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The Abbey: National Theatre or Little Theatre?

Nicholas Grene

In July 1906, Karel Mušek visited Ireland. Mušek, actor and regisseur with the Bohemian National Theatre in Prague, had become interested in the work of Synge, had translated *The Shadow of the Glen*, and was to play the Tramp in a production of the play at the National Theatre the following year. He spent a day walking in the Wicklow hills with Synge, met members of the Abbey company, and was packed off down to Galway to stay with Lady Gregory. At Coole he paid 'a visit to a Kiltartan cottage with Gregory' before attending 'a dinner at Tullira Castle with [Edward] Martyn and Yeats. The dinner featured a long discussion concerning the Czech and Irish national theatres'.[1]

The subject was to return later in the year in a debate between the Abbey Directors on the future direction of the theatre. Yeats, dissatisfied with the acting in his verse plays, proposed an ambitious long-term plan for a theatre with a full classical repertoire:

> We should keep before our minds the final object which is to create in this country a National Theatre something after the Continental pattern. This Theatre should be capable of showing its audience examples of all great schools of drama . . . Such a Theatre must [. . .] if it is to do the educational work of a National Theatre be prepared to perform even though others can perform them better representative plays of all great schools. It would necessarily look to a National endowment to supply it with resources before its work could be in any way completed upon all sides.[2]

[1] Karel Mušek, 'V zapadlém kraji. Črty z Erina, ostrova hoře' [In Distant Countryside. Sketches from Erin, the Isle of Sorrow], *Zvon* Vol. 7 (1907), No. 23, 362–65, No. 24, 378–81, No. 25, 388–92. I owe this reference and a summary of the contents of the article to Ondřej Pilný. A further extended article by Mušek describing his 1906 Irish visit was published in *Zlatá Praha* in 1916, prior to the Czech première of *The Playboy*.

[2] Ann Saddlemyer (ed.), *Theatre Business: the Correspondence of the First Abbey Directors, William Butler Yeats, Lady Gregory and J. M. Synge* (Gerrards Cross, 1982), 169–70.

Yeats dangled before his fellow Directors the prospect of an endowment of £25,000 that their patron Annie Horniman was prepared to invest in the company 'under certain circumstances'.[3]

Neither Gregory nor Synge rose to the bait. Synge opposed Yeats's plans particularly forcefully in his reply:

> I think we should be mistaken in taking the continental Municapal [sic] Theatre as the pattern of what we wish to attain as our 'final object' even in a fairly remote future. A dramatic movement is either a) a creation of a new dramatic Literature where the interest is in the novelty and power of the work rather than in the quality of the execution, or b) a highly organised executive undertaking where the interest lies in the more and more perfect interpretation of works that are already received as classics.

He left no doubt that the Abbey should continue in category (a) and pointed out that even with the proposed new investment of capital they would still have nothing like the resources of Prague: 'Miss Horniman's money [. . .] is quite insufficient for anything in the nature of a Municipal Theatre. The Bohemian Theatre has £12,000 a year and all scenery. The interest on the £25,000 would be I suppose £800 or £900, so that for us all large schemes would mean a short life, and then a collapse'.[4] Synge and Gregory won out, Yeats had to make do with the importation of an occasional actor and a business manager from England, an arrangement that soon fizzled out.

For James Flannery, passionate advocate of Yeats's drama, this was a tragic wrong turning for the theatre, for which he blames Gregory and Synge:

> One cannot help concluding that, as much as any single cause, the intransigence, theatrical ignorance, and downright selfishness of Lady Gregory and Synge thwarted Yeats's ambitions for the early Abbey Theatre. By blocking Yeats's efforts to widen the theatrical scope of the Abbey, they effectively limited the repertoire to Irish peasant plays. In so doing, they also destroyed Yeats's hopes of receiving satisfactory productions of his own poetic plays.[5]

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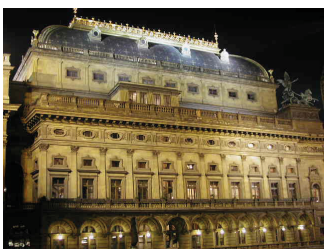
[3] Ibid, 175.

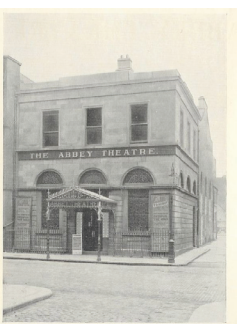
[4] Ibid, 178.

[5] James W. Flannery, *W. B. Yeats and the Idea of a Theatre* (New Haven and London, 1976), 225.

This is a partisan reading and ignores the practical good sense of Synge's contrast between the Bohemian National Theatre and their own. A comparison of the size and scale of the two may bring home the point.

The Czech National Theatre had its origins in the mid-nineteenth century. The neo-Renaissance building, designed by Josef Zítek, took thirteen years to build. When a fire destroyed much of it after a first opening in 1881, such was the public enthusiasm that a million florins was raised for its restoration in 47 days. Its grand opening in 1883 featured the première of a specially commissioned opera by Smetana. By contrast with this enormous investment in a purpose-built auditorium, the Abbey Theatre was created by converting the humble Mechanics Institute, previously used as music-hall, at a cost of £1300 supplied by Annie Horniman. The Abbey's tiny stage, as Chris Morash points out, 'was completely unsuited to the monumental transformations of light and space Yeats was beginning to discover in the work of Edward Gordon Craig and Adolphe Appia, but was ideal for the claustrophic box-set of a play like *Riders to the Sea*'.[6]





But it is not only that the Abbey was a small theatre unsuited to a classical repertoire, and had nothing like the resources of the Czech National Theatre or its public support. The Abbey was in its origins a self-consciously 'little' theatre with a mission that fundamentally conflicted with its aims as a national theatre. We can see this already in the famous statement issued in 1897 by the founders of the Irish Literary Theatre, Yeats, Gregory and Edward Martyn.

> We propose to have performed in Dublin in the spring of every year certain Celtic and Irish plays, which whatever be their degree of excellence will be written with a high ambition, and so to build up a Celtic and Irish school of dramatic literature. We hope to find in Ireland an uncorrupted and imaginative audience trained to listen by its passion for oratory, and believe that our desire to bring upon the stage the deeper

[6] Christopher Morash, *A History of Irish Theatre, 1601–2000* (Cambridge, 2002), 128.

> thoughts and emotions of Ireland will ensure for us a tolerant welcome, and that freedom to experiment which is not found in the theatres of England, and without which no new movement in art or literature can succeed. We will show that Ireland is not the home of buffoonery and of easy sentiment, as it has been represented, but the home of an ancient idealism. We are confident of the support of all Irish people, who are weary of misrepresentation, in carrying out a work that is outside all the political questions that divide us. [7]

The main thrust of this is anti-colonial, nationalist rhetoric: the rejection of misrepresentation and stereotyping, the rediscovery of the national spirit – 'the deeper thoughts and emotions of Ireland' – the rejection of English cultural hegemony. But this manifesto (initially for a 'Celtic Theatre') was first drafted by Yeats, and Roy Foster makes it clear where he was coming from: 'The idea derived from WBY's acquaintance with avant-garde French theatre, a literary enterprise, expressing the ascendancy of the playwright rather than the actor-manager *à l'anglais*, like Beerbohm Tree and his "vulgar pantomime"'.[8] Both Yeats and Martyn had had plays rejected by London theatre managements, and there was some personal animus in the phrase about the 'freedom to experiment which is not found in the theatres of England'. That 'freedom to experiment', however, is perhaps better understood if we see the Irish Literary Theatre and the Abbey that was eventually to succeed it, in the context of a number of other 'little' theatre movements in the thirty year period before and after 1897 (see **Fig 1**).

The Abbey: National Theatre or Little Theatre?

Fig 1

Theatre	Directors	Playwrights	Place	Date
Théâtre Libre	André Antoine	Ibsen, Strindberg	Paris	1887
Independent Theatre	J.T. Grein	Shaw	London	1891
Moscow Art Theatre	K.S. Stanislavski	Chehov	Moscow	1898
Irish Literary Theatre	W.B. Yeats, A. Gregory	Synge	Dublin	1899
Intimate Theatre	August Falck	Strindberg	Stockholm	1907
Provincetown Players	George Cram Cook	O'Neill	New York	1916

[7] Lady Gregory, *Our Irish Theatre* (Gerrards Cross, 3rd ed., 1972), 20.
[8] R. F. Foster, *W. B. Yeats a Life*, I *The Apprentice Mage* (Oxford, 1997), p. 183.

Many of these theatres were small-scale, if not amateur affairs. The Moscow Art Theatre began rehearsing in a barn; the Irish Literary Theatre, and its successor the Irish National Theatre Society in the pre-Abbey days, performed in small halls. *Cathleen ni Houlihan* was first staged in St Teresa's Hall, normally used for temperance lectures. Some of the audience who came along for their usual demonstration of the evils of drink must have been taken aback by Yeats and Gregory's intoxicating patriotic play.[9] The Provincetown Players started out as an amateur group doing summer seasons in the Rhode Island seaside resort that gave them their name. This was not just a matter of humble beginnings on modest resources. The 'little' theatres chose to be little by the standards of the very large auditoria that were the norm in the nineteenth century. This is most obviously the case with the Intimate Theatre, set up in 1907 in Stockholm, specifically to put on the chamber plays of Strindberg that would have been lost in the mainstream theatres.

The naturalistic plays of Ibsen and the earlier work of Strindberg were crucial to the repertoire of both Antoine's Théâtre Libre and to its London counterpart the Independent Theatre. Antoine's *Ghosts* was famous – it is one of the very few plays we know J. M. Synge actually saw in the Paris theatre – and its English-language première by the Independent Theatre in 1891 produced the deluge of critical abuse that Shaw took pleasure in collecting in his *Quintessence of Ibsenism*. To achieve the naturalistic effectiveness of plays such as these, with low-key acting and realistic mise-en-scène, small venues were needed where minimal movements and sounds could be made to count. This was the period also at which it began to be normal to dim house lights and insist on silence during the performance, revolutionary practices on which the Abbey Directors were to insist. A relatively small audience were gathered together in darkness to watch with rapt attention the intense spectacle that appeared before them on the stage. It was a far cry from the noisy, gregarious social occasion that had been the norm for visits to the theatre for most of the nineteenth century.

The ILT manifesto claimed for itself that 'freedom to experiment' that is not found in the theatres of England. 'Freedom' is another key value for all these groups: the Théâtre Libre, the Independent Theatre. The Free Theatre did not mean that one could enter without paying for a ticket. On the contrary, Antoine's theatre depended on subscriptions, just as the ILT was to depend

[9] See Nicholas Grene, *The Politics of Irish Drama: Plays in Context from Boucicault to Friel* (Cambridge, 1999), 275.

on patrons: their manifesto was, like so many manifestoes, effectively a fund-raising letter. What these theatres were to be free of, independent of, were the demands of the market-place, the commercial ethos represented by the actor-manager – Beerbohm Tree and his 'vulgar pantomime'. Eugene O'Neill's father is a good case in point – James O'Neill, who starred for almost thirty years in a touring version of *The Count of Monte Cristo*. He came to hate it, but the public continued to love it, and it cleared him thirty-five to forty thousand a year, if we are to believe *Long Day's Journey Into Night*. It was the visit of the Abbey company to New York in 1911 that helped to turn Eugene O'Neill into a playwright: 'My early experience with the theater through my father really made me revolt against it. As a boy I saw so much of the old, ranting, artificial, romantic stage stuff that I always had a sort of contempt for the theater. It was seeing the Irish players for the first time that gave me a glimpse of my opportunity'.[10]

These were arthouse theatres, rejecting the popular appeal and the crass sensationalism of the commercial stage. The Moscow Art Theatre, the Irish Literary Theatre, proclaimed their values in their titles. The play in production was to be an integrated work of art, not merely a vehicle for the ego of the star actor or an occasion for the scene-designer's ingenuity. The plays produced were to have lasting value as part of a 'school of dramatic literature', not just hackwriting churned out to put bums on seats. The agenda was not always the same for all of these theatres. Yeats and Gregory opposed the naturalism of Ibsen that had been the radical new style of the theatre movements in France and England. The freedom of experiment to which all the little theatres were committed involved experimentation with poetic and symbolic as well as realistic styles. The Moscow Art Theatre, spearheaded by Stanislavsky and Nemirovich-Danchenko as a revolution in acting and production, had significantly different priorities than the Irish Literary Theatre, controlled and directed by the writers Yeats, Gregory and Martyn. What they all shared was the determination to pursue artistic excellence rather than box-office success as their main objective; these were elite rather than popular theatres.

The Abbey, when it was finally established in 1904, was a little theatre in every sense of the term. It had 562 seats, compared with 1400 in the Gaiety, 1950 in the Queens, two of its Dublin rivals. The cheapest seat in the house when it first opened was a shilling, twice the price of the cheap seats

[10] Louis Sheaffer, *Eugene O'Neill: Son and Playwright* (London, 1968), 205.

in the other theatres, and this was a deliberate policy insisted upon by Annie Horniman, the Abbey's patron, in order to ensure a refined clientele. Chris Morash has argued, in fact, that it was the introduction of sixpenny seats and the class of people who could afford them, shortly before the production of *The Playboy* that contributed to the riotous reaction to that play.[11] But from the beginning, there had been a mismatch between the 'little theatre' spirit of the Irish Literary Theatre and its claims to national status. There was, for example, trouble with the Irish language lobby at its very first season in 1899. A young Padraic Pearse wrote in to *An Claideaimh Soluis*, organ of the Gaelic League, in loftily dismissive terms: 'Against Mr Yeats personally we have nothing to object. He is a mere English poet of the third or fourth rank, and as such he is harmless. When he attempts to run an "Irish" Literary Theatre it is time for him to be crushed'.[12] At this stage of course, not only were these allegedly Irish plays being produced in English, they were being acted by a company of English actors.

More fundamentally, there was the claim of the Irish Literary Theatre to 'bring upon the stage the deeper thoughts and emotions of Ireland'. What were these deeper thoughts and emotions? And who was to judge what they were, the small group of upper-middle class Anglo-Irish writers running the movement, or the audience of Irish people who came to see the plays? This was at issue in the early controversies over Yeats's *The Countess Cathleen* in 1899, and Synge's first staged play, *The Shadow of the Glen*, in 1903. Yeats treated the legend of the countess who sold her soul to devils to buy food for the starving peasants as a fit subject for romantic drama, in the manner of Goethe's *Faust*. But for Irish people, just half a century after the Famine, with folk-memories of souperism, the attempted conversion of Catholics in the Protestant soup-kitchens, it was an inflammatory subject. Synge heard the story on which he based *The Shadow* from a shanachie in the Aran Islands, about as authentic a source as you could get from an Irish cultural nationalist point of view at the time. But his treatment of the young woman who finally goes off with a tramp after her old husband has pretended to be dead to catch her out in infidelity was judged a decadent, corrupt, product of the Parisian quartier Latin. For Irish middle-class nationalists the iconic figure of the peasant woman had to be shown to have middle-class standards of sexual probity.

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[11] Morash, *History of Irish Theatre*, 130–8.

[12] Quoted by Richard Kearney, *Myth and Motherland*, Field Day Pamphlet no. 5 (Derry, 1984), 15.

In the past, the standard interpretation of these rows over the early productions of the Irish national theatre movement was to see it as a clash between the innovative drama of the playwrights and the philistine reaction of their narrow-minded nationalist audiences. As Yeats put it with spectacular offensiveness in the wake of the Playboy riots, 'the people who formed the opposition had no books in their houses'.[13] But it can equally be seen as having its origins in the very fact of an elite, arthouse theatre setting out to fulfil the role of a national theatre. The cultural nationalism of Yeats, Gregory and Martyn was not in doubt. They all in their different ways opposed the dominance of England, looked forward to the independence of Home Rule, if not a more radical republican separatism. Still, in their manifesto, with all its nationalist rhetoric, they sought the support of Irish people 'in carrying out a work that is outside all the political questions that divide us', in other words liberal unionists as well as nationalists. Again and again, Yeats resisted the demands for a greener Abbey: 'in our theatre we have nothing to do with politics: they would only make our art insincere'.[14] In the winter of 1901–2, while planning the production of *Cathleen ni Houlihan*, he was still considering involvement with a London-based group called the Masquers and a project for a 'Theatre of Beauty' there.[15] In 1919 Yeats addressed an open letter to Lady Gregory, sardonically entitled 'A People's Theatre', in which he publicly renounced the achievement of the Abbey. He famously declared that for the future: 'I want to create for myself an unpopular theatre and an audience like a secret society where admission is by favour and never to many'.[16] This is often seen as a spectacular volte-face, associated with Yeats's switch of dramatic style to the esoteric plays for dancers modelled on the Japanese Noh. But equally it can be regarded as the emergence from latency of the values of the little theatre that had always been there in Yeats's theatrical enterprise, only masked by its national ideology.

The Czech and the Irish national theatres, on the face of it, might seem to have had a lot in common. Both were products of a cultural nationalism struggling to assert its separate identity within Empire. A theatre was one key way of expressing such a national aspiration: 'in the theatre', as Yeats was fond of misquoting Victor Hugo, 'the mob became a people'.[17] Yet there were crucial

[13] Quoted in Foster, *The Apprentice Mage*, 360.

[14] Ibid, 367.

[15] Ibid, 257–8.

[16] W. B. Yeats, *Explorations* (London, 1962), 254.

[17] See Marjorie Howes, *Yeats's Nations: Gender, Class and Irishness* (Cambridge, 1996), 71–2.

differences. In the case of the Czechs, language was central. A main objective of the Bohemian National Theatre was to provide a venue for performances entirely in Czech, where previously German-language theatre had been predominant. It was therefore not liable to attacks like that of Pearse on Yeats for using the language of the colonial power in the supposedly national theatre. More significantly, though, when Yeats proposed for the Abbey the model of the continental municipal theatre, he was reaching out to a sort of institution that had no precedent anywhere in the United Kingdom. The tradition of court theatres so common across Europe was not established in Britain. Instead there was the compromise, worked out originally by the frugal Queen Elizabeth, by which the royal household gave its countenance but not financial support to what remained a commercial entertainment industry. It was not until the 1960s that Britain belatedly got its own National Theatre, some thirty-five years after the Abbey had become the first state-supported theatre in the English-speaking world. When the Czechs set about creating a national theatre, it had to have a monumentality to match the theatres and opera-houses of the imperial centre in Vienna. To claim a separate national identity, the Czechs had to show that they too could produce the high performance art, opera and ballet as well as drama, that was the cultural indicator of nationhood, and provide the appropriate venue to stage them with due magnificence. By contrast with this situation, it was against the commercial managements of London that the Irish Literary Theatre defined itself.

This accounts for the curiously self-deprecatory tone of the manifesto. Their 'Celtic and Irish plays . . . whatever be their degree of excellence will be written with a high ambition'. Don't expect from us, they seem to be saying, the polished productions you see in London. Synge strikes the same note in the passage (quoted earlier) when he talks of the Abbey's work as 'a new dramatic literature where the interest is in the novelty and power of the work rather than in the quality of the execution'. In fact, from very early on, London critics admired the Abbey players for the freshness, simplicity and integrity of their interpretation of the Irish plays. Their reaction was like that of Eugene O'Neill, marvelling at the contrast with the barnstorming of the standard professional theatre of the time. The Abbey thus fulfilled the function of an avant-garde 'little' theatre, as a dramaturgical alternative to the mainstream. And from an international point of view what differentiated it from other theatres was its Irishness. In a sense, therefore, it could be argued that the Abbey was most successfully a national theatre when it was outside Ireland rather than within Ireland. Where Irish audiences at home might challenge the status of this small

elite group to express the 'deeper thoughts and emotions of Ireland' as a whole, in Britain and beyond, their otherness could be credited as expressive of their national difference. The little theatre in Abbey Street became a national theatre most fully and unquestionably when it staged its plays outside Ireland.

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