

Studi irlandesi. A Journal of Irish Studies, n. 2 (2012), pp. 109-123
<http://www.fupress.com/bsfm-sijis>

Re-Staging the 1934 Abbey Theatre Production of Yeats's *The King of the Great Clock Tower*: An Evaluation and Critique

Richard Allen Cave

Professor Emeritus, Royal Holloway, University of London
([<r.cave@rhul.ac.uk>](mailto:r.cave@rhul.ac.uk))

Abstract

This essay investigates and critiques an attempt from the surviving evidence to re-stage the first performance of Yeats's *The King of the Great Clock Tower* at the Abbey Theatre in 1934. This dance-drama was the last of four collaborations between the playwright and the dancer-choreographer, Ninette de Valois, during the period when she established for him a School of Ballet at the Abbey in Dublin. A wealth of evidence survives from which a performance text (as distinct from the printed text) may be inferred. The limitations to be found in various kinds of extant data concerning performance (music scores, set designs, photographs, revisions to play scripts, reviews, correspondence, reminiscence) are discussed in the light of the writer's experience of bringing such a re-staging into production. The dangers of overly hypothesising or historicising are examined and devices for negotiating gaps in the evidence while being wholly transparent in one's efforts are discussed. Finally the essay explores the many and diverse levels of collaboration on which a successful staging of one of Yeats's dance-dramas depends. In the course of that discussion the meaning of the word, collaboration, is interrogated and to some degree re-defined.

Keywords: Yeats, Ninette de Valois, collaboration, dance-drama, re-staging

For an academic to be challenged to prove a hypothesis always puts one on one's mettle. When that academic's discipline is in the practice of theatre, then the challenge can be both exhilarating and daunting. Where the discipline is performance studies, the writer is often a trained practitioner. Analysis in this instance involves a taking-stock, which generally comes after the performance event; the hypotheses that shaped the performance are revealed and evaluated through discussion or published critiques, but always in relation to perceived (and, if the writer was also the performer, *experienced*) success or

failure in achieving certain goals (goals, which were privately defined in the course of preparatory research, then tested and perhaps modified in rehearsal). When the scholar and practitioner also has training in theatre history and the performance takes the form of a re-creation of a historical event, the hypotheses are subtle and intricate. If such a scholar is challenged to prove what is tantamount to an *imagined* historical performance (though one informed by careful research), then the risks are considerable because of quite a different order from those attending the proving of a literary hypothesis or an engaging in experiments to extend performance skills or awareness. If one is challenged to stage a dance play by Yeats about which one has published a detailed verbal analysis, then the hypotheses embrace the literary, the performative and the historical, so the demand for accuracy in interpreting evidence becomes particularly acute. This was the situation I found myself in when recently I was invited to stage Yeats's *The King of the Great Clock Tower* (1934) before an audience of privileged experts at a conference organised by the Royal Ballet School to celebrate the achievements of Ninette de Valois, who had danced in the original production of the play at the Abbey Theatre in Dublin¹. Because much of the essay which follows requires analysis of what was the summation of an extended personal journey as scholar, practitioner and theatre historian, I must of necessity from time to time abandon traditional academic distance and objectivity and write in the first person singular.

One focus of the conference was on de Valois' experience of theatre and the extent to which it influenced her ambitions for her ballet company and its repertoire. My involvement came about as a consequence of a monograph I had written on de Valois' work with Yeats at the Abbey that demonstrated how much concerning their collaboration in Dublin is best understood in the light of what de Valois (earlier and simultaneously) was achieving as movement director for her cousin, Terence Gray, at the Festival Theatre, Cambridge, and for Lilian Baylis at the Old Vic in London. That volume argued that the staging of *The King of the Great Clock Tower* was the most unified and artistically satisfying of their productions. By pooling a wealth of surviving evidence, the monograph attempted to create a detailed scenario amounting to a performance text, which outlined as far as possible what the initial audiences actually saw and heard². This scenario was the basis of the re-staging in 2011. How the evidence was deployed in effecting the re-creation was described and analysed in a presentation I delivered at the conference immediately before the performance; it too has been published in a revised form³. The objective of the present essay is not to re-rehearse material that is already accessible in the public domain, but rather to ask: what exactly was achieved by the re-staging and what was learned through the processes of rehearsal and performance about de Valois' artistry and Yeats's? How valuable are two-dimensional forms of archival evidence (monochrome photographs, music scores, floor plans, sketches, manuscripts and proofs with textual emendations and revisions, newspaper

reviews, correspondence, reminiscence) in recovering the three-dimensional dynamics of theatre in performance?⁴ All played their part in the re-creation; but what in retrospect were their individual strengths and limitations as aids to recovery? What, in other words, were the limits of hypothesis?

One striking feature of the play in performance that emerged through the rehearsal period related to the issue of pacing. It was possible, given the structure of the piece and the demands on the performers' time, to rehearse sections of the play (the singers; the King and Stroller; the dancer as Queen) independently, so it was only in the final stages when putting those sequences together that the question of an appropriate pace impinged on our awareness. Arthur Duff's original music set one pace («in a flowing style») with the opening song⁵. «Flowing» is suggestive of continuous, unhurried movement, an idea which the delicate arpeggios of the accompaniment endorse. Yeats's lyrics are mysterious, otherworldly, magical; they intimate but do not particularise a narrative (we are in the world of his early poem, *The Wanderings of Oisín*, 1889); with that style of accompaniment, the magic is not threatening but confidently accepted. Does the mood this ambivalence inspires prepare spectators for the remarkable confidence of the Stroller when facing the King and his ominous threats? A more complex pace is set by the danced sequence, here created by Craig Fortnam from musical phrases to be found in Duff's songs⁶. Fortnam was inspired by Yeats's description of the dance as «a long expression or horror and fascination»⁷ to work with two contrasting themes of varying tempi that were underscored with percussion evoking initially fear then moving through acceptance to a mounting ecstasy. He also took note of Yeats's epithet «long», which accorded with Ninette de Valois' account of how the later danced section of the play roughly equalled in length the opening spoken and sung episode⁸. This indicates that the pacing of that initial episode should be slow: the play opens on a situation of stale-mate.

It is important from the first to establish for an audience the significance of silence: the King's aggressive questioning of the Queen meets only with a stonewalling silence: that silence impels him to further speech, while his words impel her to further passive resistance. Silence is a dominating metaphor that shapes, even to some degree explains, the ensuing action that will culminate in the dance. Dialogue enters the play only with the arrival of the Stroller; again in rehearsal it seemed imperative that these exchanges be played slowly. Most of Yeats's plays for dancers contain a description of the scenario of the danced sequence, which is proffered for the benefit of the audience by an onstage observer or a participant⁹. This is not the case with *The King of the Great Clock Tower*, where the content and impact of the dance are confined to the stage directions as an aid to readers of the printed text to help them imagine the movement content¹⁰. In the theatre and with de Valois as performer, such aids were unnecessary. Instead (and this, I would argue, is why the dialogue in the first part of the play must be paced relatively slowly in the playing), the exchanges

between King and Stroller and the Queen's song together create a context for an audience through which they are subtly given the means to interpret the second half of the play, where the body becomes the prime (and for long periods of stage time the only) means of expression. Even the logo-centric King is at the last compelled to enter the Queen's domain to define himself and his relation to her through mime and tableau. Appreciation of the meticulously sustained balance of the play's structure between speech and dance (voice and body), all framed within the medium of song, grew through rehearsal and performance in a way that no reading of the play text could realise. (It should be noted that the spoken section of the drama outnumbers the movement episodes by six pages to three in the Variorum edition of the prose version of the play, which was the text used in the 1934 staging)¹¹. Though the re-creation worked rigorously with the available evidence, there was, however, no way of proving absolutely that this was how the play was paced when performed to audiences in 1934.

This was also true of most of the visual aspects of the play. A surviving floorplan of the setting drawn on graph paper and accurately to scale (the work seemingly of the director, Lennox Robinson, rather than the designer, Dorothy Travers Smith) taken into consideration with Yeats's initial stage directions immediately poses problems¹². The floorplan defines two tower-like structures framing an inner semi-circle of screens or curtains, whereas Yeats writes only of the central semi-circle. The towers seem more appropriately symbolic of the King's realm and the «tower» that features in both the title of the play and the dialogue. They enclose and confine the playing space more precisely than curtaining alone would do, making the borders (and the limitations) of that realm apparent. Yeats in his directions is less concerned with the exact appearance of the set than its colour: predominantly a shade of «rich blue» but with the curtaining or screens «so painted that the blue is darker below than above». Colours are relative, being differently perceived by individual sensibilities. So what exactly constitutes «rich» in such a context? Approximations only are possible, giving a general, not a precise (authentic) effect.

This is equally true of the costuming, where a surviving monochrome photograph has to be embellished in the imagination by Yeats's description of the effect he intended the costumes to have onstage. He appears to have visualised a schematic approach with the dresses deploying stark contrasts of red (King), black (Stroller) and orange (Queen) but with details using one of the other tones so that the figures seem to inter-relate. The magnitude of the problem over how to interpret verbal evocations of colours is exemplified by the fact that de Valois herself frequently referred to her costume as «gold»¹³. To some eyes a spectrum of orange shades might embrace gold; to others, not. The issue is highly subjective; and moreover colours will often significantly change under the impact of stage lighting. Again, one must approximate; as one must too with the quality of materials used in the making of the costumes. While a surviving monochrome photograph gives a sense

of the overall line of each, it is difficult to judge the weight or texture of the fabrics originally used¹⁴. Working with the performers in terms of the requirements of the action may prove helpful, however. While the King's costume appears to be of heavier materials than the Queen's, for example, it must still in its construction give the actor ample room to allow him to appear violently to attack the Queen, when he tries to kill her (in the final mime) and then through a smooth physical transition lay himself prostrate at her feet. Too heavy a costume will impede the progress of the movement towards the final sustained tableau: if the sequence were to intrude on a spectator's awareness as clumsily achieved, it would rob that tableau of its sense of logical closure, of an inevitable ending. (Yeats admired an effect of utter implacability in the plot-development of serious drama).

The performers proved helpful too with the cut of the costumes. What is not clear, for example, from the photograph is how the sleeves of the Queen's dress were formed: the arms are closely encased in material but there also appear to be drapes hanging from the shoulders in soft folds which echo the folds at the base of the skirt. Were the «drapes» independently shaped lengths of material attached to each of the shoulders or were they part of a continuous piece of fabric forming a short cape? Experiment with the dancer involved in the re-staging showed the former possibility as the more likely (because far more practical) option. The Queen's role requires her at various stages of the dance to lift the Stroller's mask as representing his severed head: a cloak, however short, proved too constricting for the dancer's arms to be fully extended. In practice in the performance, having reached this decision, the draping fabric became responsive to every movement of the dancer's torso and arms, accentuating her efforts to escape the horror of the severed head but equally augmenting the effect of monumental, awed stillness when she stood in reverence before it¹⁵. Like all dancers, de Valois was invariably alert to the potential for costume to enhance choreographic detail. It would be good to be able to prove that our experimenting had reached an accurate recreation of her dress for this role; circumstantial evidence seemed strongly to uphold this view. As with our work on colour, fabrics, pacing, we had reached a level of highly informed conjecture, but it was conjecture nonetheless.

The two masks for Queen and Stroller were more troublesome. The extant photograph of the cast line-up (onstage but behind the scenes) gives a good, full-face view of de Valois' mask, but that for Denis O'Dea as the Stroller is seen only in profile. The Queen's mask depicts a round and appropriately moon-like face, pale and wan but with a pronounced mouth, half-open as if in invitation; the ebony black hair accentuates the general effect of pallor, particularly as the wig is cut short to frame the forehead and upper face while leaving the cheeks and mouth free. Of the range of traditional masks for the Japanese Nō drama, this design by George Atkinson for

the Abbey staging is close to that known as *Deigan* (worn by a beautiful but ghostly woman whose passion is unfulfilled). Yeats, through the agency of Ezra Pound, was familiar with the range of Nō masks and it is possible that at some deep subliminal level this particular mask influenced his conception of the Queen's role in his dance play or that he showed Atkinson a photograph of it from his collection to aid the designer's inspiration. However, the mask is not as simple as it might appear: it must not appear vacant or simple (as the interpretation of the Japanese prototype suggests, the face must suggest a wealth of suppressed experience and expectation). As the play unfolds, spectators are taught to read upon its features that the Queen is deeply self-possessed and, though utterly still and silent, profound in her self-communing. The task facing our mask-maker, Vicki Hallam, was to create a face that an audience could see from the first was full of potential, as much a challenge for them to interpret as for the King.

If the Queen's mask required subtlety of painting in its completion, the Stroller's required subtlety of construction. Whereas the Queen's mask fits the dancer's whole head, that for the Stroller is a half-mask, coming only part-way down the actor's cheeks but with a fully attached beard hiding the actor's own jaw line. Like the hair surmounting the mask, the beard is to be markedly red (typically Irish in colour) so that, when the mask is removed to represent the character's severed head, the beard may come to seem like dripping blood (the stylisation is calculated to enable an audience like the Queen to register horror and shock at the character's brutal fate, but not to alienate them emotionally from the developing action). Yeats specifies that this mask should appear «wild, half-savage»¹⁶. The darker quality of the mask's features when compared in the photograph with the Queen's or with the face of the actor playing the King (F.J. McCormick) intimates that it was painted by Atkinson to appear both ruddy and swarthy. Vicki Hallam worked with these various suggestions. The Stroller's dialogue with the King in time reveals him to be morally bohemian (he has walked out on his marriage), aesthetically gifted as a poet, a likely lad and a jester, but also a man blessed by the ancient gods, an outsider who seems brazen and audacious in the King's eyes, yet one who is ultimately possessed by a consummate daring because of his utter confidence in the truth of his convictions. For him there is no question but that the Queen will dance before him, hear the song he will sing her out of gratitude and ultimately kiss him. It is the contrast between his all-consuming rapture and the insecurities implicit in the King's relentless questioning that finally causes the Queen to move. The mask must support all these revelations and render them wholly credible to a spectator's awareness.

Vicki Hallam is an experienced mask maker for drama, dance and opera and knows that it is important not to make a mask too specific, too defined. «Meaning» is to be created in performance not only by the mask but by the performer's body language and changing vocal timbres. The actor must bring

the mask into the ensemble of his or her communicational skills so that body and voice work to give signification to the mask. Hallam's painting of the Stroller's mask, like that for the Queen's, was nuanced rather than precise, openly evocative rather than insistent: it invited an audience's imaginative engagement with a dynamism latent in the mask that awaited release through their committed, rapt attention. The resulting masks may not have been exact replicas, but Vicki Hallam's aim was not to achieve the contingent details but to embrace the presiding spirit of Atkinson and Yeats's invention. A consequence was that all involved in the re-staging learned much about the function of the mask in performance not only in literal, practicable terms but also as a potent signifier with figurative, emblematic, emotional and psychological dimensions to its shaping of meaning. We learned just how essential an element the masks were within the whole concept of a dance play by recognising the degree to which they begin to encourage spectators to read movement as the body's language well in anticipation of dance becoming the prime means of communication. The masks have a function within the dramatic narrative certainly, but they also prepare an audience increasingly to focus their attention on the physical impact that the actors and dancer are having on them as the performance evolves; spectators are steadily brought to focus on the immediacy of each performer's total *presence*.

At first glance there would appear to be no traces left of the dance whatever: no score, though clearly from the terse note «dance follows» Arthur Duff had devised some accompaniment to the movement. Perhaps this indicates that the songs set to Yeats's lyrics had been composed at an earlier date and that the music for the dance was worked out with de Valois as she devised the choreography¹⁷. Where were we to begin a re-creation or re-staging of this sequence? De Valois said in conversations and in lectures on her work with Yeats that the style of all her dances for him could be described as «abstract expressionism». She knew the work of the Ballets Jooss at this period and had experienced having dances choreographed on her by Nijinska, which gives some indication of the effects she aimed at¹⁸. The task of re-imagining the dance seemed hopeless: to hack together a kind of pastiche of moments from de Valois's surviving ballets for her London company in the Thirties was quite out of the question. Where, then, might choreographer (Will Tuckett), composer (Craig Fortnam), dancer (Deirdre Chapman) and myself as director begin?

Some years earlier when editing Yeats's manuscripts for *The King of the Great Clock Tower*, I had been struck by how extensively his stage directions for the whole sequence involving the dance had been repeatedly revised between his earliest conceptions and the final proofs of the published text¹⁹. Closer study of these now showed how Yeats had at first some rough ideas of how the dance should appear, though these focus rather on sustained poses (the Queen holding the severed head aloft or standing gazing raptly at it, after having placed it on the ground). Any attempt to describe the

movement required to link these poses is vague and generalised. We know that de Valois, like Duff, was in receipt of a copy of a relatively early version of the play to enable her to give Yeats some constructive feed-back; and it is possible that some of the revised versions of the play antedating the typescripts, which were circulated amongst the performers ready for rehearsals, incorporated some of her initial responses and suggestions. Steadily the language of the directions changes from the generalised to the specific; and final revisions to details in the proofs suggest that what Yeats recorded there reflected fairly accurately what occurred during performances on the Abbey stage in 1934. The printed directions in the Cuala text amount in other words to the outline of a scenario which it was possible to amplify further, incorporating information taken from Yeats's recorded reactions to the production and the comments of two reviewers²⁰.

What all this material revealed was the extent to which the dance had to mark a journey for the Queen, a psychological and emotional progress through horror at the brutality of the King in executing the Stroller; culpability in that her silence had in part excited that gruesome response in him; reverence for the Stroller's daring in laying down his life to determine the fulfilment of his vision; attraction to a style of masculinity in the Stroller which, marked by devotion and a capacity to give of himself, is so different from the King's phallo-centric aggression; to a growing openness to the Stroller's ardour; a complete surrendering to his vision; and finally to the discovery of a total empowerment within the depths of her being by so giving of herself. This seemed highly appropriate in the context of de Valois' development as a choreographer: most of her major works from the decade of the Thirties that survive in the repertory today centre on the psychological development of an individual in a manner which offers a wealth of acting challenges to the performer undertaking the role: Job in the dance-drama of that name (1931), based on both the Bible and Blake's illustrations for it, passes through despair to find a lasting serenity; Treginnis in *The Haunted Ballroom* (1934) confronts his fears of an inherited curse on his family and stoically accepts his fate; The Rake in *The Rake's Progress* (1935), based on Hogarth's sequence of prints, declines from affluence to debility, madness and death; the Black Queen in *Checkmate* (1937) relentlessly explores the extremes of her will-power and longing for an absolute political control to realise in her innermost self a profound and vicious sadism. What is remarkable about these ballets is the innovative way in which they tell a complex narrative. Conventionally narrative is communicated in this art-form through passages of extended mime alternating with bursts of dancing through which characters express their emotional state at that particular moment in the action. But this is not de Valois' way: she initiates and develops her story wholly through the medium of dance; she may encompass many different styles and idioms in the process but these always push the story onward in a manner that also requires the characters to confront more and more of their inner identities. They have to act and react to

situation as an actor in drama would, but here exclusively they do so through the language of movement.

One can from this immediately see why her artistry would appeal to Yeats, who similarly sought to create a form of theatre that engaged directly with 'the deeps of the mind'. In her autobiography, *Step by Step* (1977) de Valois includes an account of working with Yeats in which she recalls how in preparation for one of his roles she entered into a state akin to a deep meditation:

In these plays one developed a very strange and moving reaction to the poet, the strength of the stilled mind, devoid of anything but the purity of a deep inner meaning that was not capable of expression in the concrete terms of everyday speech.²¹

Yeats's *Queen* begins the play with a stilled mind despite being threatened in her isolation by a predatory King; physical shock releases her into a bitter but courageous self-examination, shaped and defined always in her own private medium of expression; the integrity of that inner search brings her to a new stillness in a posture indicative of an absolute authority. From being a figure on the periphery, she comes to possess the centre of the stage and the power that is traditionally invested in that positioning within the playing space. Every stage of this whole progression is explicitly or implicitly present in Yeats's directions for his play. We had found a shape and purpose, a style and a content for our dance and the music that would accompany it. The music now had a purposive narrative line to illuminate; basically it deployed two themes which Craig Fortnam took from Arthur Duff's music for the Queen's song and that for the Severed Head, so that the accompaniment anticipated and gradually prepared spectators for the second of these, which affords one of the climaxes in the dance. There was a sense from this of the Stroller even in death leading the Queen to her new-found awareness, an idea that Will Tuckett picked up in his choreography by devising moments where the head appeared to lead the Queen onwards in her search. Fortnam's two themes pursued many variations before appropriately coming to rest in a sustained harmonic relation against which the King's violence had no chance of prevailing. In no way could this dance be described as an authentic re-creation, but we had found a means (by the four of us working closely and cautiously together) to access the *spirit* of Yeats's envisioning of the dance and de Valois' realisation of it in performance. We had done so through a sympathetic engagement with surviving traces of what the original dance had entailed, through a study of the growing specificity of Yeats's instructions to the dancer, of de Valois' preoccupations as a choreographer at that stage of her career, and of her personal responses to the demands he exacted of performers in his plays.

Traces. We had been working with traces: the remains, *les restes*, hints, adumbrations, shadows, intimations, palimpsests, «vestiges or marks remaining and indicating the former presence, existence or action of something, which no longer exists» (OED), «a surviving memorial ... of some condi-

tion, quality, practice, etc., serving as an indication of its former existence» (OED), material evidence often surviving against all the odds of the nature of something now substantially lost. At some level we were dealing with material that fell into all these possibilities of meaning inherent in the word, *trace*; and our objective by bringing all such traces together was in part to create a memorial of a style of theatre that was highly sophisticated in its ambitions and achievement. We owe it to the past to try to understand the nature of their endeavours the better to understand the principles, the formal conventions and imperatives, and the ideologies (personal and public; conscious and subliminal; inherited and determinedly forged) that shape our own chosen modes of creativity. From such traces in the form of data a historian can weave a narrative of explanation and interpretation, a carefully constructed whole in which each datum (the *given* material) can find its fitting place²². By contrast, we already possessed a narrative in the form of Yeats's playtext; what we lacked were many (but decidedly not all) of the contingencies which in 1934 had given that text life as viable theatre, had steadily throughout the processes of rehearsal taken *The King of the Great Clock Tower* from a fifteen-page typescript to the Abbey stage. Many of the data offered a potential that was not in practice realisable as fully as one might have hoped. For example, though some of Duff's score existed, as previously noted, it was not in an orchestrated format; programmes indicate that an orchestra conducted by Duff himself was deployed during the run of Abbey performances; it clearly was a chamber ensemble but precisely what instruments were included it is not possible to estimate, since none of the players is actually named. Or to take another example, Yeats's stage directions offer directors and designers a choice of background for the inner stage: it may be either «a curtain hung in a semi-circle, or a semi-circle of one-foot Craig screens». But which exactly did Lennox Robinson and Yeats choose to deploy in 1934? The sketched floor plan, referred to above, merely defines the shape; there is no indication how it was to be formed and, though there are annotations on the plan for several other elements of the set, none relates to the semi-circle. Edward Gordon Craig's set of screens had been in use at the Abbey since 1911 and were still in use for heroic plays until the fire that gutted the theatre in 1951, according to Anne Yeats, who began her career as a stage designer at the Abbey in the mid-Thirties²³. A definitive decision on either matter was not ours to take. The resulting want of precision was often frustrating; in time, however, it came to be sensed rather as an asset.

Any attempt to replay history inevitably falls prey to the need to historicise: no re-staging could be wholly authentic. (One would not wish to rebuild the Abbey stage to its precise dimensions in 1934, create a new set of screens to Craig's specification, or search for actual doubles for each of the performers in terms of age, physique, vocal timbre, accent. Such would be fruitless tasks, yet essential if one's goal were authenticity). Instead we chose to make

clear the limits of our research. As Duff's score for the songs took the form of a piano redaction, Craig Fortnam respected that fact and only deployed his string ensemble and percussion for the dance (though he did underscore the final few bars of the last song with a complement of strings to bring the piece to a more emphatic ending as the lights faded). As the whole issue of reading colours was tricky, we chose to leave the painting of the screens in bands rather than sequencing smoothly from light down to darker shades of blue, since it is not clear from the available evidence whether this tonal declension was realised or, if so, how it was achieved. The effect of this both emphasized the construction of the screens for the re-staging (it was not feasible, except at great expense, to manufacture the one-foot screens Yeats writes of and somewhat wider screens proved necessary for reasons of practicality) and also, more importantly, showed for spectators familiar with the printed text that colour, so lightly touched on verbally by Yeats, was a problematic issue of some magnitude and uncertainty for the theatre historian. Yeats's directions for the dance principally focus on held poses, which form climactic points that define a basic scenario; how the dance was to progress between these tableau-like moments was to be de Valois' contribution. We respected the poses and the basic shape they bring to the structuring of the dance as the given data; by contrast the movement was wholly the invention of Will Tuckett. However, he had been selected as a fitting choreographer, because he had performed in a number of de Valois' works professionally and had evolved his personal style through training within the School and the Company that de Valois created. His body cannot but be inflected through that training with the conventions of a language of movement that she established and encouraged to develop through performance and in choreographic practice. Tuckett eschewed pastiche in creating for *The King of the Great Clock Tower*, choosing rather to work within the terms of a tradition that he has inherited experientially and physically, a tradition that respects de Valois as its founder and promoter. This is as close in terms of sympathetic creative affinities as we could hope in 2011 to approximate to de Valois' style and invention, despite the eighty-year gap between 1934 and today. None of these decisions and others like them was made in a quest for authenticity but for the kind of integrity that comes from respecting difference and acknowledging shortfalls in understanding. It is the practice currently in the restoration of buildings, interior décor, or severely damaged paintings to make evident by a variety of devices where the restorer's information ends and speculation begins. Irretrievable areas of paintings, for example, are 'finished' in dull, matt or monochrome colours, reproducing lost details wherever possible by copying them from photographs of the original canvases in their pre-lapsarian condition. The 'full' painting is to be viewed but it is abundantly evident what is original and what the input of the restorer's expertise. This re-staging was undertaken as a kind of restoration made in a similar spirit of transparency.

Given the limits to our achieving an absolute re-creation of what audiences saw at the Abbey in 1934, we continually questioned why we were making the attempt. Today professional artists, scholars and students of performance in all its manifestations can resort to film, video or DVD to study recent productions and discover the immediate history in which their own endeavours may be situated. Recording is increasingly wide-spread, even of amateur productions or of outdoor site-specific events. This was not the case in 1934, when efforts to record were highly selective and particularly so in Ireland. The sense of an inherited tradition is strong in the case of dance and especially ballet. It is well referenced that de Valois drew on her experience of working not only with Diaghilev but also with three experimental directors of artistic theatre (Lilian Baylis, Terence Gray and Yeats) and that she carried what she learned from them into the formation of her ballet company as a repertory dance theatre²⁴. Her essays on founding a dance company and creating a repertoire continually reference the drama and its traditions and styles of performance; as repeatedly, she pushes the word, «theatrical», as the proper aim of all choreographers²⁵. Given the passion with which both Yeats and de Valois honoured the past for its power, when fully understood, to shape the present and the future, it seemed appropriate to examine one of the works which they created together to determine the nature of their collaboration when devising a piece of theatre that deploys drama, music, dance, mime, mask work and scenic artistry in a perfect synthesis. Study of sources can carry our insight and appreciation only so far; practice (rehearsing, staging, performing) more completely illuminates understanding. Even learning where the gaps or *lacunae* in our awareness are, is instructive. So too is appreciation of the contingencies of performing in a work such as this: the stamina required of all the performers and especially the dancer; the intense levels of concentration exacted from all the practitioners, centred on the particular requirements of their own roles and on their individual contributions towards sustaining the prevailing levels of ensemble work. It was this sense of creative synthesis that most impressed us as we worked together on the re-staging. Good ensemble work is a strength sought after in most forms of theatre and dance; but the ensemble discovered in rehearsing and performing *The King of the Great Clock Tower* far exceeded conventional appreciation of the term, because it fostered and sustained bridges between practitioners coming from different art forms and performance traditions, and from varied styles of training, each with its own specialised kinds of technical expertise. Commitment in this context involved a challenging openness to such diversity and concomitant levels of trust between performers. To some degree these demands are required of any performance, but in a collaboration like this those demands are ratcheted up to a pitch of intensity. Inventive collaboration together required of Yeats and de Valois all these qualities (commitment, trust, intensity of effort, unity

of purpose), and required them in abundance. Re-staging *The King of the Great Clock Tower* caused everyone involved in the process completely to redefine what they understood by collaboration, and to relish this broadening of their creative horizons.

Notes

¹ The conference, *Ninette de Valois, Adventurous Traditionalist*, was held over three days in the Royal Opera House and the Royal Ballet School's premises in London and Richmond, 2-4 April, 2011.

² See R.A. Cave, *Collaborations: Ninette de Valois and William Butler Yeats*, Dance Books, Alton 2011, pp. 92-119. Hereafter referred to as *Collaborations*.

³ See R.A. Cave, *Re-creating The King of the Great Clock Tower*, in R.A. Cave, L. Worth (eds), *Ninette de Valois: Adventurous Traditionalist*, Dance Books, Alton 2012, pp. 218-229. Hereafter referred to as *Adventurous Traditionalist*. The volume also contains a filmed record of the production on DVD, which was made by Peter Hulton of Arts Archive, Exeter.

⁴ The sources of these forms of evidence are all laid out in the chapter in *Collaborations* devoted to the original staging of *The King of the Great Clock Tower*. I had also edited the range of extant manuscripts and related materials some years prior to writing *Collaborations*: see W.B. Yeats, "The King of the Great Clock Tower" and "A Full Moon in March": *Manuscript Materials*, ed. by R.A. Cave, Cornell UP, Ithaca-London 2007. Hereafter referred to as *Manuscript Materials*.

⁵ Quotations relating to Arthur Duff's scores for the songs in the play are taken from *Manuscript Materials*, cit., where his compositions are included as Appendix VIII, pp. 348-372. This comment is to be found on p. 349.

⁶ The extant score for Duff's music covers only Yeats's songs (and those only in a piano redaction). Though the direction «dance follows» is recorded in the score (*Manuscript Materials*, cit., p. 364), nothing of what he composed for this episode in the initial production remains.

⁷ A. Wade (ed.), *The Letters of W.B. Yeats*, Rupert Hart-Davis, London 1954, p. 827.

⁸ Ninette de Valois in conversation with Richard Cave in the late 1970s.

⁹ Yeats had seen little modern dance (ballet he disliked, influenced no doubt by the opinions of Edward Gordon Craig, himself influenced by Isadora Duncan) and had in the early days of composing these dance plays scant sense of how the danced sequences might be performed, not fully appreciating the narrative and representational potential of movement. The spoken descriptions, therefore, were to indicate to performers/choreographers precisely what the dance should convey to spectators. Yeats was equally well aware that serious theatrical dance was not regularly featured on Dublin stages and so Irish audiences were untrained in interpretation of its subtleties. Hence no doubt his verbal descriptions in plays such as *At the Hawk's Well*, *The Dreaming of the Bones* and *Calvary* were designed in part to aid spectators' appreciation.

¹⁰ The earlier dance plays were written with no expectation of that they would be immediately staged (the exception was the first, *At the Hawk's Well*, which was produced by Yeats for a charity performance in 1916 shortly after he had completed its composition). When they were staged, Yeats was often disappointed particularly with how the dance was performed. He wrote *The King of the Great Clock Tower* especially for Ninette de Valois, completing it only several weeks before it went into rehearsal (Duff, the composer, and de Valois had seen and commented on drafts of the play during its composition); and Yeats wrote in this instance out of some seven years' experience of de Valois' abilities as a choreographer and performer. The play was to be a celebration of her technical expertise and choreographic invention. Through directing a School of Ballet at the Abbey which gave regular performances at the theatre, she had begun to create a taste for dance in a variety of modes. Yeats now knew how expressive a medium dance could be and so perhaps in this play chose not to include a scenario in his dialogue.

¹¹ See R.K. Alspach (ed.), *The Variorum Edition of the Plays of W.B. Yeats*, Macmillan, London 1966, pp. 990-1006. Subsequent to the performances Yeats began to transpose his play into verse. The prose version of the play, as presented in the Variorum edition, is printed only on the verso pages for ease of comparison with the verse version, which is printed on the opposing recto pages. The prose version only of the play was first printed by the Cuala Press late in 1934 in "*The King of the Great Clock Tower*", *Commentaries and Poems*.

¹² The floorplan is reproduced in a modern transcription as plate 40 in *Collaborations* and as plate 16 in *Adventurous Traditionalist*.

¹³ In conversation with the author in the 1970s and also with Sam McCready while he was researching his (unpublished) MA dissertation, *The Stage Director's Approach to the Presentation of the Plays of W.B. Yeats*, University of Wales, Bangor 1975.

¹⁴ The photograph is reproduced as plate 46 in *Collaborations*; it and the floorplan are also reproduced as plate 18 in *Adventurous Traditionalist*.

¹⁵ The dancer involved in the re-staging was Deirdre Chapman, Principal with The Royal Ballet; the costumes were recreated by Tessa Balls, formerly on the staff of The Royal Ballet School.

¹⁶ W.B. Yeats, "*The King of the Great Clock Tower*", *Commentaries and Poems*, Cuala Press, Dublin 1934, p.1.

¹⁷ There is a similar gap in Walter Rummel's score for the danced sequences in *The Dreaming of the Bones* and it is on record that he disliked composing in a kind of vacuum for the dance without some input from the choreographer. Interestingly for Fand's dance in *Fighting the Waves* in a score completed before the play went into rehearsal, George Antheil created a massive wall of sound to be played fortissimo and lasting some ten bars, which he required to be repeated «*ad libitum*», so that de Valois would be left totally free to improvise for as long as she wished. (Walter Morse Rummel's score for *The Dreaming of the Bones* is reproduced in W.B. Yeats, *Four Plays for Dancers*, MacMillan, London 1921, pp. 107-125; George Antheil's score for *Fighting the Waves* is reproduced in W.B. Yeats, *Wheels and Butterflies*, Macmillan, London 1934, pp. 161-181; the music entitled *Fand's Dance* is to be found on p. 171).

¹⁸ Jooss was the one German Expressionist choreographer of whom de Valois wrote approvingly in *Invitation to the Ballet* (1937); she was far more critical of Laban and Wigman. Nijinska was choreographing for Diaghilev's Ballets Russes during the period (autumn 1923-August 1925) that de Valois was a member of the company and certainly the role of the Hostess in *Les Biches* was created on her (the role was subsequently shared with Nijinska herself); she danced minor roles in revivals or first performances of *Les Noces*, *Les Fâcheux*, and *La Tentation de la bergère* and was also in the ensemble for Nijinski's *Le Sacre du Printemps*. All these works in Diaghilev's repertoire showed in diverse ways a marked Expressionist style.

¹⁹ See *Manuscript Materials* (2007).

²⁰ For Yeats's reaction, see his letter to Olivia Shakespear, dated August 7, 1934 in A. Wade (ed.), *The Letters of W.B. Yeats*, cit., pp. 826-827. The two anonymous theatre reviews were *The Abbey Theatre: two new plays by W.B. Yeats*, «The Times» (London), July 31, 1934, p. 12; and *The Dublin Theatre: New Productions*, «The Weekly Irish Times», October 6, 1934, p. 12.

²¹ Ninette de Valois, *Step by Step*, W.H. Allen, London 1977, p. 184.

²² For an excellent example of this process at work, see C. Nicholl, *Traces Remain: Essays and Explorations*, Allen Lane, London 2011.

²³ In conversation with the author.

²⁴ Ninette de Valois' autobiographies (*Come Dance With Me* and *Step by Step*) acknowledge her debts to all three.

²⁵ See the six essays de Valois contributed to the *Dancing Times* in 1926 and in 1933, which are edited and reprinted in *Adventurous Traditionalist*, pp. 149-168. The theme recurs throughout what is in many ways her manifesto about the art of dance, *Invitation to the Ballet* (1937). Like Diaghilev, she strongly espoused the innovative and the contemporary (hence her choice to work with Baylis, Gray and Yeats) but only if this was coupled with a profound respect for the best of the past. This is why she referred to herself as an «adventurous traditionalist».

Works Cited

- Alspach R.K. (ed.), *The Variorum Edition of the Plays of W.B. Yeats*, Macmillan, London 1966.
- Anon., *The Abbey Theatre: two new plays by W.B. Yeats*, «The Times» (London), July 31, 1934, p. 12.
- , *The Dublin Theatre: New Productions*, «The Weekly Irish Times», October 6, 1934, p. 12.
- Cave R.A., *Collaborations: Ninette de Valois and William Butler Yeats*, Dance Books, Alton 2011.
- , *Re-creating The King of the Great Clock Tower*, in R.A. Cave, L. Worth (eds), *Ninette de Valois: Adventurous Traditionalist*, Dance Books, Alton 2012, pp. 218-229.
- Cave R.A., Worth Libby (eds), *Ninette de Valois: Adventurous Traditionalist*, Dance Books, Alton 2012.
- De Valois Ninette, *Invitation to the Ballet*, John Lane at the Bodley Head, London 1937.
- , *Come Dance With Me*, Hamish Hamilton, London 1959.
- , *Step by Step*, W.H. Allen, London 1977.
- , *Six Essays Contributed to The Dancing Times in 1926 and 1933*, in R.A. Cave, L. Worth (eds), *Ninette de Valois: Adventurous Traditionalist*, Dance Books, Alton 2012, pp. 149-168.
- McCready Sam, *The Stage Director's Approach to the Presentation of the Plays of W.B. Yeats*, Unpublished MA dissertation, University of Wales, Bangor 1975.
- Nicholl Charles, *Traces Remain: Essays and Explorations*, Allen Lane, London 2011.
- Wade Allen (ed.), *The Letters of W.B. Yeats*, Rupert Hart-Davis, London 1954.
- Yeats W.B., *Four Plays for Dancers*, Macmillan, London 1921.
- , *Wheels and Butterflies*, Macmillan, London 1934.
- , “*The King of the Great Clock Tower*”, *Commentaries and Poems*, Cuala Press, London 1934.
- , “*The King of the Great Clock Tower*” and “*A Full Moon in March*”: *Manuscript Materials*, ed. by R.A. Cave, Cornell UP, Ithaca-London 2007.