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W. B. YEATS ON PLAYS AND PLAYERS

THE FOLLOWING CONTRIBUTIONS to newspapers by W. B. Yeats show a common concern for the maintenance of a free theatre in Ireland and the preservation of high dramatic standards in that theatre. They are of particular interest because none of these items is recorded in Allan Wade's *A Bibliography of the Writings of W. B. Yeats* or in his *The Letters of W. B. Yeats*;¹ nor have they, to the best of my knowledge, been reprinted since the original publication.

In August 1909 the *Irish Times* published three letters written jointly by W. B. Yeats and Lady Gregory, a further one written by Lady Gregory, and part of a letter from Bernard Shaw to W. B. Yeats. The subject of all these epistles was the threatened interference with an Abbey Theatre production by the political authorities of Dublin Castle. The play concerned was *The Shewing-Up of Blanco Posnet*. Shaw's play had been forbidden public performance in England, but as the English censorship did not extend to the Irish Stage, Yeats and Lady Gregory were quite entitled to obtain the play for their own little theatre. The authorities at Dublin Castle, however, seemed anxious in this case to apply the rulings of the English censor to Dublin and they put considerable pressure on the management of the theatre in an attempt to stop the production. As Bernard Shaw wrote in 1910 in his preface to the play:

This attempt gave extraordinary publicity to the production of the play; and every possible effort was made to persuade the Irish public that the performance would be an outrage to their religion, and to provoke a repetition of the rioting that attended the first performances of Synge's *Playboy of the Western World* before the most sensitive and, on provocation, the most turbulent audience in the kingdom. The directors of the Irish National Theatre, Lady Gregory and Mr. William Butler Yeats, rose to the occasion with inspiring courage. I am a conciliatory person, and was willing, as I always am, to make every concession in return for having my own way. But Lady Gregory and Mr. Yeats not only would not yield an inch, but insisted, within the due limits of gallant warfare, on taking the field with every cir-

¹ The writings of W. B. Yeats used in this article are quoted by kind permission of Mrs. W. B. Yeats, whose devotion to the poet's work places all Yeats's scholars in her debt; none of the Yeats material in this article may be reprinted without her consent.

cumstance of defiance, and winning the battle with every trophy of victory.

The courage of the theatre's directors is indicated in their first two public statements made to the press immediately after receiving the objections of the Lord Lieutenant, Lord Aberdeen, to the intended production. Yeats and Lady Gregory met to consider the position on Saturday, August 21st 1909. Two statements were issued by them over the weekend; both were published in the *Irish Times* on Monday, August 23rd. As the second letter considerably enlarges upon the contents of the first, it is unnecessary to quote the earlier one. As one can clearly see, right from the beginning Yeats and Lady Gregory saw the issue in terms of the freedom of the Irish Theatre rather than the 'blasphemy' or otherwise of Shaw's play.

Abbey Theatre,
August 22nd, 1909.

During the last week we have been vehemently urged to withdraw Mr. Shaw's play, which had already been advertised and rehearsed, and have refused to do so. We would have listened with attention to any substantial argument; but we found, as we were referred from one well-meaning personage to another, that no one would say the play was hurtful to man, woman or child. Each said that someone else had thought so, or might think so. We were told that Mr. Redford [the Lord Chamberlain's reader] had objected, that the Lord Chamberlain had objected, and that, if produced, it will certainly offend excited officials in London, and might offend officials in Dublin, or the Law Officers of the Crown, or the Lord Lieutenant, or Dublin society, or Archbishop Walsh, or the Church of Ireland, or rowdies up for the Horse Show, or newspaper editors, or the King. In these bewilderments and shadowy opinions there was nothing to change our conviction (which is also that of the leading weekly paper of the Lord Lieutenant's own party) that so far from containing offence for any sincere and honest mind, Mr. Shaw's play is a high and weighty argument upon the working of the Spirit of God in man's heart, or to show that it is not a befitting thing for us to set upon our stage the work of an Irishman, who is also the most famous of living dramatists, after that work had been silenced in London by what we believe an unjust decision.

One thing, however, is plain enough, an issue that swallows up all else, and makes the merit of Mr. Shaw's play a secondary thing. If our patent is in danger, it is because the decisions of the English Censor are being brought into Ireland, and because the Lord Lieutenant is about to revive on what we consider a frivolous pretext, a right not exercised for 150 years, to forbid, at the Lord Chamberlain's pleasure, any play produced in any Dublin theatre, all these theatres holding their patents from him.

We are not concerned with the question of the English censorship, now being fought out in London, but we are very certain that the conditions of the two countries are different, and that we must not, by accepting the English Censor's ruling, give away anything of the liberty of the Irish theatre of the future. Neither can we accept without protest the revival of the Lord Lieutenant's claim at the bidding of the Censor or otherwise. The Lord Lieutenant is definitely a political personage holding office from the party in power, and what would sooner or later grow into a political censorship cannot be lightly accepted.

We have ourselves taken out certain passages which we thought, considering the special circumstances of Ireland, might offend a hasty hearer; and one other as an act of courtesy to Lord Aberdeen, but these are not the passages because of which the English Censor refused his licence.

W. B. YEATS. Managing Director.
A. GREGORY. Director and Patentee.

Despite the Castle's threat, the theatre continued with its plans; rehearsals commenced, and for the first time in her life, Lady Gregory was called upon to direct the production of a play. A lengthy correspondence between the theatre and the Castle officials ensued; and, first, Lady Gregory and, then, both Yeats and Lady Gregory were summoned to the Castle for interview. These transactions have been recorded in all their exasperating, if often comic, detail in Lady Gregory's *Our Irish Theatre*. Yeats and she made it plain to the officials that they were obdurate in their resistance. Their stand was supported by Shaw who advised Lady Gregory not to threaten the authorities with a "contraband performance" but, instead, to "threaten that we shall be suppressed; that we shall be made martyrs of; that we shall suffer as much and as publicly as possible. Tell them that they can depend on me to burn with a brighter blaze and louder yells than all Foxe's martyrs."

Eventually, the Lord Lieutenant allowed the Abbey to proceed with the production which became a critical as well as popular success. Yeats and Lady Gregory were not content with their victory, however, but wished to safeguard the Irish Theatre's liberty for the future. They rubbed salt in their enemy's wounds in the following letter, published in the *Irish Times* on August 27th:

Now that the danger of interference is over, we wish to protest against the grave anxiety and annoyance we have been put to by the endeavour to force an incompetent and irrelevant Censorship upon Ireland. We were both dragged away from our work, days upon days were wasted in futile interviews and correspondence. One of the Castle lawyers warned our solicitors that if we produced the play the Castle would use against us all the powers the law gave them, and many similar threats were

made to us personally, by officials, whom, it is only fair to say, seemed ashamed of the task set them. We were forced into a position where we had either to abandon a principle which every worker, in our own dramatic movement, or in the Gaelic movement, looks upon as essential, or to risk by the closing of our theatre the livelihood of our players and the fruit of years of work. Just when our theatre was beginning to be self-supporting, the Castle, or those it has to obey, did its utmost to fix upon us a charge of encouraging blasphemy and indecency, and all this in the assertion of a right of moral censorship which had not been used for a hundred and fifty years. And all this was done, not upon its own judgement, but upon the judgement of a discredited English official, and at a moment when that official's own employers had appointed a Commission to consider whether he should or should not be dismissed. For a moment the attempt to impose the English Censorship on Ireland has been defeated, and the entire Press justifies the play and our action, but it may arise again upon the report of the Special Commission. The result of the Commission will probably be some new form of Censorship, possibly more intelligent, but certainly as objectionable from the Irish point of view, and a proposal to make it apply to Ireland, with, as is suggested, an Irish assessor. This will mean no change so far as the plays brought to Ireland by English Companies are concerned, but it will mean the putting the plays of our theatre, and all plays produced by the Gaelic League and similar societies, under the Control of a Castle official, responsible to the English Censor. *Sinn Féin*, the *Irish Nation*, and the official organ of the Gaelic League have already made their protests. They and we are but little concerned with the question of the Censorship now being fought out in London, but very much concerned in keeping the liberty we possess.

W. B. YEATS

A. GREGORY

* * * *

Another crisis overtook the Abbey in the following year when the theatre's patent and the subsidy from Miss Horniman ended at the same time, and the directors were forced to launch an appeal for financial support. A letter for this purpose was published in *The Irish Independent* on June 16, 1910:

THE FUTURE OF THE ABBEY THEATRE

Court Theatre,
LONDON.

June 14, 1910.

Sir,

In some of the many discussions of late upon the possibility and uses of repertory theatres kind words have been spoken about our Irish one. Mr. Walkley, in his speech at the dinner of the Royal Theatrical Fund, last Sunday, said that the promoters

of the Shakespeare National Theatre and all who might think of starting a repertory theatre "could not have a better example of the real value of a modest enterprise than that afforded by the Irish National Theatre which they owed to Mr. Yeats and his comrades."

For eleven years past we have worked very hard in the attempt to found and to put on a permanent footing this enterprise. Six years ago we were enabled by a generous subsidiary to play on a regular stage. We have had to fight against apathy and prejudice, and at one time or another against patriotic cliques and against Government officials. But our Dublin audience is steadily increasing, and we find support and a welcome not only in the chief towns of Ireland, but in the English intellectual centre, London (our Company is now playing at the Court Theatre), Manchester, Oxford, and Cambridge.

A school of Irish writers and actors has been founded, which has given a distinguished and powerful representation of Irish country life. The works of our fellow-director, the late Mr. Synge, are recognised everywhere now by students of dramatic literature as among the most important that have been given to the Theatre in our time. We play also, and find an audience for, translations of foreign masterpieces, especially those of Molière, akin to the folk drama, and of Goldoni. All the laborious building up, the slow amassing of a large repertory of Irish plays, the training of actors, the making of a reputation with the general public, has been accomplished, or all but accomplished. Our takings in our last financial year are almost three times what they have been in any previous year, and we believe that within a few years we shall be independent of outside aid. We need not be ashamed of having to wait these few years, for after ten years the celebrated Moscow Art Theatre is still carried on at a loss.

Our subsidy, including the free use of the Abbey Theatre, comes to an end, as well as our patent, in this year. We have saved enough money (about £1,900) to take over the Abbey Theatre and to pay for a new patent, a somewhat heavy expense. Our business advisers tell us that the sum of £5,000, which would hardly support a London theatre for a season, would enable us to keep our theatre vigorous, intellectual and courageous for another half dozen years.

Towards this endowment we have already been given £2,000, among the donors being Mr. J. M. Barrie, Mr. A. Birrell, Col. Hutcheson Poë, Lord Pirrie, Lord Iveagh, Mr. Wilfred Blunt, Lady Bell, Lord Dunsany, Mr. F. Huth Jackson, the Duke of Leinster, and the Duchess of Sutherland. Lady Tennant, 34 Queen Anne's Gate, herself a large subscriber, is kind enough to act as our treasurer. Should we receive no more than this £2,000 we shall still go on for as long as we can, but we shall be crippled and not able to carry out plans for the strengthening and widening of our work, and we shall have, as in the years past, to give up to the actual business of the theatre so great a part of our

own time as to interfere with our personal and creative work. We feel we have almost pushed the ball up the hill. We shall be grateful to any friends of our enterprise who will help us to keep it from rolling down again.

W. B. YEATS.

LADY A. GREGORY.

* * * *

The poet's lively encouragement of actors and actresses, as well as playwrights, at the Abbey Theatre is shown in a fine tribute to the then leading lady of the theatre which was printed in the *Irish Times* for January 19th, 1924, accompanied by a drawing of the actress by P. Tuohy:

MISS SARA ALLGOOD

Miss Sara Allgood is a great folk-actress. As so often happens with a greater actor or actress, she rose into fame with a school of drama. She was born to play the old woman in *The Well of The Saints*, and to give their first vogue to Lady Gregory's little comedies. It is impossible for those of us who are connected with the Abbey management to forget that night in December, 1904, when for the first time she rushed among the stage crowd in *Spreading the News*, calling out, 'Give me back my man!' We never knew until that moment that we had, not only a great actress, but that rarest of all things, a woman comedian; for stage humour is almost a male prerogative.

It has been more difficult in recent years to supply her with adequate parts, for Dublin is a little tired of its admirable folk-arts, political events having turned our minds elsewhere. Perhaps the Spaniard, Sierra, who in his plays expounds a psychological and modern purpose through sharply defined characters, themselves as little psychological and modern as Mrs. Broderick herself, may give her the opportunity she needs. I am looking forward with great curiosity to seeing her in his *Two Shepherds*, which is now just going into rehearsal, and one of our Irish dramatists, Mr. Casey [sic], has, in his new play, *Juno and the 'Paycock'*, given her an excellent part.

Miss Allgood is no end of a problem, and the sooner our dramatists get that into their heads and write for her the better for them and us. If we knew how to appreciate our geniuses, they would not have wasted her so scandalously.

W. B. YEATS.

Spreading the News, by Lady Gregory, was first produced at the Abbey Theatre on December 27th, 1904; *The Well of the Saints* by J. M. Synge on February 4th, 1905. *The Two Shepherds* by G. M. Sierra was first produced in the Abbey on February 12th, 1924 and Sean O'Casey's *Juno and the 'Paycock'* was first performed there on March 3rd of the same year.

* * * *

In June 1928 a furious public quarrel broke out between the Abbey Theatre directors and Sean O'Casey when the former rejected O'Casey's *The Silver Tassie*. The famous letter of Yeats to O'Casey (dated April 20, 1928) and the playwright's reply are now well known. The poet's letter is re-printed in *The Letters of W. B. Yeats* (pp. 740-742); and the letters of both poet and playwright are reproduced in Robert Hogan's *The Experiments of Sean O'Casey and Sean O'Casey: The Man and His Work* by David Krause. Four other letters of Yeats about *The Silver Tassie* were published in *The Irish Statesman* on June 9, 1928; none of these letters has been re-printed since then.

82, Merrion Square, Dublin.

April 20, 1928.

Dear Lady Gregory,

I have read Casey's [sic] play, and I did so without reading your opinion or Lennox's, and without knowing whether your verdict was favourable or otherwise. I dictated to George my opinion of it in the form of a letter to O'Casey which I enclose. I had meant to keep it until Lennox returned, and let Lennox send it on to O'Casey with a covering letter from myself. I hear now that Lennox may not return for another fortnight, and that seems to be too long to put the matter off, especially as O'Casey has told various journalists that he has sent the play to us and may go on doing so; it seems wrong to allow him to deceive himself. I wonder would you think it well to write a covering letter, enclosing mine, if you agree with it. I am afraid our refusal will be a very great blow to him, but if anybody can soften the blow you can. I do not think it tactful to say in my letter that he has left his material here in Dublin and will in all likelihood never find it anywhere else, because he cannot become a child again and grow up there. I did not say that to him, because I thought he might suspect me of exaggerating some of his faults in order to lure him back.

W. B. YEATS.

A second letter to Lady Gregory was dated April 25th:

Dear Lady Gregory,

It has just occurred to me that if you agree that we have no choice but to reject Casey's play, if Casey leaves the play in our hands, the most considerate thing for us to do is to suggest that he withdraw it. My letter gives an opinion, but does not absolutely reject. He could withdraw the play "for revision," and let that be known to the Press. He should say that he himself had become dissatisfied and had written to ask it back. If he disagrees with our opinion as to its merits he can wait a little and offer it to some London manager. If the London manager accepts, then our opinion of the play won't matter to him at all.

On the other hand, if no London manager accepts it, or if he doesn't offer it there, he can keep it by him, revising or not revising as he pleases. I want to get out of the difficulty of the paragraphs saying that the play has been offered to us. I have not told anybody what I think of the play, and I will get Lennox not to give his opinion. You have perhaps already written to Casey, but even if you have I would like you to write making this suggestion.

W. B. YEATS.

After the main letters in correspondence had been published in an English newspaper, W. B. Yeats wrote the following letter to the editor of *The Irish Statesman*; it was published, together with the rest of the correspondence, in that journal:

82, Merrion Square, Dublin.
June 4, 1928.

Dear Sir,

The letters of Abbey Directors to Mr. Sean O'Casey and about Mr. Sean O'Casey were obviously private and should never have been published. However, *The Observer* has decided otherwise, and I would prefer a complete to an incomplete publication. I send you some additional passages and letters, including Dr. Starkie's opinion, which Mr. O'Casey has not yet seen.

Yours faithfully,
W. B. YEATS.

Among the additional letters was one to O'Casey dated May 4, 1928, in answer to the playwright's slashing reply to the poet's first letter:

Dear O'Casey,

I have just had your letter. I write from the Abbey. Lady Gregory, Lennox Robinson, my wife and I are here for *The Plough and the Stars*—a packed enthusiastic house. Had my admiration for your genius been less my criticism had been less severe. I think that is true of Lady Gregory and Lennox Robinson also.

Yours,

W. B. YEATS.

* * * *

Sean O'Casey broke off all relations with Yeats and the Abbey Theatre, though he still continued to correspond with Lady Gregory, after the rejection of *The Silver Tassie*. It was Yeats who made the first move towards reconciliation, when he wrote a letter to the editor of *Time and Tide* in defence of the playwright. It was published in that journal on May 27, 1933.

Several weeks earlier Lady Rhondda had complained that the

printers had refused to print a short story, *I Wanna Woman*, by Sean O'Casey although she had approved of its inclusion. The situation where a magazine's printers were able to censure or veto the editorial policy of the journal was not only "intolerable," as Yeats called it, but an extremely rare, if not unprecedented, case. Despite the protests of many other writers and intellectuals—including Desmond MacCarthy and Wyndham Lewis, both of whom had read O'Casey's story, and others such as Arthur Waugh and Harold Laski, who had not—*I Wanna Woman* was never printed in *Time and Tide*. A highly moral story, it was published in book form in *Windfalls* later in 1933 and reprinted in another anthology of O'Casey's miscellaneous writings in *The Green Crow* of 1956.

Riversdale, Willbrook,
Rathfarnham,
Dublin.

Sir,

That public opinion should permit, or encourage, the censorship of printers is intolerable. What is there in their trade to guarantee their judgement? Where is such judgement to stop? Is some new *Origin of Species* or *Madame Bovary* to be forbidden by some combination of printers? The issue is between Lady Rhondda and her public. If she cares to risk her popularity and the circulation of her paper, no mechanic, or employer of mechanics, should be allowed to interfere. I am glad that Mr. Sean O'Casey has broken his long silence; he has moral earnestness and great dramatic genius. Perhaps if I am permitted to read his story I may dislike it, but that is not the issue.

I am, etc.,

W. B. YEATS.

Yeats writes in his letter of O'Casey's "long silence" since 1928. He seems half-afraid that the criticisms of *The Silver Tassie* made by the Abbey directors had affected O'Casey's confidence in his own creative power. The poet need not have worried. In the interval, O'Casey had written three short stories, two one-act plays and a full-length one. Yeats's contribution to *Time and Tide*, however, was gratefully received by the younger man and led, eventually, to the renewal of their friendship. O'Casey's moving account of their subsequent meeting in London is to be found in *Rose and Crown*, the fifth volume of his autobiography. There, he concludes with a tribute to the sick poet: "His greatness is such . . . that the Ireland which tormented him will be forced to remember him forever."

* * * *

The Abbey Theatre produced *The Silver Tassie* in Dublin in August 1935 and completed O'Casey's reconciliation with Yeats. The poet was soon called upon to defend the play, for it was attacked by bigoted priests and pietists even before it reached the Abbey Stage.

One of the newly-elected Abbey directors, Brinsley Macnamara (the late John Weldon), was influenced by the clerical opposition. He publicly attacked both the play and his fellow-directors, and, in reply, the Directors of the Abbey Theatre issued the following statement for publication in the *Irish Times*. It was printed on September 3rd, 1935 and Yeats's signature headed the list of directors.

STATEMENT BY ABBEY DIRECTORS

Mr. Brinsley Macnamara writes in a statement to the Press of August 29th: "I was not at any time in favour of the production of *The Silver Tassie*." At no Board Meeting did Mr. Macnamara state his objections to the production of this play. There is not one word in the minutes on this subject. His protest against the production of the play was only made when attacks in the Press began. Comment seems unnecessary. His whole statement is an obvious breach of confidence, according to the procedure of all public and private boards. He then goes on to attack the players for speaking the author's words as they had been given them. All players are expected to speak the words that are given to them, and the charge receives a touch of comedy precisely because it is made by Mr. Macnamara.

Owing to representations made by him at a recent meeting of the Board instructions were issued to the company that no word of a play's text should be altered or omitted by a player. As any breach of this regulation would have caused serious consequences to the player, it is obvious that the Directors of the Theatre alone are responsible for what is spoken on their stage. Mr. Macnamara goes on to state that the players in performing Mr. O'Casey's plays "have shown a reverence for his work which has not been given to any other author who has ever written for the Theatre," and this vague sentence means, we suppose, that they act O'Casey better than they act anyone else. This is a matter of opinion, but in our opinion our players have played whatever work has been put into their hands to their utmost ability.

He complains that our audience for the last ten years "has shown a wholly uncritical . . . almost insane admiration for the vulgar and worthless plays of Mr. O'Casey." We do not consider our audience uncritical, and we point out that it is this audience which has made the reputation of his own plays.

(Signed), W. B. Yeats,	Richard Hayes,
Walter Starkie,	F. R. Higgins,
Lennox Robinson,	Ernest Blythe.

Mr. Macnamara resigned from the Board the day on which the letter was published. *The Silver Tassie* was subsequently revived in Dublin by the Abbey Company in 1951.

* * * *

RONALD AYLING