

The Emergence of Irish National Drama: A Brief History

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Abstract

In spite of the rich potential, the emergence of drama in Ireland was very late. Till the 19th century there was no drama, either in Irish or in English language in Ireland. It was due to the sincere efforts of the poet-dramatist, W.B.Yeats and his friends, the drama in Ireland came into existence with the establishment of The Abbey Theatre in 1903 in Dublin. But the development of the Abbey was not smooth. Even after the emergence of drama in Ireland talents, playwrights or actors, were not attracted towards this profession because there was not any established tradition of theatrical activities in Ireland. It was W.B.Yeats who pursued many Irish talents, living in other countries, like J.M.Synge to return to Ireland and write drama based on Irish themes and culture. In this paper we propose to trace the history of emergence and development of Irish drama and the famous Abbey Theatre and the manifold crisis faced by it. We will also briefly discuss the role of important dramatists in the development of drama in Ireland.

Keywords: Irish drama, The Abbey Theatre, Irish Literary Movement, Irish folklore, Gaelic.

1. Introduction

The history of Irish drama is a long and continuous one. Curiously enough, the emergence of national drama in Ireland is rather late. "Until the end of the 19th century Ireland had been without any national drama in either the Irish or the English language."(A.E.Malone, The Irish Drama).The rich potential for emergence of national drama in Ireland was not exploited, perhaps because of the idiosyncratic nature of the Irish ethos. It was W.B.Yeats who, with the help of Edward Martyn, George Moore, and Lady Gregory founded the Irish Literary Theatre on January 16, 1899. The efforts of the founders of the Irish Literary Theatre eventually led to the establishment of a national theatre in Dublin. In 1903 the Abbey Theatre was established with the munificent aid of Miss. Horniman, a rich English lady, which was intended to bring Ireland in the main stream of drama in the west. However, the passage of development and consolidation of the Abbey was far from being smooth.

2. Aims of the Pioneers

In absence of any established tradition of worthwhile theatrical activities in Ireland, it was naturally difficult to attract talents-actors or playwrights- towards this profession. It is worth mentioning that the Irish Literary Movement in particular was an offshoot of the already ongoing National Movement for freedom from the British rule. Whenever a national movement of this type begins, in order to nourish and promote patriotism, arousing interest in native culture is given the first place. Because of prolonged subjugation of Ireland by the British, its own cultural ethos had almost ceased to find expression in any worthwhile native literature. The English language had inundated the Irish linguistic milieu to such an extent that Gaelic, the traditional language of Ireland, was relegated to the status of the rustics' medium of social interaction. The Irish Literary Movement was thus faced a two-fold problem: One was the choice of material which, as a logical corollary to the National Movement, had to be Irish. The second was the choice of language, and here the verdict of the pioneers was in favour of English which was widely used by educated masses and also because the pioneer of the Movement, W.B.Yeats himself did not have any Gaelic. The emphasis in regard to the first was on Irish legend, history and folklore. W.B.Yeats and Lady Gregory wanted that a play should be national in the choice of themes, and the language should be Anglo-Irish. Exclusive concentration on Irish subject-matter—legendary or contemporary—occupied a prominent place in the manifesto of the Movement. W.B.Yeats himself has stated the professed aim of the Movement in one of his "Last Poems."

John Synge, I and Augusta Gregory
thought,
All that we did, all that we said or sang,
Must come from contact with the soil, from,
that,
Contact everything antaeus-like grew
strong.
We three along in modern times had
brought,
Everything down to that sole test again,
Dream of the noble and the beggar-man.
(The Variorum Edition of the poems of W.B. Yeats)

As it has been usual with a host of critics, such statements, as the above, have been misconstrued as photographic realism. In fact, the process of the Irish Dramatic Movement, unlike its political counterpart, was less propagandist and more literary. This is clear from J.M.Synge's statement about the dramatic creed the pioneers were keen to formulate. While rejecting Ibsenian and Zolaesque naturalism and the entire vogue of problem plays, Synge asserts that **"the drama like the symphony does not teach or prove anything. Analysts with their problems, and teachers with their systems, are soon as old-fashioned as the pharmacopoeia of Golden-look at Ibsen and the Germans- but the best plays of Ben Johnson and Molier can no more go out of fashion than the blackberries on the hedge"**. (Preface, The Tinker's Wedding, in Micheal Mac Liamn'Oir, ed., J.M.Synge's plays, poem and prose). For Synge 'reality' is at the base of dramatic composition. What he is opposed to is Zola and Ibsen type naturalism which brings intellectual titillation rather than true experience of theatrical performance. He found the milieu of the Irish peasantry a suitable reservoir upon which he drew for his dramatic material. His own statement in this matter deserves quoting, **"...for in countries where the imagination of the people, and the language they use, is rich and living, it is possible for a writer to be rich and copious in his words, and at the same time to give the reality, which is the root of all poetry, in a comprehensive and natural form...In Ireland, for a few years more, we have a popular imagination that is fiery, and magnificent, and tender; so that those of us who wish to write start with a chance that is not given to writers in places where the springtime of the local life has been forgotten, and harvest is a memory only, and the straw has been turned into bricks."** (Preface, The Playboy of the Western World in J.M.Synge's plays, poem and prose). W.B.Yeats, too, wrote plays which dealt with the deeper reality of life. Excepting his two plays, Countess Cathleen and Cathleen ni Houlihan, his entire dramatic output is not connected with the current propagandist intentions of the pioneers of the National Movement. Lady Gregory drew largely upon the Irish folklore resources for her plays. Thus, though the Irish Dramatic Movement was a part of the general National Movement, it differed from its source in regard to the propagandist part which was either considerably played down or totally absent. It is evinced in Yeats's assessment of J.M.Synge which encompass his own position well: "J.M.Synge was incapable of political thought." Yeats and Synge were not prepared to compromise literature with politics. But the establishment of the Abbey Theatre needed financial backing which could come only if stage performances were well attended. That would mean that only such plays should be written which should appeal to the contemporary audience and be in keeping with their national and patriotic aspirations.

3. Difficulties in the Emergence of National Drama

In the beginning of the Abbey, the audience attendance was very thin in the theatre. People were more interested in oratory, poetry and folklore than in drama. The initial difficulties of providing a habitat for the proposed National Irish Theatre was, however, overcome by the benevolent contribution of Miss. Horniman. The next problem was of

writing plays for the theatre where W.B.Yeats' and Lady Gregory's earlier plays, based on Irish legendary and folklore materials, were well received. To gratify the patriotic aspirations of the Irish audience, the advent of J.M.Synge on the Irish theatrical scene was significant. Born on 16th April 1871, John Millington Synge wanted to become a musician but due to his shy nature to perform on the stage he gave up the idea and started pursuing writing. In 1894 he went to Paris to study literature and language at the Sorbonne. It was in Paris where W.B.Yeats discovered him, recognized his talent and advised him to return to Dublin to devote himself in writing about the lives of the Irish peasants and about their culture and tradition. Following the advice of W.B.Yeats, Synge returned to Ireland in 1898 and devoted himself writing plays. He wrote plays on the life of Irish peasantry in a medium re-created out of the Anglo-Irish language which was dramatic as well as poetic. His master piece play, The Playboy of the Western World is a milestone in Irish drama. The discovery of J.M.Synge was W.B.Yeats' singular contribution to the Abbey. It was he who advised Synge to return to Ireland and contribute to the fulfillment of its national aspirations.

4. Fay Brothers

As we have averred to above, there was no established and acceptable Irish tradition of native actors and theatre companies. Whatever plays were put up on the stage were imported from across St.George's Channel and were naturally acted by amateurs and professionals from London. The rather precarious financial condition of the Abbey towards the middle of the first decade of the twentieth century was saved when the famous Fay Brothers joined hands with the Abbey Theatre dramatists and managers. Frank and William Fay, the two brothers, were the first Irish actors who acted in an Irish play. They acted first of all in two plays, George W. Russell's Deirdre, and W.B.Yeats' Cathleen ni Houlihan. The performance of these plays on 2 April, 1920, marked the real beginning of the Irish National Theatre. For the first time the ideals, aimed by the pioneers of the Dramatic Movement, were fully realized when the plays were written by Irish playwrights, acted by an Irish company, and staged by an Irish producer. In this way the Fay brothers contributed a lot to the Abbey Theatre. Had they not appeared on the scene as actors, perhaps, the Abbey Theatre Movement might have died within a short time of its beginning. Thus their contribution was very great to the cause of establishing a National Irish Theatre in Ireland.

5. Two Groups in the Abbey

The history of the Abbey has never been smooth. It had a tendency of encountering fresh difficulties before the old ones were solved. Besides the financial crises, which recurred very often, there were squimishes among the dramatists themselves. All of them were not like-minded and some of them-like Synge and the domineering Yeats-were often than not un-compromising. There were clearly two groups of dramatists at that time. One group, which was led by W.B.Yeats, pleaded for dramas of Irish legend and classical history, while the other group led by Fiona Mac Leod and Standish O'Gray, supported the dramas of ideas with intellectual content. In fact one group favoured the Theatre of Beauty while the other group favoured the Theatre of Idea and emphasized the importance of rhythm, diction and the printed plays. But both the group were against the commercial theatre, which was dominated by Stage-managers.

6. The First Performed Plays in the Abbey

J.M.Synge and Sean O'Casey occupy a significant place in the establishment and sustenance of the Abbey. The Irish audience towards the close of the 19th century, was keen to see its own past and present presented on the stage. W.B.Yeats and Lady Gregory gave them a picture of their cultural past. W.B.Yeats' first performed play on the Abbey stage, Cathleen ni Houlihan is a patriotic play which encourages the Irish young men to fight and sacrifice their lives for the freedom of their country. This is a symbolical play. The title character in the play, Cathleen, is an old woman who symbolically represents Ireland. She appears at the door of a family who are celebrating the wedding of their son. Addressing the youth she describes her "four beautiful green fields", which represent the four provinces of Ireland which have been taken unjustly from her. She requests the Irish young men to free her from slavery. The youth agree and leaving their home go out to fight for their country. Cathleen again appears as an image of youth

with "the walk of queen" and declares that those who will fight for her "shall be alive for ever. They shall be speaking for ever. The people shall hear them for ever,"(W.B.Yeats, Cathleen ni Houlihan). The other play which was performed at the opening night of the Abbey Theatre was Lady Gregory's The Spreading of News. It is an one-act comic play. It was a very successful play on the stage. The Irish audience enjoyed it a lot. The play is full of situational humour. When it was staged the audience kept on laughing throughout its performance. The story of the play is very scanty. A magistrate comes to a local fair of a small village to inspect the stalls. There he meets Mrs. Tarpey who has the problem of hearing impairment. Due to her hearing impairment, a misunderstanding grows which leads to a false arrest for a murder that never happened. The play ends abruptly without telling what happened.

7. Contribution of J.M.Syngé

While W.B.Yeats and Lady Gregory gave the Irish audience a picture of their cultural past, Syngé and O'Casey presented before them their contemporary life. Syngé appeared on the scene of the Abbey at a time when dramatic reservoir of the Abbey was depleting fast and there was a lack of plays which could appeal to the audiences' ethos immediately. He wrote many plays like Riders to the Sea, The playboy of the Western World , In the Shadow of the Glen, The Well of the Saints, Deirdre of the Sorrows etc. to represent Ireland's contemporary ethos. His masterpiece, The playboy of the Western World is a comedy with satiric and tragic elements. This play is about a young man , Christy Mahon who is on run after killing his own father. He takes shelter in a small village where he becomes very popular due to his ability to tell the story how he killed his father. This makes him a hero among the villagers. Pegeen Mike, a beautiful pub owner's daughter falls in love with him. But at the end of the play it is disclosed that Christy's father is not dead. He comes, forgives Christy and takes his son with him. Thus all the character comes out of the world of imagination to face the reality of the life. In this play Syngé wanted his audience to laugh at his characters, but he also wanted the audience to notice their humanity for they have their faults and defects. When the play was first performed at the Abbey on January 26, 1907, there was a riot and protest. The audience protested the performance of the play on the ground that it has defamed the Irish people and their country, religion and their culture. It was also blamed for using offensive languages. Anyhow, Syngé's presentation of Ireland's contemporary ethos almost overwhelmed the audience and thus the Abbey has a new lease of life provided by his plays. But, unfortunately, Syngé died young and his dramatic output remained scanty. But he carved and, in a way, determined the direction in which the Irish drama was to move and shape itself. His imaginative, realistic tradition was followed by a group of dramatists from outside Dublin who are known as the 'Cork Realists'. But these playwrights concentrate more on the surface reality of life and could not reach the depth of human psyche which was so brilliantly fathomed by J.M.Syngé. Hence, naturally the Abbey felt a second-time ebb in its progress of establishing itself as a financially sufficient entity.

8. Contribution of Sean O' Casey

It was at this second –time crisis in the history of the Abbey that Sean O'Casey was inducted into the affairs of the Abbey by the almost indulgent encouragement of Lady Gregory. His first play, The Shadow of a Gunman, drew enthusiastic applause from the audience and encouraged him to write more plays about the immediate history of the actual life of the Dubliners. His Trilogy-The Shadow of a Gunman, Juno and the Paycock, and The Plough and the Stars, -brought thundering success in the direction of its consolidation in future. The plays written between 1923 and 1926 went outside the Irish theatrical boundaries and captured international attention. They brought immediate and widespread fame to O'Casey which no Irish dramatist had the luck before to have.

O'Casey's Dublin Trilogy deals with a series of personal crises against the background of a larger disorder. This disorder, which O'Casey has described as a "state of chassis" in his Juno and the Paycock, has been presented in his first play, The Shadow of a Gunman,(1923), the crisis is at the level of the individual, in Juno and the Paycock, (1925), it is expanded into one which encompasses a family, while the third play, The Plough and the Stars (1926), extends to a whole city. As the canvas expands gradually the first through the second to the last play of the trilogy, there is a corresponding increase in the poignancy of human suffering and in the ironic vision of O'Casey. This happens to the extent that the human crises are sometimes overshadowed by the chaos outside the individual. This is not to say that O'Casey's concern is increasingly with the social or political predicament of a nation and in an inverse

proportion with human predicament. In fact the central situation of the play is not the chaotic background but human suffering. Human suffering and predicament as well as the chaos in the outside world draw sustenance from each other and mutually contribute to each other's significance. O'Casey has very carefully manipulated this relationship by drawing upon what professor Rolling has termed "psychic ambivalence" which characterizes the Irish national temperament.

Although O'Casey's Dublin Trilogy ran successfully on the Abbey stage, the last play, The Plough and the Stars provoked protests by those who felt that O'Casey was mocking Irish patriotism and the Irish people. O'Casey was criticized showing gritty hardship of Dublin city life particularly prostitution. Anyhow these were the plays by O'Casey which contributed a lot the development of the Abbey Theatre and enriched treasure of the Irish national plays. O'Casey's Dublin Trilogy is realistic but his later plays such as The Silver Tassie (1928) are expressionistic. His change in style led to a break with the Abbey, and O'Casey moved to England but he never forgot Ireland and the Abbey Theatre.

9. Conclusion

Thus, we may conclude that, although the Irish National Drama came into existence with the help of W.B. Yeats, Lady Gregory, Edward Martyn, and George Moore but the course of its development was not smooth. It faced many-folds problems many times. There was lack of talents in the beginning. There were no playwrights to write drama which may exhibit the Irish ethos. There were also no actors to act in an Irish drama. The pioneers were divided into two groups which was not a good sign for newly emerged drama and newly established theatre. There was also lack of finance, and moreover, the Abbey faced protests from the audience many times. But fortunately the problems were solved anyhow and the Abbey Theatre and the Irish National Drama kept on progressing smoothly. It is also a good luck that Ireland produced two dramatists, J.M. Synge and Sean O'Casey who emerged as the saviors of the Irish National Drama and the Abbey Theatre. Besides J.M. Synge and Sean O'Casey there were other important Irish dramatists such as Theresa Deevy, Lennox Robinson, Padraic Colum, Denis Johnston and St. John Ervine who contributed a lot to the Irish Drama and the Abbey Theatre.

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