

THE IRISH PLAYERS

INTRODUCTION BY THEODORE ROOSEVELT

THE ABBEY THEATER BY JOHN QUINN

A NEW PLAY BY LADY GREGORY

IN the Abbey Theater Lady Gregory and those associated with her—and Americans should feel proud of the fact that an American, Mr. Quinn, was one of the first to give her encouragement and aid—have not only made an extraordinary contribution to the sum of Irish literary and artistic achievement, but have done more for the drama than has been accomplished in any other nation of recent years. England, Australia, South Africa, Hungary, and Germany are all now seeking to profit by this unique achievement. The Abbey Theater is one of the healthiest signs of the revival of the ancient Irish spirit which has been so marked a feature of the world's progress during the present generation; and, like every healthy movement of the kind, it has been thoroughly national and has developed on its own lines, refusing merely to copy what has been outworn. It is especially noteworthy, and is a proof of the general Irish awakening, that this vigorous expression of Irish life, so honorable to the Irish people, should represent the combined work of so many different persons, and not that of only one person, whose activity might be merely sporadic and fortuitous. Incidentally, Lady Gregory teaches a lesson to us Americans, if we only have the wit to learn it. The Irish plays are of such importance because they spring from the soil and deal with Irish things, the familiar home things which the writers really knew. They are not English or French; they are Irish. In exactly the same way, any work of the kind done here, which is really worth doing, will be done by Americans who deal with the American life with which they are familiar; and the American who works abroad as a make-believe Englishman or Frenchman or German—or Irishman—will never add to the sum of first-class achievement. This will not lessen the broad human element in the work; it will increase it. These Irish plays appeal now to all mankind as they would never appeal if they had attempted to be flaccidly “cosmopolitan;” they are vital and human, and therefore appeal to all humanity, just because those who wrote them wrote from the heart about their own people and their own feelings, their own good and bad traits, their own vital national interests and traditions and history. Tolstoy wrote for mankind; but he wrote as a Russian about Russians, and if he had not done so he would have accomplished nothing. Our American writers, artists, dramatists, must all learn the same lesson until it becomes instinctive with them, and with the American public. The right feeling can be manifested in big things as well as in little, and it must become part of our inmost National life before we can add materially to the sum of world achievement. When that day comes, we shall understand why a huge ornate Italian villa or French château or make-believe castle, or, in short, any mere inappropriate copy of some building somewhere else, is a ridiculous feature in an American landscape, whereas many American farm-houses, and some American big houses, fit into the landscape and add to it; we shall use statues of such a typical American beast as the bison—which peculiarly lends itself to the purpose—to flank the approach to a building like the New York Library, instead of placing there, in the worst possible taste, a couple of lions which suggest a caricature of Trafalgar Square; we shall understand what a great artist like Saint-Gaudens did for our coinage, and why he gave to the head of the American Liberty the noble and decorative eagle plume head-dress of an American horse-Indian, instead of adopting, in servile style, the conventional and utterly inappropriate Phrygian cap.

THEODORE ROOSEVELT.

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LADY GREGORY AND THE ABBEY THEATER

BY JOHN QUINN

I WAS away from New York when the Abbey Theater company of Dublin first came here, and I did not see them play until the end of their first week. In writing to a friend to explain who they were and what they had accomplished, I pointed out the perfect naturalness of their acting, the simplicity of their methods, their freedom from all distracting theatricalism and "stage business," their little resort to gesture, the beautiful rhythm of their speech, the absence of extensive and elaborate scenery and stage-settings, and the delightful suggestion of spontaneity given by their apparently deliberate throwing away of technical accomplishments in the strict sense of the word. I said that too many theaters have costly scenery and expensive properties to cover the poverty of art in the play or the players, just as poor paintings are sold by dealers in big glaring gold frames; and that their acting, in comparison with the acting of many theaters, had the same refined quality, not always apparent at the first glance, that old Chinese paintings are seen to have when placed alongside of modern paintings by Western artists.

As I observed the fine craftsmanship of the actors, without a single false note, each seeming to get into the very skin of the part that he impersonated, my thoughts went back some eight or nine years to what were the beginnings of this whole enterprise.

On a Sunday in August in 1902 I traveled with Jack B. Yeats, the artist, from Dublin, through Mullingar to Athenry, and thence by side-car to Killeeneen, in County Galway. On the way from Athenry to Killeeneen we passed little groups of bright-eyed men and women, always with a hearty laugh and a cheery word "for the American" and "a pleasant journey to you." They were on their way to a "Feis" (or festival) that was to be held that afternoon at Killeeneen, where the blind Connacht poet Raftery was buried. The Feis was held on rising ground in a field beside the road. There were perhaps a hundred side-cars and other vehicles and five or six hundred men and women at the meeting. On a raised platform sat Dr. Douglas Hyde, the President of the Gaelic League; Edward Martyn from Tillyra Castle; Lady Gregory from Coole; and others in charge of the Feis. W. B. Yeats, the poet, and his brother, Jack

B. Yeats, the artist, and myself stood in the crowd and watched the spectacle.

Yeats told me that Lady Gregory had heard some time before that there was in the neighborhood a book in Irish with songs of Raftery. She had found it in the possession of an old stone-cutter near Killeeneen. She got a loan of the book and gave it to Dr. Hyde, and he discovered in it seventeen of Raftery's songs. Douglas Hyde has since edited and translated a book of the songs and poems of Raftery, and he gives many interesting stories of the bard. He told me that Sunday that it was to the kindness of Lady Gregory that he owed many of his stories of Raftery. She had got, from a man who, when he was a boy, was present at Raftery's death, a full account of it. The poet was buried in the old churchyard of Killeeneen, among the people whom he knew. In August, 1900, there had been a great gathering there. Lady Gregory was the chief organizer of the gathering. She had raised a high stone over Raftery's grave with the name of the poet in Irish upon it. It was she who had thought of doing it, Dr. Hyde told me that Sunday afternoon, and it was upon her that the cost, or most of the cost, had fallen.

Prizes were given at the Feis for Irish singing, for the recitation of old poems, the telling of old stories all in Irish, and for traditional Irish dancing, flute-playing, and Irish music. A little girl from the Claddagh, the fishermen's quarter of Galway, took two or three of the prizes, and a week or ten days after, in going through the Claddagh, I saw her and spoke to her, and she remembered seeing me at the Feis. There was an old man there, and it took much persuasion to get him to mount the platform and tell his story. He hung back diffidently for a long time, but finally a lane was opened in the crowd and he got his courage up and marched bravely to the platform, and, gesticulating with a big blackthorn stick, made a great speech in Irish. Hyde translated parts of it for Yeats and me, and told us how the old man had boasted that he had been at Raftery's dying and had "held the candle to him."

Over the platform was a big green banner with letters in Irish on it and a picture of Raftery as an old man remembered him,