

SEAN O'CASEY: AN APPRECIATION¹

BY DENIS JOHNSTON

A DOZEN screaming women rushing from the pit and climbing upon the stage. A fierce and penetrating argument with the actors upon the merits and demerits of Morality, Patriotism, and the Virtues of Home Life. An attempt by a wild young man to pull down the curtain, followed by the sudden and precipitant descent over the footlights of that identical young man on the point of somebody's fist. Speeches from the gallery upon Death and Glory and the Immortality of the Soul. And the subsequent arrival of the police in force to restore order and to rescue Art from Demos.

These were some of the scenes which took place in the Abbey Theatre, in Dublin, on the fourth night of the first production of *The Plough and the Stars*, the latest work of Sean O'Casey, the author of *Juno and the Paycock*.

The name of Sean O'Casey is fast becoming well known to English playgoers, and much more will be heard of him before long; but a wonderment has often been expressed as to how the Dublin public could have been persuaded to stand his picture of it in *Juno and the Paycock* without protest. The reason is not far to seek. The Dublin public—or at any rate the more expressive section—has always been under the mistaken idea that *Juno* is a roaring comedy, and has in consequence been too busy with the roaring to protest.

The Plough and the Stars, however,

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is a larger and more difficult pill to swallow, and on the Thursday night, when Caliban had gazed upon his own features for one whole act with growing uneasiness, the storm burst with the consequences detailed above.

This play is an immense, heart-wrenching satire upon the folly of war and bloodshed, and centres in that epic period of modern Irish history, Easter Week 1916. Hardly had the curtain risen on the second act—a public house where patriots forgather—when suddenly the whole theatre was in a 'state of chassiss.' Women screamed and sang songs. Two young flappers blew a whistle violently until—most unfortunately—they blew the pea out and no amount of frantic repairing could restore the instrument to working order. A red-haired damsel in the gallery removed her shoes and flung them heatedly into the mêlée beneath. And above all, the voice of William Butler Yeats from the stage: 'You have disgraced yourselves again. Is this to be the ever-recurring celebration of the arrival of Irish genius? The news of this will go from country to country. The fame of O'Casey is born to-night. This is apotheosis.'

It was truly apotheosis—a scene that could have been witnessed only in that historic breeding-ground of great dramatists, the City of Dublin. It was to the serious-minded a disgraceful and disgusting scene, but nobody can deny that it was a sincere and spontaneous scene—a vibrant repetition of the tribute paid to prac-

tically all the great masters of the past; and as such it must not be taken too seriously.

It could not have happened in England — although I do seem to remember a shrill female protest upon the last night of that sophisticated absurdity, *Fallen Angels*. But then, neither could England have produced such a play or such a playwright.

Sean O'Casey, whose tall angular figure, with its inseparable cloth cap, can be seen almost any evening leaning over the brass rail in the Abbey balcony, has been compared to many of his predecessors — to Chékhov and the Russians, to Benavente and the Mediterraneans, and, perhaps most of all, to the late lamented John M. Synge. It is a pity that this should be the case. Whenever we see a play where unusual and outrageous things are said, as sure as the night follows the day the critics will talk about Shaw. Let us have a play centring around the slums and the jails and the garbage heaps of the big cities, and, inevitably, we shall hear vague, consequential mutterings about the Russians. And an Abbey play, none the less, that is found to be filled with strange cynicisms and bitter self-examination will always be referred back to Synge, regardless of its tenor or even of its date.

The truth of the matter is that O'Casey cannot seriously be compared to any of these. Within the last ten years the world has experienced a cataclysm that has changed the face of nature, and Ireland herself has been turned from the wandering, soulful Cinderella goddess called Kathleen ni Houlihan into the clear-eyed, cynically bourgeois Free State, with its brave Board of Film Censors and its Shannon scheme. Against such divergent backgrounds no two theatres can be compared with any profit or success.

If Sean O'Casey is to be set in apposition to anybody, it must be to another of his post-war contemporaries — to Toller, to the fierce young iconoclasts of the Czechoslovakian stage, or to his American fellow countryman, Eugene O'Neill.

Like Toller, he is poet of the revolution, and his chiefest and only concern is the sordid misery of the common people. National flags, party shibboleths, religion, morality — everything pales into insignificance before this overwhelming sentiment. The surprising impartiality that we find in O'Casey's work is not founded upon an unbiased and judicial mind, but is due to the completeness with which this one supreme passion has driven out all lesser and inferior ones.

'I belong to only one club,' Mr. O'Casey announced rather defiantly one evening in the middle of Kildare Street, 'and that's Jim Larkin's trade-union.' He was referring to the International Workers of the World, the 'Wobblies' — call them what you will, but they embody the only ideal to which Sean O'Casey owes allegiance, and it seems to me that they are right wealthy therein, if in nothing else.

But unlike Toller, and like Eugene O'Neill, he claims to be a realist. This is a dangerous phrase. Since the war, realism on the stage has come to typify all the cynicisms of the new world, and to be associated with a sort of earth-bound pessimism wherein some 'Hairy Ape' is portrayed in the process of sinking lower and lower with the inevitable precision of a Tube lift. I have never quite been able to understand why realist drama must necessarily be slum drama, or why it is impossible to be photographic in Berkeley Square as well as in Shadwell. The Russians again, I suppose!

Suffice it to say that both O'Neill and O'Casey are masters of the orthodox

slum-play, and outside of this both appear to have been unable to venture as yet. But this distinction must be drawn — that, whereas O'Neill has himself apparently nothing very much to say, O'Casey has most unmistakably a very great deal to say; that, whereas O'Neill in one of his latest and most elaborate plays, *Desire under the Elms*, has turned his genius to the portrayal of a theme based on sex, and on sex alone, O'Casey has never had time for such trivialities, and has never betrayed the slightest serious interest in this rather careworn and threadbare topic. Do not so far misunderstand me as to imagine that O'Casey has no interest in women. On the contrary, his interest in women is so profound that he might well be found guilty of Bretherton's famous charge against the whole Iberian race — that of matriarchy.

Certainly it is true that what little of human decency there is to be found in any of O'Casey's characters is to be found in his women alone. It is his Junos and his Bessies who carry the action to the heights to which it sometimes soars, and it is always the men who drag it down to its most sordid levels. It is the voices of the women alone that cry out, 'Blessed Mary, Mother of God, take away this murdering hate and give us some of thine own eternal love!' while the men never can rise above alcohol and the minor blasphemies. But the main theme of his action is never the sex theme, as with O'Neill. It is the human, sexless theme of Epic Drama.

O'Casey has never written for popularity. Rather the opposite. There is probably no man more surprised — yes, and even a little embarrassed — by the meteoric success of *Juno and the Paycock* than its unsophisticated author. And, as the reception of *The*

Plough and the Stars now shows, he is becoming even more fearless in his disregard for the approval or disapproval of the crowd than ever he was. It is encouraging, too, to note that though his house may hiss and shout and to some extent pretend to be shocked, yet they come again, and will continue to do so, in spite of everything. And strange also as it may seem, the main opposition to his work comes not from the men whom he debases but from the women whom he glorifies. It was a women's row in Dublin, and a women's row almost entirely. It appears to be the romantic female, and not the sentimental male, who is goaded to fury at the state of nakedness in which O'Casey leaves his townspeople.

And yet Dublin as a whole does not seem to be ashamed of her nakedness or of her latest contribution to the international world of letters. Possibly it is because she knows that the only malady from which she suffers is not an Irish but a world disease. Or possibly because, with the originality of the Celt, she would rather be violent than smug.

As for her new prophet, it is becoming more and more clear that as a realist he is an impostor. He will tell you the name and address of the person who made each individual speech in any of his plays, but we are not deceived by his protestations. His dialogue is becoming a series of word-poems in dialect; his plots are disappearing and giving place to a form of undisguised expressionism under the stress of a genius that is much too insistent and far too pregnant with meaning to be bound by the four dismal walls of orthodox realism. It will be interesting to see how long in the future he will try to keep up so outrageous a pretense.

LIFE, LETTERS, AND THE ARTS

THE FRENCH STAGE CENSURED

CRITICS like St. John Ervine and theatrical managers like Basil Deane have been complaining off and on all winter that the English stage of the moment has reached its nadir of mediocrity, uninventiveness, and tameness. Their jeremiads have had a ring not entirely discordant with those that Mr. Shaw used to thunder forth in his reviewing days back in the nineties, and, as that decade was followed by one in which such figures as Mr. Shaw, John Galsworthy, Granville Barker, Sir James Barrie, and Mr. Ervine himself emerged, it is perhaps not unreasonable to expect that the English stage may be on the verge of another fruitful epoch.

At any rate, it appears now that the English stage is by no means the unaccompanied Cinderella of the European drama. Unsympathetic outsiders have more than once observed that the contemporary French theatre was the least animated scene in the whole cultural life of France — bustling and vigorous enough in the domain, for example, of the novel. These critics have objected to the monotony with which French playwrights continue to exploit a single subject, interesting and dramatic in itself, but in no sense the central subject of all human life. They have lamented similarly the willingness of many French playwrights to be content with the rather mechanical technique of dramatic writing worked out by authors like Sardou at the end of the nineteenth century — believing as they do that many important values

are sacrificed to mere technical adroitness.

No doubt there have been plenty of Frenchmen all along who have agreed, articulately or tacitly, with them. One of these detached spirits, M. William Speth, writing in the *Revue Mondiale*, takes his theatrical countrymen to task in good ringing Shavian terms. His immediate inspiration is a play by M. André Birabeau at the Potinière, entitled *Plaire* — ‘To Please.’ Without singling out this pleasant comedy for special chastisement, M. Speth cannot refrain from observing how emblematic its title is of the French theatre of today. To please, he says, — and to please at any cost, — seems to be its whole purpose. Everything serious, painful, important, must be banished from the boards in order that nothing may defeat the conspiracy between the playwright and the audience to see human life through rose-colored spectacles to the accompaniment of charming and empty music.

This decadence M. Speth attributes to the unwillingness of French audiences to watch patiently and appreciatively the efforts of young authors to work out a genuinely serious and responsible dramatic style. They exact of all plays a mature and expert finish that they would not think of expecting in all novels; and as a result there is no atmosphere for experiment. Under the circumstances, it is foreign authors of established reputation who attract the really cultivated playgoers.