gate Press Book 1, 28)

And the *Connacht Sentinel* opined that "the beauty of the design and the splendour of the embellishments could not be surpassed in a metropolitan theatre" (28 Aug., 3). These comments reveal a desire on the part of the community to see their local theatre approved by the standards of the metropole, suggesting, once again, a postcolonial anxiety over legitimacy. They also show a sense of pride arising from a feeling that, while proving itself as good as any other form, the new native drama retains an authentic difference.

The newspapers were not alone in attaching enormous significance to the production. Ernest Blythe, in his *Connacht Tribune* article, described the new theatre as a crucial institution in a crucial location: "I took the trouble to travel to Galway for the opening of the Gaelic Theatre because I felt that the event was of national importance. . . . It may well be that the fate of the Gaelic tongue depends upon what will happen in regard to it in Galway" (28). Galway (or Gaillimh) was seen as a last bastion of the Irish language, and like the rest of the Free State government, Blythe, vice-president of the Executive Council as well as finance minister after

Kevin O'Higgins' death, had a great deal invested in the language. While the Free State poured even greater resources into language education than described in the previous chapter during these years, heightening requirements for students and state employees, the number of Irish speakers in the country continued to fall. Nevertheless, the political power of the *idea* of language revival was such that each of the major political parties of Ireland (Cumann na nGaedheal, Fianna Fáil, and Labour) not only sent an official letter of encouragement to the theatre but also designated an official representative to attend the opening performance.

B: The play's impact

The role of the native language in postcolonial cultures is crucial, even when, as happened in several nineteenth-century European nations, actual use of the language had become a rarity. As Benedict Anderson has written, a fundamental justification of many independence movements is the sense of immemorial history attached to a given nation. Clearly, myths like the ancient Celtic stories play a role in the discourse of timelessness, but language can be equally useful; as Anderson says, "once one starts thinking about nationality in terms of continuity, few things seem as historically deep-rooted as languages, for which no dated origins can ever be given" (196). Declan Kiberd, in *Inventing Ireland*, calls "the experience of losing Irish" a "significant element" in the "cultural confusion" that he sees as characteristic of the early Free State (652). The Taibhdhearc na Gaillimhe was part of an official attempt to fend off that confusion, and to diminish the ambivalence that resulted from the dominance of the colonizers' language in day-to-day life in Ireland. Language was not the only symbol of clarity and purity, however. In Ireland, as in other emerging states, the question of the language was intertwined

with the concept of the national land, both of which were singularities that could be used to support a concept of a unique national identity.

The location of the theatre, Galway, capital of the rural west of Ireland and gateway to the Gaeltacht, carried symbolic weight in its own right. To many Dubliners, the West represented the true heart of the nation, and it had been romanticized many times on the Abbey stage, in paintings and in song. The analysis of *Kathleen Mavourneen* in the first chapter of this dissertation addressed the importance of "the land" in Irish nostalgic fantasy; *Paul Twyning,* in the second chapter, showed a more modern vision of the rural village life that was a crucial part of the Irish Free State's self-image. The establishment of the theatre in Galway took the land trope to another level, one in which the land was tied to the native language. For Terence Brown, cultural representations of the Gaeltacht were an important nationalist fantasy: "Islands of Gaelic-speaking people in a sea of anglicization, the Gaeltacht and the western island represented that ideal unity which nationalist ideologues had envisaged and prophesied, but which reality had failed to provide" (*Ireland* 72). This attitude – Brown refers in particular to the popularity of island life narratives like *The Islandman* and *Twenty Years A-Growing* in the late 1920s and 1930s – had its roots deep in the history of Irish colonization and rebellion. Of this history, Seamus Deane writes:

> The repossession of language and of land and the dispossession of both are the intimate themes that link the political and the literary campaigns for recovery from the early nineteenth to the early twentieth century, from Catholic Emancipation in 1829 to the secure foundation of the Irish Free State a century later. (*Strange Country* 52-3)

In the critical discourse surrounding the premiere of *Diarmuid agus Gráinne* in Galway, these two themes were further linked with the issue of Gaelic mythology.

According to Edward W. Said, the nationalist period that is centered around the recovery of land gives rise to a search for new cultural heroes. In "Yeats and Decolonization," he argues:

> The search for authenticity, for a more congenial national origin than that provided by colonial history, for a new pantheon of heroes, myths, and religions, these too are enabled by the land. And along with these nationalistic adumbrations of the decolonized identity, there always goes an almost magically inspired, quasi-alchemical redevelopment of the native language. (79)

Many of the reviews of *Diarmuid agus Gráinne* seem to read its premiere as an "almost magical" conjunction of the native language, native myths, and the land. By the time of *Diarmuid agus Gráinne*, however, what Deane calls "the secure foundation of the Free State" had already been accomplished; the repossession of the land was complete, at least in the twenty-six southern counties. True, many nationalists both within and without the government saw the value of using the native language as a talisman in helping to ensure the land was *psychologically* possessed by the Irish people, via differentiation from English language and land. This particular use of the land was powerful not in itself but as a representation of a powerful idea. Mythology was not resonant in Irish culture as it had been decades before; the language was not vital within the culture as it had been centuries before. While the questions of authenticity Said describes would never be completely resolved in Ireland, by the end of the 1920s they were beginning to subside, as the decolonizing process slowed.

Thus, those critics who saw *Diarmuid agus Gráinne* as a long-hoped for seed for a new flowering of Irish mythic drama were sorely disappointed. The play's lack of imitators suggests that in Free State Ireland, even though it had claimed its own land for fewer than ten years, the national imagination no longer found this particular pantheon of heroes useful. The Taibhdhearc's repertory came to be dominated in its early years by European and Irish plays translated into Irish (many translated by Mac Liammóir), rather than native Gaelic works. Any politicians who seriously anticipated the full rebirth of the Irish language were also doomed to disappointment, although those who appreciated the value of a cultural symbol must have been pleased with the Taibhdhearc's survival. (Taibhdhearc na Gaillimhe, with its government subsidy, continues to function to this day, and the native language remains a powerful discursive force, especially when used again as a source of national identity, now in the face of Europeanization.) Although Mac Liammóir continued to work with the Taibhdhearc throughout its first three seasons, his growing commitment to Dublin and its Gate Theatre meant that he eventually shifted most of his Irish-language activities to the capital's An Comhar Dramíochta. An Comhar and Taibhdhearc na Gaillimhe were not the only Irish-language theatre groups to function during the 1920s, 30s and beyond – others receiving government funding in the 30s included the School Drama Society, Cumann Dramiocht na Sgol, and Drama sa Ghaedhealtacht, which received small sums for the production of plays in entirely Irish-speaking areas. None of these endeavors lived up to the rhetorical excesses claimed for their impact on Irish language and letters. The ongoing efforts put into them, however, continued to highlight the cultural status of theatrical performance in Irish society and the discursive influence it was deemed to have.

An article in Dublin's *Irish Independent* had looked forward to a day when the Galway theatre, having capitalized on the contributions of experienced outsiders in perfecting its own native form, would "not only provide adequate dramatic fare for its own consumption" but also create "a flourishing export trade" (19 Nov. 1928, Gate Press Book 1, 16). Such optimism may have been warranted by the enthusiastic packed houses *Diarmuid agus Gráinne* drew for each of its four performances, and even by the translations of European works that Micheál Mac Liammóir produced for the theatre later in its first season. Despite the best hopes of politicians, theatre-goers, and language enthusiasts, however, there would be no great flowering of Irish-language drama in the wake of this play; while more plays in Irish were written, they tended to be minor works, suited for the amateur and school groups who were their most frequent producers. Indeed, as early as February 1929 the *Connacht Sentinel* was recommending that the theatre ensure its own survival by emphasizing education: "May we suggest that for the future the theatre might seek to retain its patronage by performances at regular intervals, by arousing the interest and the support of the schools and colleges, and by making arrangements well in advance whereby these can avail of one of the most valuable educational forces in Connacht?" ("Ourselves and Our Irish Theatre," 12 Feb. 1929, Gate Press Book 1, 34). For the government and much of the public, the Taibhdhearc was about art only inasmuch as art could serve pragmatic civic functions.

Christopher Fitz-Simon writes that when *Diarmuid agus Gráinne* was staged for the Taibhdhearc's twenty-fifth anniversary, it was called in *The Bell* "the best play ever written in the Irish language." Although an accolade from *The Bell* (the literary journal through which editor Seán Ó Faoláin and other writers attempted to stimulate Irish culture in the 1940s) could

be trusted, to be called the best play in the Irish language was not an entirely welcome compliment. According to Fitz-Simon, at the time Mac Liammóir himself "admitted privately that he did not feel the theatre . . . had progressed at all in its twenty-five years" (*The Boys* 187). As for the "export trade," theatrical tropes about Ireland exported both abroad and throughout the country itself would continue along lines firmly established earlier in the 1920s. The reasons for this can be discerned in reactions to the English-language version of the play in Dublin, which I will discuss shortly. Free Staters liked the *idea* of a theatre promoting ancient Irishness in the west, seemingly confirming their concept of the land, and were willing to fund it. They were less than excited, however, when a similar performance was mounted in the capital city. If the mythic Irish play did not stand up well upon export even to the Irish urban setting, it was unlikely that it could prove a powerful factor in international discourse.

III

Back in Dublin: the official national theatre and attempts at variation

In Dublin during the late 1920s, the absence of war and the presence of the increasingly popular cinema meant that entertainment-oriented theatres showed a rather calmer pace than they had ten years before. While the artistic theatres began to see some more successful attempts at modernist variation, the best-known theatre, the Abbey, continued for the most part along the lines that had been delineated in the middle twenties. Frank O'Connor, the noted short-story author who served as an Abbey director for a time in the 1930s, wrote disparagingly of theatre's dependence on comedies and broad acting in *Leinster, Munster, and Connaught*:

> For a short time the [Abbey] theatre was able to keep O'Casey, but after him for years it was kept going by a handful of noisy farces. The old cry (again being raised) was up: there were no new plays. Even when the old plays were produced, as they occasionally were, it was usually impossible to see them for the acting. (35)

O'Connor's observations highlight the ways in which playwriting, acting, and audience expectations all played roles in the sustained dominance of predictable comic works in the Abbey's repertoire.

William Butler Yeats, now a member of Free State Seanad (Senate), and director/manager Lennox Robinson shared regrets over the Abbey's trend, though their opinions about what would constitute a preferable course differed somewhat. Although no new Yeats play had been produced at the Abbey since *The Player Queen* in 1919, he took the opportunity in 1926 to bridge the gap between familiar and unfamiliar theatre in staging his own version of

Oedipus the King. *Oedipus*, written in spare prose, drew a respectable audience (enough to warrant a 1929 revival), which, according to Christopher Murray, "surprised and encouraged" Yeats (*Twentieth-Century* 28). For Murray, this use of less poetic language was the strategy by which Yeats made "a truce between the aristocratic Noh form and the unashamedly democratic Abbey form" (28). Such a tactic echoed *The Player Queen*, which drew crowd approval even though its variety of prose was more abstract and poetic than that usually heard at the Abbey. Certainly *Oedipus,* like 1930's *The Words Upon the Window Pane,* was far more comprehensible to audiences than the plays for dancers that Yeats had published in 1921 (two of which, *The Cat and the Moon* and *The Dreaming of the Bones,* were performed by the School of Ballet at the Abbey in 1931 to general mystification). Using somewhat less unusual styles, with content that was not unfamiliar even if non-Irish, Yeats found a way to satisfy his artistic ideals and please audiences at the same time. Rewriting one of the earlier plays for dancers, *The Only Jealousy of Emer* (based on Cuchulain myths), into more accessible prose as *Fighting the Waves* was another step in the same direction. Peter Kavanagh writes, however, that the rewritten version was still not entirely successful, saying that it "puzzled the people who came to see it" (151). Joseph Holloway complained of the production's use of avant-garde music by George Antheil, quoting the reaction of well-known actor F.J. McCormick (who had appeared in the title role of *Oedipus*): "oh, what noise!" (50).

Although the Abbey would stage several more Yeats premieres before his death in 1939, the truth is that the Abbey had moved permanently beyond Yeats's vision of what the theatre should – or could – be. Even the staging of classics and translations, a policy urged by Lennox Robinson in the absence of consistently fine new Irish plays (and of which Yeats's own *Oedipus*

is an example), did not prove successful in the long term. Several of the international plays staged at the Abbey during the mid-to-late 1920s at Robinson's instigation were transplants originally produced by the Dublin Drama League – four, as Brenna Katz Clarke and Harold Ferrar record, during the 1926-27 season. Katz Clarke and Ferrar term these productions, together with *Fighting the Waves* and the 1928 production of *King Lear* directed by Denis Johnston (the Abbey's first Shakespearean undertaking, and a critical and popular failure) "part of a last-ditch struggle by Yeats to shift the Abbey towards a more venturesome course. . . . fruits of the League's seeds that blossomed for a brief moment and wilted as the Abbey speedily rejected innovation" (19).

The most significant joint venture of Robinson and Yeats at this time was the construction of the small Peacock Theatre within the Abbey property, at a cost of £4,094. This small (102-seat space) was publicized as being, in Robinson's terms, intended for "the convenience of the general public interested in the writing or production of plays," such as any inexperienced Irish playwright who wanted to gather a group of amateurs to stage a production. Yeats, on the other hand, welcomed the Peacock as a home for his long-planned Abbey School of Ballet, which he wanted to use to train performers for his plays for dancers, under the direction of Ninette de Valois. Yeats also approved of the small scale of the theatre. During the later years of his life, the exclusive concept of the theatre he had endorsed after the time of *The Player Queen* remained a dominant theme, as seen in the Old Man's opening of the 1939 play *The Death of Cuchulain* (partly in self-satire, as Katherine Worth suggests [187]): "I wanted an audience of fifty or a hundred, and if there are more, I beg them not to shuffle their feet or talk when the actors are speaking" (*Last Poems* 111).

Yeats's artistic attention increasingly turned away from the Abbey. Peter Kavanagh offers his own interpretation of Yeats's mood at this period in relation to the theatre he had founded: "Yeats had realized too late even his *Kathleen ni Houlihan* had made too many concessions to the public and so could never win over the theatre for poetic drama. The public liked most of his early plays, and that in itself was a condemnation" (150). Yeats's relationship to the Abbey became further complicated as his deteriorating health meant that he regularly spent large portions of the year out of Ireland in more salubrious climates starting in 1928.

Despite Robinson's and Yeats's intentions, the first production at the Peacock was neither a new Irish play nor a ballet work, but a translation of Georg Kaiser's *From Morn to Midnight*. Staged by the New Players, an offshoot of the Dublin Drama League, the play opened the blue-painted theatre on 13 November 1927. To Joseph Holloway, the large cast of performers "seemed very cramped for room on the stage" (*Irish Theatre* 29). C.P. Curran's review of the opening in *The Irish Statesman* expressed some misgivings:

> The Peacock has no company attached to it, nor is it a junior partner of the Abbey. It is as if the Abbey wishes to found a dynasty, but put the child out to nurse. Its first nurses are the New Players, a by-product of the Drama League, and their aim is to build up a regular company of sufficient merit to secure the existence of a true experimental theatre in Dublin. I hope they will succeed, but the circumstances of their proposal suggest that the Abbey in its present generation of actors is surrendering the initiative in experimental work. I hope the new theatre will not be found to the handkerchief behind which the old firm will comfortably

> settle down to drowse and even the Drama League to take an odd nap. ("The Peacock Spreads His Tail," 19 Nov. 1927, 255-6)

As Curran was one who hoped the Abbey Theatre would remain a provocative artistic force, his concerns were natural.

The Peacock would, in fact, contribute to a slowdown in experimental theatre from the League and the Abbey, although perhaps not in precisely the way Curran had imagined. Although the League made good use of the Peacock in its first year of operation, the very success it achieved at this time (building upon what it had achieved in the year or two immediately preceding) contributed to its eventual demise, as the League helped prepare the way for a more professional group that also found the Peacock quite useful. 1926 and 1927 had been the two busiest years of the League, as the increased cultural stability of the Free State meant that the group was able to become more ambitious in its productions, and that audiences were more willing to turn out for something outside the norm. As seen in the previous chapter, the League shied away from provocative material during the worst of the troubles, but in the ensuing years, it began to find a more stable niche, drawing a steady audience to an expanding repertoire of works. While in the tumultuous year of 1922 the League staged only four productions, mostly one-act plays with small casts, in 1924 and 1925 those four productions a year had grown to include ambitious productions of full-length, large cast avant-garde works by Luigi Pirandello and August Strindberg. In 1926 and 1927, the League staged a total of fifteen separate productions, four of which, as previously stated, were transferred to the Abbey stage. Apparently, when Dublin audiences had a sense of social stability at the base, they were more likely to harbor and indulge curiosity. However, such productions were still not entirely

welcomed by the National Theatre and its audiences. The League was still playing to a niche market, even if its niche had grown somewhat bigger. After the establishment of a professional alternative to the League, the Abbey once again concentrated on Irish plays, offering an all-Irish slate of only six productions in 1929. When Hilton Edwards and Micheál Mac Liammóir turned their focus from Galway to Dublin, the Peacock would be the temporary home of a group that had little association with the Abbey, but would earn a lasting reputation.

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IV

Founding the Gate

In the eyes of posterity, the most significant achievement of the Dublin Drama League may have been the preparation it provided for the theatre that would become the second most important in Ireland, the Dublin Gate. The opening of the Gate in 1928 (obvious connotations of that phrase are echoed in the theatre's emblem, showing a Harlequinesque figure straining to throw open a pair of enormous gates) is hailed by theatrical and cultural historians as a landmark in Irish culture. In the following pages, I will discuss three significant productions of the Gate's first two seasons at the Peacock Theatre (October 1928-January 1929 and February-September 1929). As the theatre company attempted to find its way in Dublin as a viable artistic and financial entity, it experimented with several styles of playwriting and production. The 1928-29 productions of *Peer Gynt*, *Diarmuid and Gráinne,* and *The Old Lady Says "No!"* each made a slightly different cultural statement in the Irish cultural discourse, and appealed to slightly different audiences. Each was regarded as a success. Yet the Gate offered productions similar to only one of these efforts, *Peer Gynt,* while the theatre went on to become a stable cultural institution. The reasons for this speak, once again, to the state of postcolonial culture in Ireland as the 1930s neared. The repertory that brought the Gate long-term success indicates that the demands of certain groups of educated Dubliners to be exposed to European thought and artistic design were both strong enough and *safe* enough to be accommodated within the politically stable society. Stories of Irish myth, on the other hand, despite some political lip-service, were not a vital force, while drama that used experimental modernist forms to question the sanctity of Irish history was too suspicious, and too far outside the nation's mainstream culture, to become

an inspirational discursive voice. While a society that was stable rather than war-torn was able to hold a greater diversity of styles, modernism in the theatre remained for the most part an extra-Irish phenomenon on display, rather than an intrinsic cultural imperative.

Even while Micheál Mac Liammóir and Hilton Edwards were occupied with the opening of the Taibhdhearc, they had continued to make plans for establishing their own theatre. Edwards had visited London seeking the advice of Peter Godfrey, whose Gate Theatre Studio Edwards admired (and for which the Dublin Gate was named, although the connection between the two companies eventually proved inconsequential). With the enlistment of cabaret director Mme. D. Bannard Cogley and actor Gearóid O'Lochlainn, and some financial support from a Mac Liammóir family friend, the Dublin Gate Theatre Studio opened for its first season in October 1928, only a few months after the Taibhdhearc. The Gate's initial mission was described, in a document circulated to potential subscribers in September, as "the production of modern and progressive plays, unfettered by theatrical convention" (qtd. in Robert Hogan's untitled essay for *Enter Certain Players*, Luke 13). From a wide-ranging list of possibilities, a season including works by Ibsen, O'Neill, Evreinov, Wilde, and Mac Liammóir himself was undertaken.

Mac Liammóir and Edwards had further stated in their circular: "it is not the intention of the studio to encroach upon the activities of any existing Dublin theatrical organisation; rather . . . to introduce a new element, both in the play and its production." This statement seemed primarily directed at the Abbey, and considering the Abbey's history, it is a reasonable claim (although the Abbey had attempted Ibsen with *John Gabriel Borkman* in March 1928). It seems clear, however, that the success of the Gate Theatre built upon the ongoing work of the Dublin

Drama League, foremost in conditioning an audience of supporters, but also in preparing some actors. Like the League, the Gate operated as a subscription society, and was initially housed in the Peacock Theatre. For Brenna Katz Clarke and Harold Ferrar, the relationship between the League and the Gate was simple:

> The League succeeded so far beyond original expectations that by 1928 there was a dependable enough demand for continental drama to encourage Michael Mac Liammóir and Hilton Edwards to open the Dublin Gate Theatre, a full-time company offering an international repertory. The Gate's choice of productions was so similar to the League's that in 1929 the League phased itself out, its purpose accomplished, and league members were urged to transfer support to the Gate. (20)

Despite protestations of complimentarity rather than competition, the Gate was soon characterized as a rival to the Abbey; it would eventually be regarded as Dublin's true second professional theatre. Edwards himself described the role the Abbey had played in affecting the course of his theatre, describing "the Gate's concern with the whole gamut of theatrical exploitation which made it, in those early days, perhaps over-stress the plastic and the visual in distinction from the Abbey's austerity" (unpublished typescript qtd. in Pine, "Dublin Gate" [9]). The contrast with the Abbey was obvious early in the day:

> In 1935 the partnership was able to announce to London audiences that its policy had "tended towards the creation of plays and forms of presentation that are frankly theatrical, as distinct from the naturalistic methods usually associated with peasant and other domestic drama. The result is a purely theatrical institution,

> international in outlook, although, quite incidentally, it has acquired many national characteristics." (Pine, "The Gate Theatre" 8)

Ironically enough, considering the above statement and the Gate's reputation for international work, the theatre actually owes a debt for its very existence to the Gaelic play *Diarmuid agus Gráinne*. In his tribute to the recently deceased Micheál Mac Liammóir in the Gate's fiftieth anniversary festschrift *Enter Certain Players*, Hilton Edwards writes that because the English-language version, *Diarmuid and Gráinne,* "never went on with the McMaster Company . . . I swore that I would put on the play in Dublin within the year if I had to build a theatre to do it" (85). This, coupled with the pair's desire to work together, stage international plays, and play parts of their own choosing, gave them the drive to hire the Peacock Theatre for a season. Edwards notes: "Well, the Peacock was too small to do anything, so we decided to do everything" (85). "Everything" was exemplified in the company's first production, which would, in many ways, set the tone for years of work by the Gate.

The first play staged by Hilton Edwards and Micheál Mac Liammóir for their new Dublin Gate Theatre project was Henrik Ibsen's *Peer Gynt* (an Irish premiere). Many were perplexed as to how this play, featuring expansive, changing sets and a large cast, could be successfully staged in the tiny Peacock Theatre, whose stage was so small that it could barely be entered from stage left, where the proscenium was essentially flush with a wall that had no doors. In the event, *Peer Gynt* served as the perfect vehicle for Edwards and Mac Liammóir to demonstrate their concept of theatre: one highly predicated upon lighting, set, and costume design of a non-realist nature. Rather than attempting pictorial representation, the *Peer Gynt* design was symbolic and suggestive, centered around a set of steps that created dynamic levels on the stage. (In this, the

set design echoed the pioneering work of German Expressionist director Leopold Jessner, who often used stylized staircases on otherwise bare stages.) The unusual (for Dublin) design elements, coupled with the overall professionalism of the production (including Hilton Edwards' performance in the role of Peer), were the primary foci for audiences and reviewers. The *Irish Sketch* of November 1928 noted, as had other reviews, the technical challenges involved in the ambitious production, but stated that "all the difficulties were well overcome, and the producer deserves great credit for his handling of the play." The reviewer, "Wiswayo," praised Edwards' acting, and said that "the lighting effects were admirable, especially in the scene of 'Dawn,' at the end of the second act" (Gate Press Book 1, 2). The *Irish Times* of 15 October had admired this same scene's silhouette effect, calling the lighting overall "splendidly conceived and effected" (*Times* 4). Similarly, "An Londubh" wrote of the dawn scene in *The Irishman* of 20 October 1928, "Seldom have I seen as perfect a piece of stage-craft where acting, light and music combined" (Gate Press Book 1, 7). The directors' emphasis on the visual is further suggested by a telling comment from "J.W.G." in the *Independent*: "There were moments indeed when I found myself wondering heretically if the play would not have been more effective as a film" (15 Oct. 1928, Gate Press Book 1, 6).

The play itself did not cause much comment. *Peer Gynt* had not previously been produced in Dublin, despite the fact that it was now a sixty-year-old play; the unusual nature of this production is suggestive about the histories of Irish theatre and culture alike. Yet, although Ibsenism could still be considered something of an avant-garde commodity in Irish circles, this particular play offered little provocation to societal mores. Even the *Times*' dry remark that in the character of Peer, Ibsen "had reflected many of the weaknesses of the Norwegian character"

had more to do with complimenting Edwards' execution of a multifaceted role than with any criticism of the play's content. A more negative review published in the *Cork Examiner* seemed to consider the play more irrelevant to Irish life than offensive, giving an early impression of the Gate as a niche, rather than popular, theatre. The reviewer stated that the play was "not a happy selection," for, "though 'The Peacock' seats no more than one hundred persons, the number of persons who admire that sort of thing to the extent of paying an admission fee is not large enough to fill the theatre for fourteen nights." ("Dublin Letter," 15 Oct. 1928, Gate Press Book 1, 4). Rather than rousing its audience, the production took an artistic path that would become familiar throughout the Gate's succeeding decades: the choice of an interesting, but not revolutionary play, whose subject did not touch directly upon Irish concerns, as incidence for a beautifully executed piece of stagecraft.

At this early date, however, Edwards and Mac Liammóir still had other paths to try out. One of the most interesting productions of the Gate's first season has already been mentioned in this chapter: the opening of Micheál Mac Liammóir's *Diarmuid and Gráinne*, his own English-language version of the Irish play that had premiered in Galway three months earlier. An interesting dichotomy was created by these two productions. While the Gate has always been hailed for presenting a rival point of view to the Abbey's, determinedly looking beyond Ireland at modernist drama from Europe and the United States, attention must be paid to the fact that the Gate's founders also played a key role in establishing a state-subsidized theatre that was hailed as a milestone in the progression of insular cultural nationalism. The twin productions of *Diarmuid agus Gráinne* and *Diarmuid and Gráinne* offer a unique opportunity to compare the roles each theatrical institution occupied in Irish culture.

When *Diarmuid and Gráinne* was produced in November 1928, reactions were more restrained than they had been for *Diarmuid agus Gráinne*. Overall, the press seemed to express approval of the play as a respectable effort that ought to be admired – although their approval lacked a certain degree of enthusiasm. On the whole, critical opinion agreed with "T.G.K." of the *Dublin Evening Mail* in terming the show "really a very creditable and meritorious performance" (21 Nov. 1928, Gate Press Book 1, 17). An uncredited clipping in the Gate's press book, after praising "play, acting, and staging" calls the drama one "that should appeal strongly to Irish people, and should fill the Peacock Theatre for much longer than its allotted fortnight" (Gate Press Book 1, 16). But did it appeal?

The production was praised for maintaining the high design values for which the Gate Theatre Society was already establishing a reputation. While the Gate created its own costumes and scenery rather than using the Taibhdhearc's, in design there were very few changes made. The musical accompaniment was upgraded, with incidental music composed by frequent Gate contributor Cathleen Rogers augmenting themes from Rimsky-Korsakov and Debussy, featuring violinist Bay Jellett, cello, and piano (some musical scores are held in the Dublin Gate Theatre Collection, Music Box 4). The visual values of the production were admired by the *Irish Times*, which called *Diarmuid and Gráinne* "a spectacular feast" ("A 'Fianna' Play, 19 Nov. 1928, 4). Going on, the reviewer employed, like others, a rhetoric centered around cultural worthiness: "It is, however, very much more that: it is the first serious attempt in this century to stage Irish mythology, and it deserves to be as great a success in the commercial as it undoubtedly is in the artistic sphere" (4). The production was, in fact, the greatest commercial success of the Gate's season (although its success was limited by the fact that the Peacock Theatre could seat only 102

persons). As the first Irish-authored play at the new theatre, it drew its audience from a rather broader spectrum of society than did *Peer Gynt* and Kaiser's *Gas*. This was in spite of the fact that, according to the *Sunday Independent*'s review of the Galway production, "a [mainstream] Dublin audience is afraid of a saga-theme. It fears that high art and highbrow mysticism are intended." At the same time, those who were actually attracted by the "high art" of the Gate's modern European plays might have rejected the prospect of a mythic Irish play out of hand for precisely the opposite reason, according to the reviewer for *The Irishman*, who spoke of friends who "had avoided the production fearing that a play in the Irish mode could not be made interesting." (The same reviewer goes on to admit that "this unfortunately is often true, but it is certainly not so in the case of Mr. MacLiammóir's play" [8 Dec. 1928, Gate Press Book 1, 18]). Somehow, however, the show managed to find a substantial audience somewhere between the extremes of those who saw Celtic mysticism as "highbrow" and those who felt it was pedantic.

Yet while these varied audiences were pleased (hence the good ticket sales), none of them was overwhelmed. Curran, the critic for the *Irish Statesman,* who generally endorsed both modernism and patriotism, could not help analyzing the play's faults: "one wishes to shout one's approval and stifle the little maggots of criticism that would nibble at some of its rhetorical excesses" (24 Nov. 1928, 233). The *Times* and the *Independent*, adhering to the demands of the well-made play, both complained of dialogue that did not advance the plot, and of the artificiality of the supernatural scenes, which were considered overly Shakespearean. While the *Evening Mail* was pleased to report that the compressed plot "to a considerable extent achieves unity" (21 Nov. 1928, Gate Press Book 1, 17), *T. C. D.,* a publication of Trinity College, found that "the end of the play is hardly sufficiently convincing" (29 Nov. 1928, Press Book 1, 20). The criteria

of these critics point to the overwhelming dominance of realism on the serious Irish stage and in the mindset of cultural leaders. Without the obvious services to the Irish nation provided by the Irish-language *Diarmuid agus Gráinne*, it was harder for critics of any stamp to fully embrace a play that was neither a perfect exemplar of realism nor a provocative modernist challenge, and that neither enshrined nor experimented with Irish myth in any powerful way.

Acting was the other major subject for Dublin critics. Mac Liammóir again played the role of the title lover, while Hilton Edwards took on the part of Fionn. The performance of the Gate's leading lady, English-born Coralie Carmichael, probably constituted the most drastic change between the two productions (beyond the obvious one of language). Where Galway's Maire Sgolaidhe was praised for her beauty and restraint, Carmichael was described by both the *Irish Times* and *Independent* as behaving like a "vamp" of Hollywood cinema. Such a display of sensuality, while it seems to the contemporary eye much more germane to the script of the play than Sgolaidhe's dignity, was disturbing to an audience that was conditioned to see Irish myth presented as admirable and something from which to draw national self-respect. (This criticism highlights the fact that sexuality seems to have been curiously missing from the Taibhdhearc production, or if present to have been ignored by the reviewers, who also ignored the fact that the play lacks a clear hero or definitive sense of right and wrong – hardly the norm in nationalist discourses. Such was the power of the statement made by the mere establishment of the Gaelic theatre.)

Despite these initial concerns, the Dublin production was successfully revived in 1930 and received on much the same terms. When *Diarmuid and Gráinne* was staged in December 1931 by a small group of enthusiasts in London (Warwick James Repertory Company) without

the help of Mac Liammóir or Edwards, however, the *Irish Press* stated that it was "neither well produced nor well cast" and played to a "very small audience" (30 Dec. 1931, Gate Press Book 6, 49). While the critic for the *Daily Telegraph* thought the play could be "very impressive" given a better production, the bulk of his review was concerned with marveling at the peculiar pronunciation of names which had "little or no apparent connection" with their spellings – deemed part and parcel of the "extremely Celtic" nature of the proceedings (30 Dec. 1931, Gate Press Book 6, 49).

A performance like this, easily dismissed by critics with Orientalist attitudes, was not a particularly useful entrant into the politics of international representation. By all accounts, the performance was shrouded in the mists of the Celtic Twilight. Mac Liammóir, describing his visit to the London theatre in *All for Hecuba* fifteen years later, said that the production made him recognize his play as a "tasteful compromise between Maeterlinck and the Love Songs of Connacht" (154). Christopher Fitz-Simon has argued that *Diarmuid and Gráinne* was actually "a play of the modern European movement" (*The Boys* 51). Yet while the play can be considered modern in the sense that it displayed something of the artistic sensibility of the earliest years of the modernist dramatic movement, it accomplished no formal innovations of its own, and in subject, was actually retrograde. (Maurice Maeterlinck's most influential Symbolist plays were written in the 1890s; Douglas Hyde's volume of romantic nationalist poetry was published in 1893.) So far from seeing any future in this kind of playwriting, Mac Liammóir left the theatre depressed, vowing to avoid the Celtic Twilight for a form of writing in which "all must come from myself." By 1946, he admitted that his play did not suit the mood of the Free State: "the Celtic Twilight . . . in those days of self-conscious virility and neurasthenic fact-

facing was at its lowest ebb. . . . These were no times for echoing the vanished rhapsodies of the nineties" (70).

Diarmuid and Gráinne's success was due more its historic nature more than to its modern elements, which could be more fully developed elsewhere. As a piece of history, it evoked the Celtic Renaissance of the 1890s as much as it did the bygone days of the Celts, and that cultural moment, and the associated cultural formation of romanticized mythology, had already done its part for the Irish nation. *Diarmuid and/agus Gráinne* represented Micheál Mac Liammóir's attempt to capture some vital essence of the Irishness he craved, but he realized that his artistic choices simply had no organic connection to contemporary Ireland. Terence Brown writes that "images of heroic nobility lost their imaginative potency in the 1920s"; instead, "a largely conservative, rurally based society found its self-understanding expressed in minor literary and artistic works whose claims to attention now are often little more than a conventional rustic charm" (*Ireland* 78). While I agree with Brown, I do not share his regret over the situation; the conventional was simply more useful than the heroic in the post-independence state. As Ireland headed into the 1930s, reenactments of myth were less relevant to the country's political, cultural, and even everyday life than they had been thirty years before.

Although this attempt at revamping myth had a novelty factor, ultimately the heroes of Celtic Ireland suited neither those who looked inward nor those who looked out in the search for the new Ireland. While *Diarmuid and Gráinne* had a certain usefulness, even attraction, as a visually attractive symbol of an Irish past to which lip service was paid, it failed to offer either the escapism or fantasy offered by more popular forms of nostalgia – and nostalgia was hardly what an avowed artist like Mac Liammóir was aiming for in any case. Although early-season

circulars suggested another new Mac Liammóir mythic drama, *Etáin*, would soon appear, it was not in fact until 1940 that the Gate produced another new Mac Liammóir play. This play, *Where Stars Walk*, did indeed present characters from the Etáin story, but transmogrified into contemporary figures who echoed myth in the midst of a modern drawing-room comedy. At this juncture, musing on what the Celtic heritage meant to modern Irish society was more appropriate than romanticizing the past.

V

The Old Lady Says "No!"; Ireland says perhaps

A: The play in production

The Old Lady Says "No!," which premiered in the Gate Theatre's second Peacock season in July 1929, has been acclaimed as a milestone in Irish drama. Academics attracted by the inventiveness of Denis Johnston's script have hailed it as the first significant experiment in Expressionist drama in Ireland. Harold Ferrar calls it "a landmark" (*Denis Johnston* 15), saying, "In method, it was the most original native play Dublin had yet seen" (17). Largely on the virtues of this first play, a bold satire on the traditions of Irish nationalism, Johnston is seen as the most important Irish playwright of the period after O'Casey. D.E.S. Maxwell's assessment in "Waiting for Emmet" is typical:

> *The Old Lady* is a remarkably effective blending of invention which looks to cosmopolitan sources and a content which is parochial. Unlike its ancestral casus belli (*The Playboy of the Western World, The Plough and the Stars*), *The Old Lady* offended not just by subverting received Irishryness. It was out to domesticate novel forms of statement. The new voice was Irish, but with, so to speak, a Continental accent. *The Old Lady* was shocking in its reversals of orthodox sentiment. (29-30)

Maxwell's emphasis on "invention" and the "novel" demonstrates the way in which critical attention is attracted by cultural works that buck prevailing cultural trends. Seamus Kelly, reviewing a 1977 production of *The Old Lady,* recalled the 1929 premiere as a "*tour de force*" that "hit a city of theatre-goers conditioned to bromidinous conventionality like Joe Louis and

Max Schmeling," creating "febrile excitement" and "dramatic delirium" (*Irish Times*, 18 Feb. 1977, 9). C. P. Curran's contemporary observation in *The Irish Statesman* was perhaps the most revealing: "We have had hitherto nothing comparable with it in Dublin," he wrote after the premiere (13 July 1929, 376). True enough, and while that fact undoubtedly kept many conservative theatergoers away, the sense of novelty and sensation also contributed to the play's success. More telling from the perspective of cultural analysis, however, is the realization that Dublin would have nothing very comparable to this play afterward, either. In the following pages, I will look at the first production of *The Old Lady Says "No!"* in depth, providing a thick reading of its production history, including its rejection by the Abbey, reactions to the production, and analysis of the play's long-term status as a work of modernist drama. Ultimately, the fact that this play, striking as it was, had no real imitators serves to highlight the Gate Theatre's true niche as the home of a safely foreign variety of modernism rather than a substantive challenge to the dominant trend of conservative cultural consolidation.

The play reads like a hallucination. The script opens with a scene reminiscent of a romantic nationalist piece, featuring Robert Emmet, whom history recorded as a tragic martyr after he led an 1803 rebellion, and his equally romanticized love, Sarah Curran. Things take a surreal turn when the actor playing Emmet is hit on the head and, as the nameless Speaker, wanders through a nightmarish Dublin landscape. Figures from Irish history recur – Major Sirr, a British prosecutor of Irish revolutionaries who is vilified in Irish record, is depicted at home with his jolly Anglo-Irish family, while a statue of Henry Grattan, who helped Ireland to establish its own Parliament in 1792, comes down from its pedestal yet offers no guidance. Most significantly, a foul-mouthed old flower seller is revealed to be Cathleen ni Houlihan, revered

symbol of Ireland herself. The mythic figure Cathleen, alternately perceived as an elderly mother and a beautiful young queen, recurred throughout the stories, poems, and speeches of cultural nationalists, and had, as noted in previous chapters, been the subject of one of Yeats and Lady Gregory's most important early plays. In Johnston's play, however, Cathleen ni Houlihan is far from an inspirational figure; rather, in Harold Ferrar's words, she is envisioned as "a whore who propositions her son's murderer as her boy lies dying" (*Denis Johnston* 28). This depiction, a more vicious revision of nationalist tropes than any such characterization in the banned works of Joyce or O'Casey, is exacerbated by the fact that the actress playing Sarah Curran also plays Cathleen, and was to prove perhaps the most significant element of the play's reception.

Before the play could be received by the public, it had to be accepted by a producing organization. For a play that was so different from the theatrical norms of the period, acceptance was far from a given (witness the history of *The Silver Tassie*). In fact, the title of the play actually references one pre-production critical rejection of the play, adopting it as a sort of joking commentary on the play and the culture. Denis Johnston was a young barrister in Dublin when he wrote his first play, which bore the working title *Shadowdance*. Having previously received encouragement from the Abbey Theatre (where he had recently directed a production of *King Lear*) and particularly from W.B. Yeats, Johnston sent the play to the Abbey for consideration. *Shadowdance* would have been a real departure for the Abbey Theatre, since it not only utilized Expressionist techniques but also explicitly satirized the hagiography of national images promulgated by Abbey plays as formulaic and out-of-date. The play was returned to the author by Yeats's co-director, Lennox Robinson. According to Johnston, scrawled across the title page was the sentence "the old lady says No." The "old lady" in this case was most likely Lady

Gregory, third of the triumvirate of Abbey directors. Academics have cast doubts on the veracity of Johnston's story; Nicholas Grene has presented evidence that Johnston "doctored one of his own manuscripts to make good" the story behind his play's name (*Politics* 150; see also "Modern Irish Literary Manuscripts" in *Treasures of the Library Trinity College Dublin*), and his argument is supported by Christine St. Peter's further discussion of the evidence in her article "Denis Johnston, the Abbey, and the Spirit of the Age." Regardless of how the title came to be, however, Lady Gregory was not alone in her objections to the play, for W. B. Yeats also found it problematic (perhaps even more so than Gregory, according to Robinson in later years).

Why did the Abbey directors reject the play? *Shadowdance,* although clearly coming within the Abbey purview as a new Irish play of some merit, contravened the Abbey mainstream in two major ways: satirizing conventional nationalism and venturing beyond realism. Which issue was the more objectionable? Initially, it seems unlikely that Yeats would have been affronted by *Shadowdance*'s politics, and might in fact have delighted in such potentially provocative work. On prior riotous occasions, Yeats had shown himself willing to defend the theatre's choices of material that proved politically or morally distasteful to a large portion of the audience if it meant "art." "Every student of drama has read how Moliére was treated when he wrote 'Tartuffe'" was one quote he gave a reporter during the riots occasioned by *The Playboy* (*Freeman's Journal*, 4 Feb. 1907, 4, qtd. in Kilroy 81). Joseph Ronsley writes:

> Yeats, Johnston says, told him that the play would cost the Abbey £50 and would annoy the audience; he didn't care about the £50, but he didn't want to annoy the audience. Clearly, according to Johnston, this was a lie; Yeats minded very much losing the £50, but didn't mind at all annoying the audience. In fact, Yeats was

> quite willing to annoy his audiences as a general rule throughout his theatre career. (180)

In 1929, only three years removed from his castigation of the *Plough and the Stars* rioters, Yeats might, seemingly, have been attracted by a play that showed potential for shaking the bourgeois national theatre audience out of its somnolence. On the other hand, an aging Yeats concerned with the survival of his theatre and with the legacy of cultural nationalism the Abbey had helped to create (in which *Cathleen ni Houlihan* played no small role) might indeed have found the play's satirical content problematic.

The style of *The Old Lady* was clearly a problem for Yeats and the Abbey. As previously shown, the riots welcomed by Yeats at the premieres of *The Playboy of the Western World* and *The Plough and the Stars* had been occasioned by content rather than unorthodox style or method. *The Silver Tassie* had been rejected out of hand due to its combination of foreign content and Expressionist techniques. Despite his ongoing search for perfection of form in his own dramatic writing, and his temporary concurrence in staging some newer European works through the Drama League and Abbey, Yeats was no more a fan of Expressionism in 1929 than he had been earlier in the decade. In her journal, Lady Gregory records a conversation she had with Yeats after they read *Shadowdance*: "I asked Yeats then, 'What is impressionism?' and he said 'No law' – and I said 'all jaw' and he said 'Just so.' And that certainly describes the play" (*Journals Vol. II* 306-7). Lady Gregory, who has not always been given as much credit as is warranted for her role in shaping the Abbey's repertory and reputation, nearly always preferred simplicity over complexity. Yeats's own preerence for minimalism is seen in his criticism of *Shadowdance*, recorded in Johnston's diary: "the scenes are too long . . . then, there are too

many scenes" (Ronsley 179). The same taste is evident in the fact that (again according to Johnston's diary) Yeats's response to intentionally overwritten passages of turgid romantic prose (some of it directly quoted from the work of nationalist writers and speechmakers) was to cut and clarify Johnston's writing into a style similar to that of Yeats's own spare poetry of the time.

Still, Yeats, unlike Gregory, was not entirely lacking in sympathy with *Shadowdance*. He was apparently the director responsible for offering Johnston a subsidy or guarantee against losses of £50 to aid in having the play produced at another theatre. Eventually, a cash subsidy of £15 was paid. Whether in spite of the support or because of the grudging manner in which it was forthcoming (the terms of subvention were a matter of debate), Denis Johnston seized an opportunity to take a dig at the Abbey when he adopted the new title of his play, envisioning the mere statement of the play's name not only an act of revenge against Lady Gregory and the Abbey hierarchy but also as an apt reflection of the play's content as challenging the "old lady" which symbolized stultified Irish culture, of which the Abbey itself could be considered an element. At the end of the day, this play was simply too much for the Abbey, going beyond its discursive limits in both style and content.

The Gate, meanwhile, was still determining what its cultural role might be. While the Gate directors did not intend their theatre to be a "national" one in the sense of focusing upon the Irish nation, there was still a type of nationalist influence at work. Micheál Mac Liammóir wrote in his unpublished manuscript "The Early Days of the Dublin Gate" that the group's efforts were not merely those "of putting on a play, but of contributing to our generation's effort of creating a capital out of a provincial town, of setting a faintly fluttering heart a-beat once more in Ireland's body" (qtd. in Pine, *All for Hecuba* exhibition catalogue, Item 26). Though Edwards and Mac

Liammóir did not share the Abbey's concern with nurturing Irish drama, their interest in serving their vision of a more cosmopolitan Irish culture meant that they were more than interested when they found an Irish playwright whose style seemed a natural fit with their artistic goals. Here, in this new, native, and highly topical play, was the opportunity for their theatre to have a dramatic impact, beyond the respect earned by the polish of *Peer Gynt*'s designs and the good intentions of *Diarmuid and Gráinne'*s old-fashioned cultural nationalism. In Johnston, Mac Liammóir and Edwards discovered the innovative Irish playwright they had been seeking. They took on the challenging script, scheduling the premiere at the Peacock for July 1929.

While *The Old Lady Says "No!"* was still in rehearsal, considerable interest in the play was generated in Dublin's theatrical and journalistic circles. The Gate production team seems to have contributed to a certain air of mystery around the play, speaking of it as something new and different, which, unfortunately, indicated to some that it would be incomprehensible. Stephen Williams, a visiting critic from London's *Sunday Express*, wrote:

> I am not permitted to say what it is about. Indeed, after half-an-hour's converse with the author the other day, I reluctantly concluded that he did not know himself. . . . I strongly advise the Gate people, nevertheless, if they want to make a lot of money out of this play – is it a play, by the way? – to advertise it as "The Mystery Play," by "The Mystery Man of Dublin." ("A Visit to Ireland's Theatre," 16 June 1929)

Williams alludes to the fact that Denis Johnston was, at the time, using a pseudonym – E.W. Tocher – which was the name that first appeared on the playbill. Few beyond the inner circle of

the theatre knew who the actual author was. (Johnston was a barrister, and professional regulations prevented him from writing under his own name.)

While Williams seems to find the information he had been given impossibly vague, his recognition of the marketing potential in appeals to curiosity was shared by the producers. *The Old Lady Says "No!"* opened to full houses, and retained them through most of its run. Many audience members seemed intrigued by what was (for Dublin) novel staging, which was a pastiche of everything from melodramatic love scenes to the chants of a chorus of shadows of great Irish thinkers, accompanied by the beating of a drum. The review in the *Irish Sketch* emphasized "the ultra-modern fashion" of the play (although complaining that the pastiche resulted in a "disconnected jumble" ["Between the Acts," August 1929, n.p.]). The reviewer for the *Irish Times* seemed mildly irritated by the play's failure to make a direct statement: "Why the old lady, however she may have been, said 'No,' was not made clear. . . . But the audience probably saw and heard many reasons why any lady would say 'No.'" The *Times* acknowledged, however, the accomplishment of producer and actors, and stated that "A packed house gave the play an enthusiastic reception" ("An Irish Revue," 4 July 1929, 4). Stephen Williams' review in the *Express* was more appreciative of the play's wide-ranging satire, finding that performance had dispelled the "mystery" of pre-production:

> Everything which has been traditionally reverenced in Ireland has been made the butt of withering sarcasm, and the play expresses the outlook of an Irishman whose only religious conviction is a belief in the real existence of hell.

> No Irishman has ever written a play even remotely resembling this, and it is certainly an act of courage on the part of the directors of the Gate to present it on an Irish stage. (Review, 7 July 1929)

As an outsider from London, Williams was able to identify the play's potential for controversy without taking a firm stance on the merit of the production, beyond applauding the daring of the producers in challenging a society he viewed as severely constrained by religion.

Others were less detached in their appraisals. James P. O'Reilly, writing to the generally broadminded *Irish Statesman* after it printed Con Curran's positive review, called the play "a blasphemous outrage," implying a sense of nationalism as a religion that may have been partly due to the growing correlation between Irishness and Catholicism. The temper of O'Reilly's brand of Free State nationalism is seen in his disgust at a play directed "by a foreigner" in what he called "the capital city of this Christian country," a play that would disgrace the international image of Ireland if "produced in any theatre open to the public outside this country" (20 July 1929, 391). Like O'Reilly, Joseph Holloway took particular exception to the depiction of Cathleen ni Houlihan in a play which "might be summed up as a jeer at patriotism served up in the crudest, brutal way." Holloway castigated the Gate audiences as an elite removed from mainstream mores, saying that if *The Old Lady* had been "produced anywhere else . . . it would not have been tolerated by an audience" (*Irish Theatre* 49). In this theatre, audiences treated Irish nationalism in a less-than-reverential, comedic fashion.

Yet Denis Johnston's diary entries suggest that Gate audiences were not entirely tolerant, painting the playwright as a misunderstood iconoclast:

> I could not bear the shocked and taut reactions of the audience all on tip-toe – the women who tut-tutted and clicked their tongues from time to time, and the people who got up and walked out, slamming the door behind them. It was indecent that such people should be listening to my play – this play into which I had put everything and left back nothing, where I had spoken the truth. . . . It was an indecent exposure before such turds. (Ronsley 188)

Undoubtedly some of the tut-tutters were attracted by the thrill of scandal and controversy. Just as with *The Plough and the Stars* and *The Playboy of the Western World*, moral disapproval did not necessarily mean staying away – and if some potential audience members did stay at home, they were more than replaced by the curious. Micheál Mac Liammóir notes in his theatrical autobiography *All for Hecuba* "the play had a prolonged run and the theatre was booked out every night" (86). The production was, in fact, a huge financial boon for the theatre, which was able to move into a permanent home (a 600-seat Gate Theatre constructed in the historic Rotunda Building) the next year largely on the strength of *The Old Lady's* proceeds. The play's success was capitalized upon in revivals in 1931, 1934, 1935, 1941, 1947, 1948, and 1957 (at which point the 58-year-old Mac Liammóir gave his last performance as the young Robert Emmet). Through these revivals the once-questionable production became a staple of Dublin theatre, and was toured around Ireland, the U.K., and the U.S. as representative of the theatre's finest work.

In retrospect, the international tours of *The Old Lady Says "No!"* offer some insights into the lack of successful Irish modernism. Exposing this play to non-Irish audiences was a major problem: despite its adherence to techniques of Continental origin, the play's content remains focused on Irish history and culture in such a way as to render it nearly inaccessible to audiences

unfamiliar with its referents. Even those who have a basic familiarity with historical characters like Robert Emmet and Daniel O'Connell may miss much of the satire emanating from the rapid-fire quotes. When the Gate toured the play internationally, the program featured copious explanatory notes. Critics received the productions politely, focusing on the polish of set designs and acting, without the shock, hilarity, or outrage variously experienced by Irish audiences. Beyond the Gate, *The Old Lady* has very rarely been produced outside Ireland (American universities have mounted a few productions) and thus one must question whether it is truly a work of international stature. The text's value is contingent upon the historical circumstances of its time and place. Ironically, by concerning itself with criticizing nationalistic standards for art, it hems itself within those standards. In this play, as in Irish cultural discourse in general, postcoloniality remains the ultimate parameter, containing within its bounds even a powerful force like modernism.

B: The play's impact

While *The Old Lady Says "No!"* is widely considered a great play within the tradition of Irish drama, it was not an influential one. Undoubtedly the script is exciting, entertaining, and well-written, but it must be noted that this play has no descendants worthy of note in the Irish dramatic canon; if groundbreaking, the broken ground saw little built upon it, at least not for a number of years. As D.E.S. Maxwell says, *The Old Lady* was a "herald to whose call no Irish poet or dramatist much attended" ("Waiting for Emmet" 35). This was not the hope of those associated with the Gate Theatre at the time. Later, in *Theatre in Ireland* (1950), Micheál Mac Liammóir elaborated on these ambitions:

> We secretly hoped, and indeed are still hoping, that through our experiments in the field of ancient and modern plays, from all sorts of places, and from the varied methods the handling of the plays demanded, we would at last discover a way, more evocative than literal, more suggestive than photographic, that might serve as the mould for the Irish dramatist of the future. (30)

The phrase "still hoping" is telling. Perhaps the Gate did have some influence on later dramatists, but as of 1950, none beyond Johnston had made a lasting contribution. Even Johnston himself found following up his debut effort difficult. Joseph Ronsley quotes the playwright's diary: "All that I ever knew or ever felt or heard or experienced about Ireland I put into that play until when I had finished it again, I felt that never again would I be able to write another play as I had said everything there was to say" (179-80). During the 1930s Johnston wrote two more plays, both well received by critics, but neither quite as revolutionary in either style or content as *The Old Lady*. For the most part, Irish playwriting continued along the conservative lines of Abbey realism which were so favored by the insular national climate of the Free State. The sensation created by the unusual look and sound of the premiere production did have a lasting influence: the Gate Theatre continued to implement modernist design and directorial styles, but established a repertoire of "foreign" rather than Irish plays. The Gate's eventual state funding and popular acclaim (as well as its influence on the designs, if not the play scripts, of the Abbey) suggest once again that the application of non-nationalist sensibilities and techniques to Irish themes was the source of objection to *The Old Lady*, rather than experimental theatre in itself.

An assessment of the ways in which *The Old Lady Says "No!"* can and cannot be considered a modernist work helps to answer the question of why postcolonial Ireland failed to develop any significant body of modernist drama. It is clearly modernist in technique. The *Old Lady* is typical of early modernism, and of German Expressionist drama, in theme in rejecting the traditions of the past. Yet is not, thereby, entirely a work of its period; while Anglo-French or Anglo-American modernism (to use Bradbury and McFarlane's terms) of the 1920s and 30s tended to exhibit a sense of completely breaking with the past, the focus in *The Old Lady* is actually upon stories of the past and the relationship of the past to the present, satirizing without offering an alternative perspective for the future. As Richard Pine writes in his essay "The Gate Theatre 1928-1978" in the *All for Hecuba* exhibition catalogue celebrating the fiftieth anniversary of the theatre, experimentation was common during this era in other nations:

> In the late 1920s the false gaiety of American and European society was becoming pale and the fabric of security was crumbling. In response to this, drama, in countries where it had a strong tradition of response to social circumstances, developed in violent experimental reaction to depression and decadent politics. (n.p.)

In the early to mid-twenties, however, as I have shown, Irish society was reacting to war rather than "false gaiety," and attempting to weave, rather than unravel, a sense of security. To the extent that *The Old Lady* irritated some audiences, the irritation was due to the ways in which the play threatened the fabric already woven by the stories of history. With cohesion the order of the day, the dissenting statements made by *The Old Lady Says "No!"* functioned at the edge of the

limits of expressibility of the Saorstát's culture, not quite dangerous enough in their niche venue to incur censorship, yet not part of the mainstream discourse.

The play's technique was not groundbreaking; what was new was the full-scale application of techniques of the German Expressionists to Irish topics. Unfortunately for devotees of Expressionism, however, it was not realistic to expect this style to serve as a vehicle for the expression of Irish culture at this time. Micheál Mac Liammóir, looking back in an unpublished manuscript called "The Early Days of the Dublin Gate," seems to take a similar point of view, confessing to

> a perhaps too solemn faith in a thing called expressionism & its exponents. Kaiser, Toller, Meyerhold & the like were our gods, & we honestly believed, or many of us did, that the theatre was finding its way to freedom, mistaking as so many new generations do, a welcome but essentially ephemeral shelter for the night for a permanent dwelling place. (Qtd. in Pine, *All for Hecuba* catalogue exhibit 26)

Mac Liammóir was not alone in considering Expressionism an ephemeral style. Critic Martin Esslin has contended that the modernist techniques of German Expressionist drama were ultimately "mere trickery," linguistic games covering tales that were essentially melodrama. For Esslin, "in the theatre Expressionism's greatest influence may have been less in the achievement of . . . playwrights than in . . . directors like Jessner or Piscator" (557). As Mac Liammóir notes, the Gate found its strength not necessarily in Expressionism or in new plays at all, but in producing "dramatic masterpieces of all nations & periods." And the theatre made its most lasting impact, as Richard Pine himself argues, through its design, direction, and production

successes. Looking through the production records of the Gate, one soon sees that *The Old Lady Says "No!"* is the only major exception to a repertory that tended to be either foreign and experimental or Irish and traditional in style, even when the content of Irish-written pieces set out to challenge the norms. The second season production of David Sears' *Juggernaut,* a prize-winning play that had been rejected by the Abbey, is a case in point. The first Irish-authored play to premiere at the Gate, *Juggernaut* took on a sensitive subject in the Irish Civil War, but did so in a familiar realistic fashion.

Another example is Mary Manning's *Youth's the Season . . . ?* (1931-33), considered one of the highlights of Irish playwriting at the Gate. *Youth's the Season. . . ?,* a contemporary comedy/drama in the realistic mode, used conventional techniques to question conventional wisdom, but like *The Old Lady Says "No!"*, it spawned no imitators or descendants (even from its writer). In this play, Manning attempts to satirize the growing bourgeois class of the Free State through her depictions of a circle of middle-class Dubliners who are attempting to sort out their paths in life. The playwright also satirizes the intellectual and artistic types with whom she obviously sympathizes, when, for example, a claim to being intellectual is substantiated by "having read *Ulysses* through twice!" (335). Adherence to traditional standards of national morality is questioned, but no really viable alternatives are found. A young man who wishes to become an artist in London is convinced by financial threats to work in his father's firm instead, while an aspiring novelist commits suicide when he realizes that his aspirations are mere pretension. Conventional behavior is clearly tied to Free State nationalism: "Isn't he normal and clean and healthy – the backbone of the nation? What would we do without Philip Pryce? O God, I'm so depressed!" (325).

Christopher Fitz-Simon writes of reaction to this production:

> Predictably, the Hope of the Gaels section of the press did not appreciate *Youth's the Season -- ?* at all, and did not care to believe that the characters in it could possibly be Irish; what may also have been upsetting to them – for they tended to belong to that peculiarly unsophisticated troupe which equates the actor with the part portrayed – was that the Gaelic-speaking MacLíammóir, who had now produced or acted in more than a dozen plays in the first national language, was letting the side down badly by appearing (as he described the character himself) as "a youthful invert in a cyclamen polo jumper . . . I painted lampshades in designs of a rather dubious Greek origin, got tight at a party and slapped a boy-friend's face, wept and said how hard it was to be called Flossie at school, and ended up with a lament for a young suicide after the manner of the page of Herodias in *Salomé*." The Ballsbridge and Rathgar section of the audience appreciated the play very much indeed: there was a strong element of recognition in their laughter. (78)

These remarks throw into relief certain characteristics of Gate Theatre audiences, highlighting the ambivalent relationship of the theatre and its upper middle-class patrons to the majority of the Irish people. Class was always an issue with this niche theatre, as can be seen both in the mundane financial details like ticket prices and the cultural backgrounds of the company's leaders.

On the opening of the new theatre building, *The Irishman* complained of prices for extras at the theatre: Christopher Fitz-Simon paraphrases, "sixpence was too much for a cup of coffee,

and threepence too much for the programme, no matter how beautifully printed" (62). A more usual price for coffee would have been 4p. As for ticket prices, there were four grades of seats, the most expensive of which cost four shillings sixpence, and the least 1/3, at a time when cinema tickets were typically about half that, ranging from around 9p to 2s; season tickets for six productions cost from 9s up to 25s. Because of these prices and the subscriber organization of the theatre, many attendees tended to be of "Ballsbridge and Rathgar" origins, hailing from the affluent south-central Dublin area that had traditionally been home to many members of the Anglo-Irish Ascendancy. Clearly, there was a distance between these elite theatre patrons and those who, with the Free State government, believed Irish theatre should contribute to the good image of the conservative postcolonial nation.

A look through the company biographies in the 1934 book *The Gate Theatre Dublin* suggests that by this point the make-up of the Gate company had rather more in common with the Ballsbridge audience than with the mainstream of Irish society, whether that mainstream is seen as the Catholic working-class drawn to the popular entertainments of the Queen's and Royal Theatres or as the Free State governing class that supported the rural comedies of the Abbey and the linguistic ethos of An Taibhdhearc. Hilton Edwards and Micheál Mac Liammóir, despite Mac Liammóir's pretense, were raised in English culture. The Earl of Longford, who became the Gate's primary financial backer in 1931 when the Society failed to attract a full number of shareholders, was an obvious enthusiast for Irish cultural nationalism; John Cowell writes of the teenage Longford's language studies and budding political interests, "Come what might, he meant to be a thorough Irishman" (29). The earl certainly had a more elite educational and social background than the ordinary Irish person, however. Longford and his English-born wife,

Christine, who both had substantial artistic input into the theatre during the years they partnered with Edwards-Mac Liammóir, had met as students at Oxford. Cowell, their sympathetic biographer and friend, describes their involvement with the theatre as that of "liberal English-orientated academics in search of an identity in an illiberal Ireland" (213). In the first issue of the Gate Theatre's magazine, *Motley*, edited by Mary Manning and published in 1932, Christine Longford, according to Fitz-Simon, "contributed a compendium of remarks overheard in the foyer, such as 'Meriel Moore lives in Ailesbury Road. I heard she was so keen on acting, she gave up everything. She even gave up her golf!'" (79). Meriel Moore, who had played Sarah Curran and the Flower Seller in *The Old Lady,* was one of the Gate's leading ladies; Ailesbury Road was (and is) one of the most elite street addresses in Ballsbridge. Of the Gate's other leading ladies, Betty Chancellor's background was similar to Moore's, and Coralie Carmichael, who had met Edwards and Mac Liammóir on the McMaster tour and helped to found the Gate, was English. Several other actors were also English, and others were graduates of Trinity College Dublin.

R. F. Foster has suggested that even as the Irish state became more determinedly outwardly Catholic, "a modest, unofficial form of 'Ascendancy' lingered on" (*Modern Ireland* 534). Even as the Protestant population of the Free State continued to decline, its representation in professional classes was very substantial, and it was from these classes that the Gate Theatre drew much of its audience. The days of the politically awkward British Empire Shakespeare Society were over (rebirth as the more diplomatically named Dublin Shakespeare Society would not come until the late 1930s), but an Irish society no longer threatened by war could make room for a more diverse mix of outside voices. The British plays among the range of European,

American, and Irish works presented at the Gate were not condemned on the basis of their nationality; they were essentially non-threatening. Although the Gate's work would be rewarded with a government subsidy finally approved in 1969, during its early years it was simply irrelevant to the national project being pursued through governmental and other theatrical means. Mac Liammóir may have seen the project as fostering a different type of Ireland, but even as the group earned critical acclaim, its productions had little wide-ranging influence in the national discourse.

In the long term, the legacy of the Gate's early years was probably less than what its founders had hoped it to be. Richard Pine, in explaining the theatre's success in a conservative society, also points to the Gate's failure to be very groundbreaking in itself:

> Edwards-mac Liammóir [sic], including Carmichael, Cogley and O Lochlainn, found an audience because, unlike some of their European counterparts, they were not *enfants terribles* but *cousins terribles.* Unlike the "shock tactics" of the *avant-garde*, of Brancusi, Joyce, Cocteau, Stravinsky, the Gate Theatre's techniques were acceptable, even though they were "new" and thus it was possibly to introduce contemporary drama served up in a slightly different way, mixed with more traditional fare, and establish an experimental theatre more by tact and diplomacy than outright bravado, gathering a faithful audience as it did so. ("The Dublin Gate" n.p. [9])

For all the modernity of the Gate, all the showcasing of non-realist playwriting and design, it was not in itself radically avant-garde or groundbreaking. More often than not, the producers showcased the intriguing techniques of others, rather than devising new techniques for others to

imitate. Terence Brown, more critical than Pine, suggests that the mix of styles showcased by the Gate is a sign that the company's "ethos was style for style's sake rather than a theatre that shared the modernist movement's intense desire to be present at the birth of the 'Savage God'" ("Ireland, Modernism" 27). Pine argues elsewhere (in an untitled essay on Mac Liammóir) that the Gate's greatest contribution was awaking a "consciousness of the visual" in its audiences, in contrast to the focus of the "predominantly *literary* revival" that influenced the Irish rebellion (75). To this I would add that it has been frequently observed that the great strength of the school of acting established by the Fay brothers at the Abbey was generally considered to be their fine vocal technique (whereas, by contrast, complaints about the dullness of the Abbey's frequently recycled sets were ongoing). Thus, if the Abbey's mark was made by words and the way they were spoken, the Gate's was made (admitting some remarkable performances) foremost by sights.

This was not enough to cause a major international impact, however, as Micheál Mac Liammóir himself stated when ruminating on the Gate's eventual tours:

> [there was] a feeling among us at the Gate that having brought much of the world to Ireland we had but little of Ireland to show to the world when we went away – a few fine works by Denis Johnston, a play or two of my own, some players fitted for their craft, & above all I believe some discoveries in production by Hilton Edwards that have made all seem worthwhile. ("The Early Days of the Dublin Gate," qtd. in Pine *Hecuba* exhibit 26)

The Gate had little to show the world of Irish playwriting because its ideal – Irish plays influenced by current international playwriting – was unrealistic in a culture that was still largely

internally focused on the process of self-definition. George Russell, the influential intellectual known as Æ, had written in 1924: "We believe ourselves that the idea of an Irish culture relying upon its own resources is impossible; but a culture more vital is possible, even certain, by the wedding of the Gaelic culture to world culture" (19 Jan. 1924, qtd. in Lyons 166). It was not for decades that mainstream Irish culture could begin to approach Æ's ideal, as economic and political developments induced the "old lady" to loose her hold on the populace's imagination. Until that time, Denis Johnston's *The Old Lady Says "No!"* remained an anomaly, gradually canonized by academics, gradually accepted by the viewing public as the shock wore off and the jokes set in, but ultimately a tradition unto itself.

My discussion of Sean O'Casey in the previous chapter illustrated censorship of both Irish content in a realistic mode and non-Irish content in experimental modes. A major problem in both of these cases was that the place of presentation was the Abbey, the initially so-called, later officially "national" theatre, which could not accommodate major divergences from the Irish standards of realist style and respectably nationalist content. The success of *The Old Lady* suggests that such elements were permissible even when combined, to a degree – as long as they were sequestered to a certain niche, elite, not-particularly Irish element. The failure of either *Diarmuid and Gráinne* or *The Old Lady Says "No!"* to inspire imitators, however, and of the Gate to inspire much Irish playwriting at all, suggests that both non-patriotic and modernist drama were simply not viable elements of Irish culture during the early Free State period. Despite attempts at and incursions of modernism, the overall conclusion must be that postcoloniality trumped modernism. Rather than bemoaning the situation, let us note the success of a cohesive culture in contributing to the survival of the state.

VI

Censorship, cinema, class

A: Censorship and the theatre

Some of the major events of Ireland's cultural history occurred in these years, when the subject of censorship came before the Dáil, first in regard to the cinema in 1923 (with amendments to cover advertisements and soundtracks in 1925 and 1930), and second to books and periodicals, in 1929. The resulting Censorship of Films Act of 1923 and Censorship of Publications Act of 1929 can be seen as the cementing of Ireland's conservative societal mores. For the purposes of this dissertation, the Censorship Acts raise some crucial questions. Why were Irish theatre and drama not formally censored, and what role did the growing art of film play in the popular and official representation of theatre? I have discussed some partial answers to the first question in the previous chapter's discussion of Sean O'Casey in Dublin. In this section, after a historical discussion of the censorship issue, I broaden scope to Limerick, where the controversial reception of O'Casey's work in film form, coupled with comments on the growth of amateur drama, reveals more about the differing roles of entertainment forms as the nation-state entered the 1930s.

The continued lack of theatrical censorship in Ireland under its diverse governments has been noted with some puzzlement by various writers, especially since theatre is deservedly credited with substantial cultural power. For example, Robert Hogan and Richard Burnham, discussing theatre while the British government sought to quell rebellion in 1919, write that "Many productions, both amateur and professional, contained criticisms of Britain; and yet the drama was little interfered with," even while "Censorship of published work, however, grew

quite restrictive" (*Amateur* 185). *Banned in Ireland*, the censorship history from the anti-censorship organization Section 19, states:

> There were notorious cases of unofficial censorship in the theatre both before and after the establishment of the Irish Free State, including Cardinal Logue's campaign against W. B. Yeats's *The Countess Cathleen* in 1899, the riots at the Abbey Theatre when John Millington Synge's *The Playboy of the Western World* was first produced in 1907, and the closing of Tennessee Williams's *The Rose Tattoo* at the Pike Theatre in 1957. *Nevertheless, when the subject of censorship arose in Ireland in the 1920s, official censorship of the theatre was not debated and, as a result, never became a serious political issue in modern Ireland.* [3, emphasis added]

A records search of Dáil Éireann debates confirms that theatrical censorship was not even mentioned in the debates over the 1923 and 1929 censorship acts, and the issue was rarely mentioned in the press. This is startling in light of the fact that theatre, unlike novels, had actually been shown to create public disturbances in Dublin; its power was immediately apparent. And in parliamentary debates in Britain during the same period, there were references to the evil influence of the stage. Article 19 offers no explanation for this lack of censorship, however. Similarly, Michael Adams, in his book *Censorship in Ireland,* has little to say about the passage of the 1923 Censorship of Films Act, finding it to be a relatively uncontroversial event. The Minister for Justice shepherded the Bill through the Oireachtas, with substantial earlier input from religious authorities.

The Abbey was not mentioned as a candidate for censorship even before it was subsidized, and after the subsidy, with the appointment of the government representative, the theatre was presumed to be working within approved national boundaries (the violation of these boundaries being one of the inciting factors of the *Plough and Stars* disturbances). The Gate, though it caused some public protest with occasional politically or morally provocative elements (ranging from hisses at *The Old Lady Says "No!"* to letters of complaint in the newspaper about a 1931 revue that included a farce of an exorcism), did not deliberately pursue scandal, and remained for the most part confined to its niche of non-Irishness. When the imprimatur of genuine Irishness was accorded to a production like *Diarmuid and Gráinne,* its sensuality was allowed to slip through, even though sexuality was the element most often targeted by film censors. The popular theatre did offer some productions as morally suspect as many films which were banned, which was noted, if not attacked, by some officials at the time. Kevin Rockett writes in "Protecting the Family and the Nation: The Official Censorship of American Cinema in Ireland, 1923-1954":

> *Pathé Pictorial* was told to delete shots of girls "indecently 'clad' in brassieres and trunks", even though [the official censor James] Montgomery was well aware that such costumes were part of the shows in Dublin theatres and cine-variety houses such as the Royal. "People may say you can see it on the stage of the Royal, maybe they're right, but I certainly will not accept the Royal as a criterion of decency". (290-1; qtd. from a censor's decision of 22 June 1936)

Yet even the most titillating theatrical material was rarely a target for otherwise easily outraged authority figures, public and ecclesiastical alike. The Royal may not have been a standard for

decency, but by virtue of its categorization with more elevated (and culturally contributory) stages, it avoided the official stamp of indecency.

There are several possible explanations for the overall lack of theatrical censorship, all of which may be partially true. Some were practical: due to centuries-old quirks in licensing laws, Irish drama had never been subject to an official censor in the way that British plays historically were, and thus new legislative control of the stage would have been a break with tradition. Then, centralized censorship of stage productions is a more difficult (and potentially more expensive) organizational matter than a clearinghouse for film reels and print publications. Other reasons have to do with the role of the theatre in the national discourse; as noted above, undertakings that received broad cultural approval – *Diarmuid and/agus Gráinne*, the Abbey by the late 1920s – usually occasioned little controversy in the press. From the government's perspective, the de facto censorship imposed by public demonstrations of opinion, both in the dramatic form of protesting and the everyday form of abstaining from ticket purchases, might have been assumed to be enough to maintain theatre's morality in line with mainstream opinion. Most crucial, however, was the feeling that Irish theatres were already functioning in line with the cultural imperatives of the society. Because of the reputation and history of theatre in Ireland, the Irish government had a *stake* in creation of theatre, a sense of ownership, whereas film was primarily coming from the outside, and was thus easy to attack when the state was attempting to establish an identity that was moral, stable, and conservative, in contrast to the ephemeral and potentially immoral cinematic form.

B: The rise of cinema

As cinema rose to become the dominant popular entertainment form in Ireland, its relationships to theatre were complex. Theatre historians must take into account the fact that, as Robert Hogan and Richard Burnham write, "by 1925, the movies had far outstripped the theatre in popularity" (244). The quotation from censor Montgomery above suggests that even while there were some similarities of content between the two media, they occupied very different niches both societally and discursively. In a telling observation, Joseph Holloway wrote in his diary for 14 September 1929 that as he went up O'Connell Street to the Gate Theatre, "great queues were outside the picture houses. . . . The Gate was not well filled" (*Irish Theatre* 78). Kevin Rockett refers to the "famous Dublin cinema queue," arguing that "the importance attached to cinema-going as the event of the week indicates that despite the severity of film censorship, the experience of going to the cinema was central to the lives of a great many people, children and young (and courting) adults especially, in urban areas" (292).

Urbanites were not the only ones to have access to the cinema, however, and some Irish citizens saw a potential impact on the independent nation as a result. The *Irish Times* had stated as early as 1925:

> every Irish village has a picture-house to-day, which offers a couple of hours' daily excitement all the year around, for a few pence, to every school-child. . . . The queerest feature of the whole business is the complacency towards it of the people whose ideal is a Gaelicised and isolated Ireland. They strain violently at the gnat of "Anglicisation," but swallow this camel of Americanisation without a murmur. ("Hollywood and Ireland," 5 Sep. 1925, 6)

This article points out an interesting incongruity in Irish concepts of the foreign. The long lessons of history meant that in rhetorical terms, British culture was far more threatening than American, even as Irish people emigrated to both countries in large numbers. (Of course, in practical terms, as seen in the earlier discussion of Irish theatre during the war years, mainstream British entertainments had become largely identified with popular entertainment in Ireland, particularly in contrast with more overtly foreign European types.)

Some suggested that the growing popularity of film, and the conditioning of audiences to the form, was responsible for a decrease in the quality of Irish theatre during the 1920s. John MacDonagh, the playwright and producer earlier associated with Edward Martyn's Irish Theatre, said in an interview with the *Evening Herald*:

> Within the past ten years a big change has taken place in the theatre, and we are told most of the blame rests with the "Pictures." There are no great plays and consequently no great actors, because the public are doped by swiftly-changing pictures specially prepared to please every intellect, i.e., the meanest. . . . Well, be that as it may, there is in Dublin, I hold, and hope, a chance for plays requiring grey-matter, both before and behind the footlights.
>
> . . . "I go to the theatre to be amused," one hears repeatedly, and personally I applaud the sentiment, for I find that the standard must be raised to meet this demand, and not lowered, as is erroneously supposed. ("Music and Drama," 31 May 1924, 7)

Blaming film for the dominance of undemanding, entertaining theatre is an overly simple proposition. It is possible, however, to argue that similar cultural imperatives, including the need

for escapism in times of war and economic depression, played a part in determining the repertoire of each medium.

Yet even while some popular theatres, mixing their variety programmes with cinema, overlapped with film to a considerable extent, it is also easy to argue that the status of drama was heightened as the cheaper, more novel, and increasingly risqué, cinema became more prevalent. Kevin Rockett quotes a handwritten draft of James Montgomery's 1931 report on the Irish censorship situation to the Minister for Justice that displays a class-conscious point of view

> I am not trying to say that the morality of the stage is superior to the 'talkies,' but it must be remembered that the stage attracts a sophisticated adult audience and that the following of the development of a play calls for the exercise of thought. We have thus the anomaly of a sophisticated and limited audience for comparatively reticent productions, and a most highly sophisticated entertainment offered indiscriminately by the Cinema to the unsophisticated masses. (287)

From this perspective, it was an almost paternalistic responsibility for the government to protect the state's childlike people from the euphemistically termed "sophisticated" entertainment. Theatre, on the other hand, was the province of the educated. While such attitudes made it easier to view theatre as a cultural force (whether it was the Abbey subsidy helping to increase Ireland's reputation abroad, or the Gate "enlightening" Dublin's bourgeoisie and upper class), they also meant that theatre was becoming increasingly marginalized.

Cinema was not the only medium that partially displaced the stage. Hogan and Burnham suggest that in this era "the chief rival to the popularity of films was radio," not theatre (*O'Casey* 249). The availability of in-home entertainment, bolstered by the official Free State radio station

that began broadcasting in 1926, contributed to the growing marginalization of the theatrical form. The BBC had opened a station in Belfast in 1924; Tyrone Guthrie, who worked at the Belfast station in its early days before achieving fame as a theatrical director, wrote in his *Life in the Theatre* that despite initial disorganization, "Gradually it became evident that this new medium was going to exert a tremendous influence upon public opinion and the public imagination" (33). As Ireland's postcolonial development continued in the coming decades, theatre would remain an important element of the stabilizing discourses, but often served as an artifact as much as an agitator. Meanwhile, the modern – if not modernist – media played growing roles, as is exemplified in this chapter's next point of discussion, further instances of public disturbances over the works of Sean O'Casey, this time in Limerick.

C: Limerick: censorship, cinema and the amateur stage

The *Limerick Leader*, like Dublin periodicals, complained of the deterioration of theatre audiences in the 1920s. A columnist writing in 1929 argued that those audience members who had been noisy at the old Theatre Royal had been so due to their appreciation of the theatrical arts; their comments exhibited a "lively wit," and they were possessed of fine singing skill when it came to singing along with operatic performers. Now, the columnist complained, they were boisterous simply for the sake of being boisterous. This speaks to a nationwide democratization in theatre-going, possibly influenced by the growth of cinema and its relaxed code of audience behavior that was much like the old melodrama's. But the most extreme example of boisterous audience behavior in Limerick was not brought about by a theatrical performance itself, but by a film adaptation of a play.

On Monday, 10 November 1930, the work of Sean O'Casey once again caused public protest in Ireland. Events in Limerick, in the mid-west of Ireland, demonstrate the continued potency of O'Casey's work, showcased this time in a "talkie" picture directed by Alfred Hitchcock. The *Limerick Echo* described the events as follows:

> Last night during the second representation of the film "Juno and the Paycock" at the Athenæum, a number of men broke into the back entrance and forcibly carried off two reels of the film, which were subsequently burned in Catherine street [sic]. There was a large crowd present, and the burning took place amid the jeers and cheers of the crowd. ("Burning a Film," 11 Nov. 1930, 3)

The paper reports the theatre's lessees as stating that no disturbance had occurred at earlier showings of the film, and that "the picture had been shown at Dublin and Cork before it was at Limerick, and with the Censor's permission." Limerick, however, was already prejudiced against O'Casey; in 1929, complaints over Arthur Sinclair's touring production of *The Plough and the Stars* had led to the scheduled performances' cancellation. The *Juno* film protest was not the work of isolated individuals. It reflected a sentiment of local churches:

> At the Archconfraternity of the Holy Family the Rev Director stated he understood that an objectionable picture was being shown in the city. He warned parents against attending such pictures or allowing their children to do so. That would be, he stated, the best way in which they could show their disapproval of such films by refusing to patronise them in any way. (3)

The Catholic bishops of Ireland had plenty to say about the immorality of foreign-produced films during the 1923 Dáil debates. In this case, which struck closer to home, questions of sexual

morality (including an unwed pregnancy) were combined with questions of nationalism (appropriate representation of the Irish nation and Irish freedom fighters). While the court case over the Limerick *Juno* burning noted that demonstrations had been staged against the film in Waterford, Derry, and Dublin (with the film being withdrawn from presentation in the first two cities), cases of public protest over more simply offensive films were rare. The problem here was the depiction of Ireland; in the vast majority of cases, cinema was something exterior, and thus not threatening to the identity of the postcolonial nation, even if the Church feared that it threatened the national people's souls.

Limerick, the Free State's third-largest municipality after Dublin and Cork, was historically a highly nationalist, conservative, and economically depressed city. Limerick did not possess a significant professional theatre at this time – the Athenaeum, built in 1855, had previously been used for live performances as a Theatre Royal, but at this time was primarily a cinema house. Yet discussion in the *Limerick Leader* late in 1929 shows that the possession of a true theatre was still a civic goal, as business leaders called out for restoration of the Theatre Royal or for a new purpose-built theatre. Public leaders wanted a theatre, not necessarily to produce local drama (there was no mention of potential for a professional Limerick company), but to give the populace access to the biggest and best touring productions. Once again, the discourse circulates the idea that theatre (even non-Irish or non-serious theatre) would be good for the people of the city. Perhaps most interesting here is the suggestion that business leaders rather than local government must make theatre happen, testifying to the importance of the idea of theatre not just for government but throughout society (especially since in a cash-strapped, rather unruly city like Limerick, local governance might find it difficult to lead in such matters).

In the absence of large professional productions, there were some theatrical entertainments that were more palatable to the citizens and media of Limerick than the works of Sean O'Casey: for example, works like those of George Shiels. When the city's Institute Players amateur group presented Shiels's *The New Gossoon* in December of 1930, the *Echo* deemed the production "really healthy intellectual fun." (This newspaper included amongst its agricultural advertisements a notice that copies of a "Prayer to St. Anne, Mother of the Blessed Virgin Mary" were available from the newspaper's office.) The review goes on: "Mr. Shiels, in his Irish portraiture, is nothing but up to-date in his sketches – there is an Irish breeze about his every conception natural in every vein – homely and racy of the National soil from which, shamrock-like, their very wit and humour conception vegetate" (2 Dec. 1930, 2).

The *Limerick Leader* also highlights the growth of amateur local groups, an important theatrical movement. Although the growth of modern media meant that in Ireland, as in most other countries, professional theatre might never again serve as quite the same form of entertainment and discursive point it had in previous years, it is not fair to say that theatre was not still a significant element of daily life for many people. Dublin was not the only locale in which amateurs undertook theatrical production as a serious hobby. In Limerick, there seemed to be a crop of performances around Christmas, by school and community groups, performing popular Irish and British plays. December saw a debate conducted in the letters column of the *Leader* over the city's support, or sometimes lack thereof, of the amateur drama. Dramatic competitions among cities and towns were growing in popularity; in the *Leader,* pride was expressed in a local group's success at the previous year's national *feis* competition in Dublin. Especial pride came from defeating Cork's Drama League (which, though a young group itself,

had a strong reputation already). The pride taken in localities doing well in the Irish sphere (most amateur groups did bear names of communities, places, and/or schools) echoes the pride of the nation of the Irish theatre's reputation on the international stage.

Amateur drama groups were also key players in language revival politics (as could be seen in government budgets). Christopher Fitz-Simon, drawing from a report in the *Cork Examiner*, reports that Mac Liammóir gave a lecture in Cork in February 1939 that was

> revealing, for in it he stated publicly for the first time what he said to Lady Gregory ten years before that there really was no future for professional drama in the Irish language. "I have come to the stern conclusion that the salvation of the language in the theatre lies not in the attempt to make professional Irish-speaking actors, but in extensive amateur activities. These should be directed by professional producers." (*The Boys* 110)

In 1929 (the time of Mac Liammóir's initial comments to Gregory), Limerick's nationalist newspapers called for the Gaelic League to do more work, including presenting Irish-language patriotic theatre and variety performances. Amateurs and government alike believed in the power of theatre to aid the language movement.

Belfast newspapers also show an increased role for amateur dramatic societies, in contrast to the war years. The website of the Theatre and Performing Arts Archive maintained by Belfast's Linenhall Library notes the success of the Northern Drama League, founded in 1923 "to promote amateur performances of such good plays as are unlikely to be produced in the theatres of the city." Its not-for-profit productions included "classics by Euripides and

Shakespeare as well as works by Synge, Ibsen and Chekhov." The Northern League also had a hand in encouraging other amateur groups, again, through competition:

> In 1929 the NDL organised the first Northern Dramatic Feis. This annual competition offered a platform for the ever-growing numbers of amateur groups to compete, and groups as varied as the Lisburn British Legion Dramatic Society, the Carrickfergus Repertory Players and the Belfast Jewish Institute took part. The Feis was held at the Empire Theatre initially, moving to the Grand Opera House from 1934 onwards. (Timeline, Theatre and Performing Arts Archive)

An *Irish Independent* article of 10 February 1931 describes the first night of that year's *feis*: "not only are the entries high [21 entrants], but, judging by the houses to-night, the Feis is going to be a success from the box office point of view" (n.p., Dublin Gate Theatre Collection Press Cuttings Book 4, 95). Apparently kitchen comedies predominated at this competition as they did at the Abbey; Hilton Edwards, guest adjudicator, was quoted by several newspapers as warning competitors against over-reliance on this type (e.g., *The Northern Whig*: "Mr. Edwards . . . made a strong appeal to the societies to get away from the peasant type of play" [n.d., Gate Press Book 4, 98]). The *feis* was not the only notable theatrical effort of the 1930s. Despite its struggles, the Ulster Theatre had helped to lay ground for groups like the Empire Players/Belfast Repertory Theatre and Little Theatre of the 1930s. While the Ulster Theatre always remained an amateur group, it came together with the Northern Irish Players and the Jewish Institute Dramatic Society in 1940 to form the Ulster Group Theatre, eventually Belfast's longest-lived professional company. While none of the theatre groups active in the North in the 1920s and 1930s fostered

artistically innovative playwriting or production, their increasing role in the community showed, as in the Free State, the vitality of theatre even when it was not breaking new creative paths.

VII

Chapter summary

By 1932, the decade-old Irish Free State had achieved a remarkable degree of stability. This stability was seen in and reinforced by several political developments, most notably the adoption by the British Parliament of the Statute of Westminster in 1931and the Irish election of 1932, which saw the young state go through a peaceful change in government. The Statute of Westminster, into which William Cosgrave's ministers had considerable input, gave the Free State and other British Dominion countries legislative independence on terms remarkably like those Eamon de Valera had inopportunely proposed in the past as "external association." In February 1932, Fianna Fáil and de Valera formed their first government. An Irish electorate dissatisfied with economic depression and unimpressed by Cumann na nGaedheal's anti-Communist scare tactics rewarded the efficient organization of the opposition party, giving Fianna Fáil 72 seats, enough to form a coalition government with the Labour party. (In another election in January 1933, Fianna Fáil won an outright majority with 77 seats.) Although some observers feared possible turmoil from the change in government, up to the point of a possible military coup, all parties involved respected the democratic process. The transition was peaceful, and relatively uneventful.

Such an event would have been almost unimaginable in the war-torn Ireland of ten years earlier. With this status and the peaceful change in government, the Irish Free State was confirmed as a viable, modern nation-state, even before de Valera maneuvered towards near independence with a new constitution in 1937 (setting up the declaration of a republic in 1949). The culture of the intervening years had played a major role in bringing this change of affairs

about; fostered by a conservative government and a national people longing for stability, an Irish culture dominated by pragmatic ideas prepared the nation for the next steps in the temporally postcolonial development. I have argued in this chapter that the theatrical culture of the 1928-32 period, while exhibiting more experimentation than the previous several years, displays the continuing dominance of these postcolonial anxieties. In its politics and its performance alike, Ireland was still engaged upon what Joseph Roach calls the process of "internal cultural self-definition" (4); though a strong basis had been established, "the play of difference and identity within the larger ensemble of relations" continued in often subtle ways. Different manifestations of performance had different roles to play in the process. The establishment of an Irish-language theatre in Galway served as a symbolically useful entrant to the discourse of independence, although the play which opened it exemplified an outmoded style of mythic story. In Dublin, the Abbey and the Dublin Drama League together staged a broader range of productions than they had in the early 1920s, as directors interested in modernism sought alternatives to the dominance of rural realism. Yet although this breadth indicates a greater tolerance in Irish culture for exterior incursions in these politically more stable years, the fact that the experiments of the League and the Abbey ceased when a professional theatre dedicated to such projects was founded indicates that the niche for modernist theatre in the Irish Free State was still decidedly limited.

Of three potential paths showcased in successful early productions at the Dublin Gate Theatre, the one that would prove most successful for the theatre in the long term was that which satisfied its audience's craving for varied playwriting styles and visually polished productions in a relatively non-threatening way. Irish myth was dull and Irish Expressionism provocative;

neither spoke to audiences in a vital enough fashion to overcome the handicap of cultural tastes already set against these, and neither was an organic enough expression of Irish culture to inspire imitators. Perhaps some of the Gate's inability to foster playwriting was due to its upper-class niche, which saw it functioning at more of a remove from the mainstream of Irish society than was the Abbey, with its repertoire of rural comedies, or the music halls. Music halls were overtaken during this period by the newly popular cinema, which, unlike theatre, was formally subject to government censorship. The social and political status of theatre was heightened in comparison to film. Even while film audiences grew, theatre, especially in the form of the popular Irish comedies, played an increasingly active role in the lives of many Irish individuals as amateur drama grew in popularity. The growth in amateur drama in this era, seen in cities from Limerick to Belfast, testifies to the ongoing importance of theatrical expression in Irish society even though it continued to function largely within conservative parameters determined by postcolonial ideology.

Chapter 5

Conclusion

I

Summary

This dissertation has argued that theatrical expression was a vital cultural force in Ireland even beyond the Cultural Renaissance and the early years of the Abbey, through the investigation of a range of theatrical performances throughout southern Ireland during this period. While this selection could not be entirely exhaustive, I have tried to provide an accurate sense of Irish theatrical culture in the 1920s from historical perspective, utilizing a chronological narrative that corresponds with the Irish Free State's development.

At the historical moment with which this dissertation narrative opened, the Irish nation-state had not yet achieved temporal decolonization. During this era, a turbulent, confusing process of warfare and politics saw Irish participation in wars both at home and overseas, with shifting allegiances, symbolic action, and competing visions of the national future. That future would, it became increasingly clear, be reached not through ordinary political means but through violence. Throughout these turbulent years, theatrical performance (especially native-made theatre) thrived. Why was this the case? The example of a popular music-hall entertainment, *Kathleen Mavourneen,* offers some answers: it provided theatergoers with not only escapist entertainment but also a safe, moderate, nostalgic vision of an independent nation. Some more artistically ambitious productions found a degree of popular success, as well, but the example of *The Player Queen* suggests that Irish audiences looked first for entertainment even when scripts

held the potential for spurring more modernist soul-searching. More exclusive theatre groups either ceased operations during the period or remained confined to small niches that did not intervene in the mainstream in significant ways.

Chapter Three focused upon the Abbey Theatre, usually the chief source of evidence in the argument for the significance of theatre and drama in Irish cultural nationalism. Brenna Katz Clarke and Harold Ferrar write of the Abbey's first decades that it was

> first and foremost a political theatre, a step in the complex movement towards self-determination which can only be forged on an unshakeable base of national pride. The struggle for artistic freedom to plummet the dark recesses of the psyche was to be fought much later in Ireland. The business at hand was to foster a self-sustaining theatre which could be a prime agent in a revolution of national consciousness. (10)

In arguing that the Abbey was still politically engaged even when it was not involved with revolutionary nationalism (or with the exploration of the "dark recesses of the psyche" that characterized more modernist artistic ventures) I have explored the subtle politics of a popular Abbey production that many consider apolitical. The success of the Abbey comedy, exemplified in *Paul Twyning*, showed that the National theatre during this era was concerned not just with pride (although that was an obvious issue in the discourses around the creation of the Abbey subsidy), but also with serving the national audience's need for escape in time of war and for nostalgia and confidence in times of state-building. Reception of the work of Sean O'Casey, conversely, demonstrates the limits of Irish cultural expression during this period. When audiences relied on realist plays to reinforce the cultural narratives of national development,

works that either questioned received wisdom about nationalist icons or that looked beyond traditionally Irish subjects and styles were not welcomed to the mainstream, but were censored through various non-official means.

Cultural censorship was again addressed in Chapter Four, in which included a discussion of lack of official government censorship of the theatre in light of theatre's relationship to the state and the growing concerns raised by the increase of cinematic entertainment. The destruction of an O'Casey film in Limerick provided an instance of drama being once again censored through popular means. In this chapter, I also discussed the relationship of Irish theatre to the apparently incompatible forces of nostalgia (myth and language) and modernism. The involvement of Micheál Mac Liammóir and Hilton Edwards, two of the most important figures in Irish theatre history, in dramatically dissimilar theatrical projects provided a stimulus for investigating their different endeavors. The significance of postcoloniality in the language politics surrounding the premiere of *Diarmuid agus Gráinne* is obvious, although the apparent rejection of the mythical type of story demonstrates that the cultural nationalism of the Irish Free State was taking different forms than that of the Irish Cultural Renaissance. While the establishment of the Dublin Gate Theatre showed that Irish society (or a section of it) was ready to accommodate displays of modernist design and thought, the society continued to prove less than stimulating to playwriting that emphasized the exploration of individual consciousness through non-traditional forms. The limited success of *The Old Lady Says "No!"* also exemplifies the close relationships between history and culture described by Amilcar Cabral and Joseph Roach, as it reveals the unreadiness of the developing state to accept revision of nationalist mythology.

II

Arguments

A: Dissertation argument

A range of questions prompted this dissertation: why was there so much performance? What types of performance dominated? What succeeded and failed? What minority voices found expression? Did theatre in Ireland correlate with European, British and American movements, especially modernism? In a society where drama was considered to be deeply related to nationality, what relationship did the theatre have to the developing new state?

Answers to these questions are not simple – the diversity of performance types, themes, and styles and the ambivalence and cultural hybridity demonstrated in responses to performances show that there are always exceptions to rules. Alternative examples and arguments to those presented in this dissertation could be advanced. Research does suggest, however, that there are some defining characteristics of theatre in the period. Among those characteristics are, as discussed above, the public popularity of entertaining theatre and the high cultural value assigned to serious theatre, as well as the remarkable dominance of realistic forms, domestic focus, nostalgia, escapism, moral conservatism, resulting in what is often called sameness, dullness, or even monotony. Together, these characteristics constitute the "regularities" of a theatrical formation that was part of a larger cultural formation in the developing Irish nation-state.

In investigating these regularities in a variety of theatrical performances, I have argued that there is one common reason underlying all of these characteristics: postcoloniality. Although 1920s theatre (both commercial and artistic) was not always engaged with nationalist concerns in the direct, obvious ways that had provoked both controversy and acclaim for the

Irish Literary Theatre and Irish National Theatre Society in their early years, it still had a part to play in the life of the nation, especially through facilitating the "memory and forgetting" of culture as playwrights, directors and performances responded to the needs of audiences.

One of the main questions that inspired this dissertation is why Ireland, a country with a reputation for literary and theatrical greatness, failed to produce a significant body of modernist drama. I have argued that the principal reason that Ireland did not foster modernist drama was that Irish culture was more influenced by its domestic wars than by World War One. Collective security, as expressed in a stable nation-state, was the primary goal. The role of culture during this time was to help provide that stability. The simple fact is that Ireland was too much concerned with defining itself as a nation, a state, and a culture to afford much prominence to individualistic or cosmopolitan discourse during what was the height of the modernist period elsewhere. Theatre in Ireland was inherently predisposed to be less modernist than Irish novels and poems, due to a form and history that meant it was created through collaborative processes, was always in close contact with audiences, and was always closely tied to cultural expression rather than giving voice to unique individual thoughts.

In addition, Irish drama of the 1920s generally lacks the sense of a break with the past that tends to characterize modernist art and writing. The majority of Irish theatrical productions both lowbrow and high were solidly connected to the traditions of previous decades, both in their form and their subject (even when their intention was to debunk the sanctity of tradition, as in *The Old Lady Says "No!"* or *The Plough and the Stars*). This is only logical, for as the nation-state developed, the past *was* a very important element of both the present and the future, as it helped define what the country was and could or should be.

Thus, the nostalgia for the idealized agrarian village life presented in *Kathleen Mavourneen* spoke not only to the contemporary need for escapism, but also to the hope that Ireland could one day be an orderly society untroubled by violent disruption. Likewise, the familiar playwriting and production style of *Paul Twyning* provided a positive image in a peasant Irishman who could function independently to ensure happy endings. Even those plays that eventually proved to be beyond the mainstream showed the national narrative's primacy in the Irish imagination, from *Diarmuid and Gráinne*'s attempt to revive the vigor of myth to O'Casey's and Johnston's attempts to redefine the relationships of Irish history to the present.

B: Academic arguments

The significance of theatre in Irish society has always made it an object of intrigue to theatre historians. The idea that theatre made a real difference to Irish culture is a powerful and attractive thought for theatre scholars. If one accepts, as so many theatre aficionados do, that the Abbey Theatre and other theatrical groups made a valuable contribution to the Irish Cultural Renaissance, thus helping to influence and advance the cause of Irish nationalism in the years around 1900, then it is merely a logical extension (if perhaps a painful one) to state that the Irish theatre also made a contribution to the new strain of national culture that advanced the cause of stable Irish statehood in the 1920s. If one is not inclined to accept the significance of Irish theatre as a given, then proving contribution to, rather than mere reflection of, social developments may be more difficult. I believe, however, that concrete events such as the institution of the state subsidy and establishment of Taibhdhearc na Gaillimhe are evidence of a real contribution to the national politics that stabilized the state, as are the period's ongoing

debates over theatre and drama in the contemporary media, the complex issues of censorship exemplified in riots, the politics of theatre's international reputation, and their uses as sources of pro-Irish publicity both inside and outside the Free State. All of these testify to a significance for Irish performance that cannot be accounted for if theatre is considered irrelevant entertainment or merely representational. Although the reasons for the importance of theatre varied from one historical moment to the next, they justify investigating the theatre as a locus of cultural politics.

The introduction to this dissertation discussed the prevalence of academic and societal criticism of the conservative culture of the Irish Free State. I have argued that a more productive attitude would be to question the sources and effects of this conservatism. My research into conformist discourses in the theatre suggests that these patterns were part of broader societal trends; as R.F. Foster argues in *Modern Ireland*:

> The rigorous conservatism of the Free State has become a cliché; what matters most about the atmosphere and mentality of twenty-six-county Ireland in the 1920s is that the dominant preoccupation of the regime was self-definition against Britain – cultural and political. (516)

Foster also touches, however, upon an even more complex issue – that of proving Irishness to the Irish when he says that the "obsession with enforcing public modes of 'Irishness' owed much to the Free State regime's sensitivity about accusations that they had sold out on a separatist republic; it was, in a sense, a continuing result of the civil war" (519). This need for internal self-definition (a related issue can be seen in the debates over whether the Abbey was truly national enough to warrant the name) was coupled with the nation's need to portray itself usefully and properly on the international stage. Considering Ireland's postcoloniality, however,

it is interesting that during this time, the self-definition process enacted in theatrical productions tended not to focus upon vilifying images of the British as "Other," but rather on empowering (if simplistic) images of Ireland and Irish selves with which audiences could identify. Audiences chose to identify with the images provided by *Kathleen Mavourneen* and *Paul Twyning,* but rejected those seen in *The Plough and the Stars.* The cultural focus upon self-definition also did not mean the exclusion of popular British entertainments. Most Irish people continued to enjoy escapist entertainments made in a British culture with which they continued to share much in common, although some elite Anglo-Irish groups faded and the Irish government used the native language as an anti-English instrument.

Foster suggests that "social and political stability [was] effectively achieved, though at some considerable cost" (519). Although the stabilization of culture and society did result in homogenization, which was evident in both concrete phenomena (for example, Protestant emigration and the death of the British Empire Shakespeare Society) and in public rhetoric, stability was nonetheless a tremendous achievement. The stabilization of the Irish state between 1919 and 1932 was an extraordinary accomplishment, and one which, as John Regan notes, saw politics defined by characteristics similar to those that defined the drama – moderation:

> Revolution in Ireland as much as counter-revolution was a curious species when compared to much that goes by the same handle elsewhere in the inter-war period. Both, in an age of extremes, remain defined by moderation rather than by excess. . . . Though there was much drama in this account of the Irish counter-revolution and treatyite settlement in every sense, it is the non-events, the absence of real

> extremes, the subtle differences and ultimately the monotony of Irish nationalist politics which remain most compelling. (382-3)

Similarly, it is the absence of extremes that is most notable in Irish drama in the period discussed here, and which spurred my interest in the topic at the outset. In seeing a parallel between my conclusions and Regan's, it is in the sense that moderation, and even monotony, were essential and useful characteristics of Southern Ireland society during the Free State period.

Regan goes on to discuss the charged debates among Irish political historians, noting a tendency to assign positive and negative labels to strains of nationalism, when, he argues, the focus should more properly be upon the overall tendency toward consensus. Politics are also evident in theatre historians' and literary scholars' attempts to canonize good and bad, Irish and non-Irish plays. In drawing attention to these political judgments, I must also acknowledge the biases of my own arguments. This dissertation's attempt to complicate the Irish drama studies field includes a conscious effort to evoke more respect for a denigrated period of theatre history, through a reassessment of the value and power of often-disparaged texts and performances.

III

Epilogue

A: Implications and extensions: moving forward

The arguments made in this dissertation can be extended both forward in Irish history and outward into other nations and arenas. In Irish cultural history, the 1920s are by no means the only period that comes in for denigration. The period 1919-1932 was a definitive time in Irish history, which saw significant political developments in the nation-state accompanied by significant cultural developments. This is not to imply, however, that all of the cultural characteristics described here were unique to the period. In fact, they can be seen as seeds in earlier years and, perhaps, as developed to an even more marked degree in later years. Although it is logical to demarcate a project that follows the narrative of political independence by the years 1919 and 1932, two clear turning points, one could also, for example, delineate a period with the years 1916, 1922 or 1923, 1937 (the year of de Valera's new Constitution for the Free State), or 1949 (the year the Irish state became a Republic). Divisions of historical moments are not neat, as the beginning of this dissertation, which of necessity incorporated discussion of the previous years with World War One and Easter 1916, shows. The trends described as characteristic of the timeframe discussed in this dissertation are not necessarily unique to the period, although different historical circumstances obviously mean transformations in discourses. Looking forward into the Free State period following the election of Fianna Fáil serves as an example of the ways the argument made in this dissertation could be applied further.

Although the Fianna Fáil government might have been expected to have less sympathy for the Abbey than had Cumann na nGaedheal, and in fact became entangled with familiar

criticisms of the Abbey made by Irish-American political societies during another tour in 1932, the truth is, as Lionel Pilkington writes, that "what is so remarkable about the overall relationship between Fianna Fáil and the Abbey Theatre in the 1930s and 1940s is that there is a striking *lack* of conflict" (118). De Valera himself wrote to a friend in October 1934 that the subsidy supported "valuable cultural work" (letter to John Devlin quoted in Tim Pat Coogan, *Eamon de Valera* 504). Bearing in mind that, as Terence Brown writes, "By the early 1920s 43 percent of Irish-born men and women were living abroad" (*Ireland* 18), looking more deeply into the Abbey tours into this era could offer stimulating evidence of theatre's role in circulating discourses of Irishness not only to the former colonizers but also to hybrid Irish people who exerted influence on the state from abroad.

On looking further through the decades of Irish theatre, similar issues can be seen to recur. While Christopher Murray acknowledges some significance for Irish plays of the 1940s and 1950s as "cultural documents. . . . [that] reflect the values, artistic and moral as well as socio-economic and political, of a people struggling to establish firm contours of identity in a post-colonial phase," his primary interest remains investigating the ways in which they critique the political mainstream rather than contributing to it. For Murray, the dominance of realism is a distinct problem: "The difficulty, artistically, is that virtually all of these plays fall into a conventional realistic form, whereby the critique is usually in the end accommodated to the demands of a happy ending" (*Twentieth-Century* 138). Elsewhere, Murray calls these decades the era when "formula triumphed over talent" ("Irish Drama in Transition" 289, qtd. in Brown *Ireland* 244). As Terence Brown himself writes, the coming decades were dominated by contention – but he acknowledges that this was a result of public demand: "Indeed the 1940s

and 1950s in Ireland had been years when Irish drama, despite some signs of life, had been conventional to a degree that even the realistic novel and short story had not been. In those years various Irish dramatists had satisfied a public taste at the Abbey Theatre for kitchen comedies and well-made plays of small-town Irish life" (*Ireland* 244). More recently, Brian Singleton has argued that the controversial reception of Garry Hynes's 1991 Abbey production of *The Plough and the Stars* in non-realist style suggests, in an argument that resonates with my own, that "Not to perform realistically is permitted only if the country's dominant ideology is not under threat" (Singleton sees potential for "new forms of theatrical representation" post-1997, with political and economic changes for the nation-state [274]). All of these comments indicate that there is ample room for further scholarly analysis of the nature of conservatism in the Irish theatre in the 1930s and succeeding decades, well beyond what has briefly been suggested here as an extension of this dissertation's argument. Further explorations might well provide further illustration of the co-incidence – or divergence – of political and theatrical discourses in Ireland.

B: Extensions and implications: moving outward

Historian F.S.L. Lyons has called theatre in Ireland the "most public and most publicized of the arts" (62). As such, it is an obvious object for cultural analysis. Certainly, the theatrical moments discussed here are by no means exhaustive. The same cultural themes could be investigated not only in other time periods, but also in other theatrical performances, not least of which should be the amateur drama organizations touched upon in Chapter Four. Yet theatre was not the only area of Irish culture to be characterized by nostalgia, domesticity, realism, and conservatism. Although I have argued that these characteristics might be manifested more strongly in the theatre because of its inherently communal nature and because of its historical implication in the politics of nationalism, I have also argued in favor of seeing theatre as simply one locus of culture. As noted in the introductory chapter of this dissertation, academics have noted similar trends in Irish art and literature. If postcoloniality was, as this dissertation contends, the major cultural force in Ireland during and following the Anglo-Irish War, then further investigations of the topic in other areas of cultural studies, such as the modern mass media, are warranted.

Looking beyond Ireland is also an area of interest. One of the major benefits of utilizing theory in conjunction with empirical or narrative approaches is the grounding theory offers for comparative analysis. Postcolonial theory, in particular, can open doors to insightful comparison of the development of national cultures even when historical specifics vary widely. Although the particulars of the Irish colonial situation were unique, nations throughout the world experienced decolonization not only through political processes but also through artistic and cultural developments. The potential for extra-national investigation of similar developments, whether or

not they are concerned with similar themes of modernism and conservatism, are similarly manifested in the arts, or in fact differ widely from the Irish case, highlights this dissertation's function as a case study. As a case study, this dissertation has investigated postcolonial culture in 1920s Ireland, demonstrating that theatrical life both reflected and helped create discourses that stabilized the Irish nation-state.

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